

# ARTSPACE

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Basia Irland, *Their Library on Ios*, 3½' high, mixed media, books, 1983.



Basia Irland, *Poem for Yemanjá*, water, cedar, bottles, wax, 1987.

## BASIA IRLAND

HARMONY HAMMOND

Basia Irland, *Journeys*, approx. 3' high, sticks, earth pigments, acrylic medium, copper, 1987.

Photo: Damian Andrus.





Basia Irland, *Vessel I*, 12' long, willow, 1985.

Largely taking their cue from the seminal work of Eva Hesse, many artists in the 1970s began to experiment with all sorts of non-traditional materials, letting the materials themselves determine the forms of the pieces and contribute to meaning. A nostalgic fascination for the lost past and the simpler life represented by non-Western, tribal cultures, coupled with a feeling of general disconnectedness from life's cycles in modern technological society, has led many artists to use materials found in nature and to make work that refers to objects created in preindustrial ("primitive") societies. Simultaneously, many sculptors developed an interest in "ritual." For most, as with Hesse, the concept of "ritual" simply meant a consciousness of the process of making the work. The art object existed as a record and therefore an embodiment of this process. As John Silverstein has written, "It is an approach to object and image making that understands the social function of art as both the embodiment and reflection of the shifting creative responses to our own culture and of the shifting creative responses that go toward the making of art."<sup>1</sup>

Artists have borrowed cross-culturally for much of the 20th century, but what does it mean today, when an artist of the dominant culture draws on work from a Third World country? Even with the best intentions, such voyeurism and nostalgia all too often become a form of cultural imperialism. Nostalgia easily turns into stereotyping and romanticization which quickly denies the realities of other people and cultures. It also doesn't make for very good art. Much contemporary work emulating "primitive" art seems superficial since

the fundamental meaning or function of the creative object is missing. The object or ritual is disconnected.

To be authentic, art must openly acknowledge its sources without attempting to copy them. It must transform them. It must draw on images of one society to raise issues in another, as does the work of Charles Simonds, Nancy Graves and Joseph Beuys. Basia Irland should be counted among these artists. In a true multi-media approach, she moves comfortably back and forth between sculpture, photography, performance and poetry. Her art embraces an enormous range of material reflective of non-Western cultures and their mythological bases, as well as work by other contemporary artists.<sup>2</sup> Instead of superficially saying that her work "looks primitive" or "looks spiritual," clichés which don't explain anything, it is far more interesting and revealing to examine her work against the contextual backdrop of her resources and references, and to see how she develops meaning.

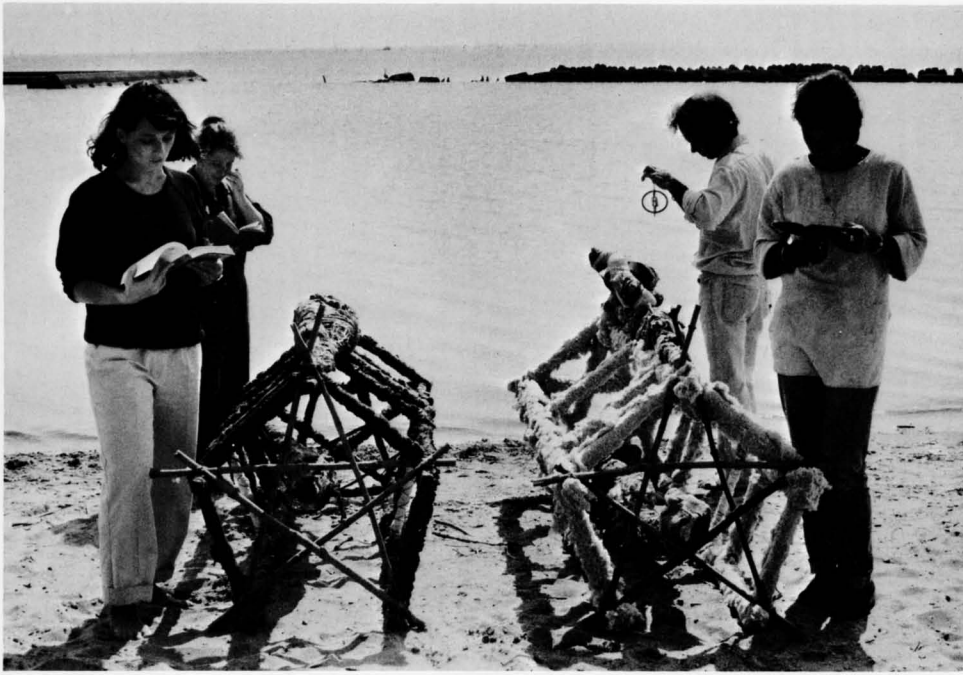
Her early tongue-in-cheek installation and performance pieces in Canada were involved with demythologizing academic knowledge (her father was a professor) by contrasting it with nature or by simply altering or erasing it. In a series of indoor and outdoor pieces, "lessons" were drawn on canvases coated with blackboard paint. These lessons were then submerged in ice, floated down a river or carried in a backpack. One lesson was left outside where the rain was allowed to collect on the surface. Later, the raindrops were erased, leaving a trace of patterns strongly resembling heavenly bodies.

This interest in erasure and in remaining traces of knowledge led Irland to haunt classrooms, photographing words, numbers and diagrams left by professors on the blackboards after class. Diagrams and words originally intended to impart meaning were now in and of themselves fragments of knowledge which could only hint at larger meanings. Often the gesture of the scribbles, erasures and markings said more than the actual words and Irland, finding herself attracted to them from a purely visual point of view, began to photo-document and publish them as "found poems."

Irland's concern with words as traces of meaning, scents along the path of knowledge, eventually led her to the book form. Invited in 1979 to submit to a Canadian exhibition of book art by women, Irland made her first book art out of materials at hand, and these led into a whole series, for the books brought together many of her prior interests and concerns. They provided a metaphor of knowledge, were primarily female in form, allowed the personal or autobiographical to enter in, and allowed processes of both adding and deconstructing.

Irland approaches books as full-fledged, three-dimensional objects. She deconstructs antique books, removes the pages, rolls, alters and layers them, and then ties or wraps them up. Literal and physical contents merge. And, as in Hesse's work, their delicacy and fragility refer to the ephemeral quality of life. Like poetic bundles, the books contain a history of previous books and allusions to other worlds. They are the relics of a dreamer, poetry made visible.

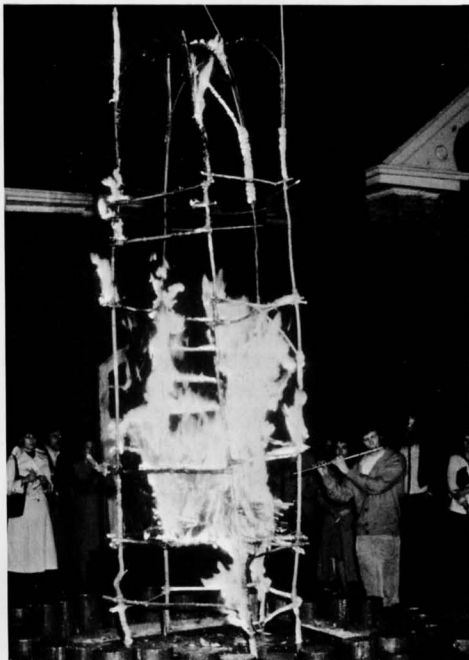
Self-knowledge and transformation are the real subjects of the books. They literally be-



Basia Irland, *Star Chart Time Sequence*, 1981, performance on the shore of Lake Ontario utilizing the sculptures *Sadachbia* and *Sadalsnuud*.

come alchemical accretions that cross time, place and culture. While a few can be opened so that the viewer can look inside, they cannot be read in the usual narrative sense. They are more about accumulation, layering, juxtaposition. Because Irland physically manipulates the pages, and often blocks out much of the text, words are only partially visible and we are left with a suggestive, poetic text. Sometimes the pieces are consciously thought about in relation to the title or subject of the original book, but more often than not, they simply grow intuitively from a loose handling of the recycled materials—old, cracked leather, moldy and musty velvet, brittle, brown-edged and foxed pages.

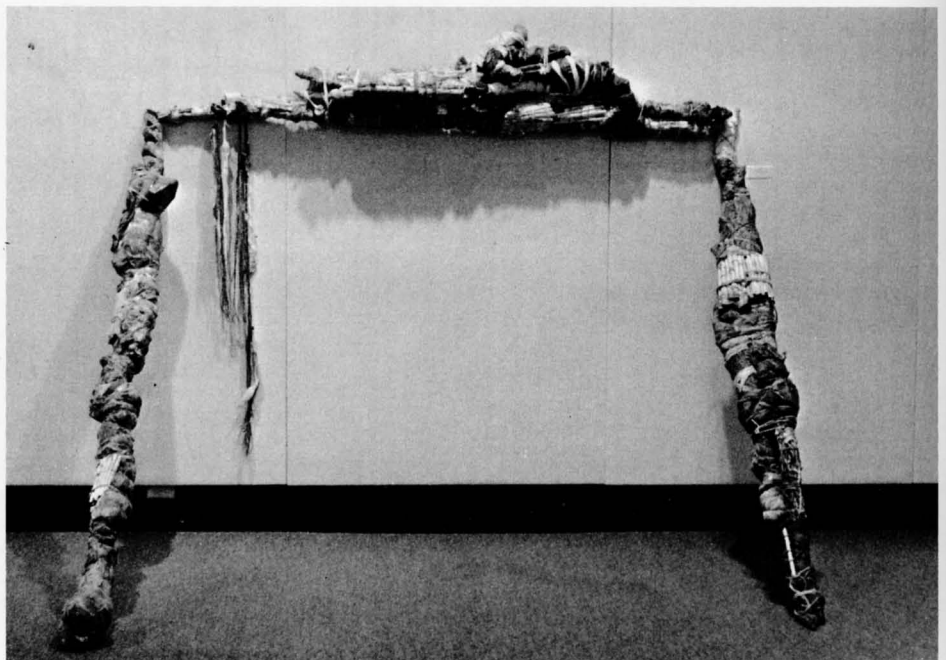
Performance of *Star Pyre*, 1981, using an *Ephemeris Structure*.



Irland has sometimes been criticized for destroying these old volumes, a criticism that sounds remarkably similar to cries in response to Ann Wilson's quilt paintings in the 1950s. Using old, worn-out, early American quilts, Wilson recycled them by stretching them and repainting patterns on the surface, turning the quilts into "fine art" icons that refer to the creative traditions of American women. Destruction and deconstruction are not the same thing. By reconstructing books that are virtually in an unusable state, Irland, like Wilson, constructs a new language.

Eventually Irland began to present her books as collected works or libraries. Her libraries are three-foot-high, arched bookcases reminiscent

Basia Irland, *Lean To*, approx. 6' high, mixed media including scrolled pages, bird wings, snake skin, Moroccan flute, etc., 1983.



of boat prows, gothic arches, weathered windows or shrines. Most, like *Her Library in Morocco*, 1983, refer to a hypothetical person. They become a sort of portable environment stocked with miniature and mysterious books, scrolls, bundles, candles, exotica and natural objects. Gauze or screening stretched across the front of the library shelves seems to represent a protective veil of time or memory.

Like Hesse, Irland identifies material and form with content. But in contrast to Hesse, she draws on a wide range of natural and man-made materials—branches, aluminum, light-emitting diodes, maps, books, charts, latex rubber, gauze, feathers, fabric, snake skins, stones, photographs, objects collected on travels, natural elements of fire and water, and such traditional fine arts materials as canvas and pigment. Frequently part of an old sculpture might be recycled into a new piece, as Irland literally builds her own history.

Organic and visceral, the materials usually evoke cycles of nature, but they also have personal references. The gauze for instance, as well as the wrapping process, refers to memories of bandaging in Irland's childhood.<sup>3</sup> Often cocoonlike, the bandaging associations change from healing to growth, regeneration, and transformation.

However, these wrapped sculptures are not so much about binding and bandaging as they are about accumulation and layering and, therefore, empowering (in this sense they are shamanistic). In a sort of homage to this process Irland titled her 1985 exhibition in Ontario "Accretions." The word refers to the gradual build-up of a surface using a number of different objects and, for Irland, it alludes to themes of growth, fusion and regeneration. Hesse, when writing about her own 1968 sculpture *Accretions*, which consisted of 50 fiberglass units leaning against the wall, defined accretions as "the growing of separate things into one."<sup>4</sup> While Irland states that she did

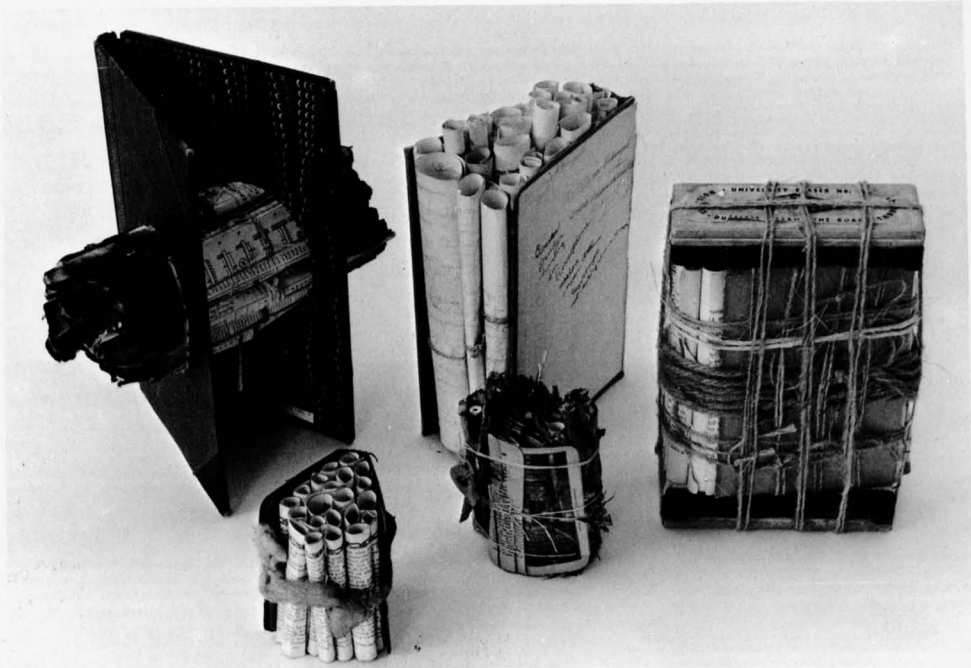
not have Hesse specifically in mind while she made this work, there is, once again, a strong indebtedness to a vocabulary of ideas and forms that were “in the air” for many artists, and clearly generated by Hesse’s earlier work.

Irland is deeply interested in cycles—life/death, destruction/regeneration—and many of her works refer to the vast spaces of the universe. Pages from *The Ephemeris*, a standard astronomic codex of movements of the heavenly bodies is included in many works. In two versions of her *Ephemeris Structures*, 1981, aluminum shrines or observatories are wrapped with gauze and latex and have pages from the codex hanging from them like feathery spirit catchers. Irland admits she can’t read the codex, she just likes the poetic suggestion and the sound of it. She writes, “Ephemeral, ephemeris, ephemerae, merge with gauze, twigs, lace, rags, twine, and latex creating observatories, shrines, pyres, sarcophagi, and books.”<sup>5</sup> Many of her sculptured objects are actually used in performances which, in turn, add layers of meaning. Irland’s performance piece, *The Ephemeris*, is a late-night procession by three monks who stand inside, lift and carry a seven-foot-high, observatory-type structure. Their destination remains a mystery.

Irland has also incorporated pages from *The Ephemeris* into works like *Oroborus*, 1981, and *Sadachbia and Sadalsuud*, 1981. Both pieces are paired, hutlike or sepulcherlike structures that have been wrapped with Irland’s montage of materials. Caught midpoint in decay, they have something of the latent intensity of an abandoned shrine.<sup>6</sup> *Oroborus* alludes to the mythic image of a serpent consuming its own tail, thus representing the destruction/renewal principle. This duality appears again in *Sadachbia and Sadalsuud*, based on two stars in the constellation Aquarius. A performance of the same name involved the carrying of the two seven-foot structures to a river bank where an astronomer and a poet simultaneously read the meaning of the stars’ names.

While Irland uses materials for their associative meanings as well as sculptural possibilities, she uses structures as her words or symbols. Books, libraries, cradles, nests, caskets and lean-to forms all provide shelter. *Alignment Device*, 1983, in the spirit of Paul Klee, Jean Tinguely or Jasper Johns, promises balance or centering or alignment with the heavenly bodies, but in fact lines up nothing. As a completely non-functional tool, it tells us that some things are not knowable.

*Lean To*, 1983, a large, squared arch frame that is wrapped with sticks, scrolls, snake skin, gauze, rubber latex, a horsehair mat, lace, string, bird wings, clay flutes and a friend’s leather satchel sits on the floor and leans against the wall, marking off space. Hardly functional as a structure to protect one from the elements, it offers more magical protection as an accumulated fetish bundle. Built like a bird’s nest woven out of many materials, *Lean To* reflects Irland’s interest in all forms of animal and human architecture (cocoon, eggs, nests, shells, primitive dwellings). She is particularly fascinated by nomadic forms of architecture and corresponding views of the world. Reflecting on the essential functions of shelter and survival, Irland’s vo-



Basia Irland, various books and scrolls, 1979.

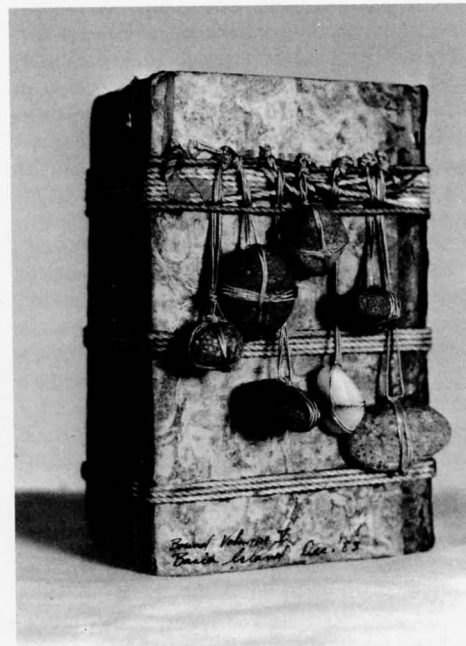
Photo: Kay Aubanel.

cabulary of forms draws on structures and symbols from art and artifacts of non-Western cultures and nature itself. Working out of an archetypal pool of images and symbols, her references are not specific to any one culture but are “animated by a general understanding of the function that ritual objects play in traditional societies as power symbols, as complex informational systems, as ciphers and mediators or elemental forces, and as tools designed

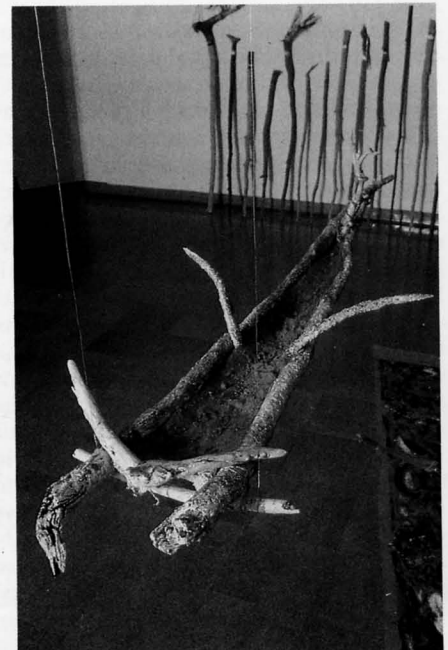
to invoke primal energies.”<sup>7</sup>

In a sense all of Irland’s work is about the journey. It is a collection of materials, objects and images gathered on her travels around the world, and refers to notions of spiritual, metaphysical and intellectual journeys to other states of being, a kind of “poetics of space” and passage. Books, maps, charts, ladders and boats are meant to take us on journeys to other places (literally or symbolically), to different planes

Basia Irland, *Bound Volume, VI*, 7" high, books, rocks, twine, 1983.



Basia Irland, *Moon’s Pull on the Tides* (detail), approx. 6' long, sticks, earth and mixed media, 1987.





Basia Irland, *Homage to Bachelard's Reveries, III*, photomontage, 1987.

of existence and states of being, and they imply the revelation of knowledge. The *Lean To* is a resting place along the way, and the shrines and observatories look to the future.

In *Journey*, 1986–87, Irland leans 27 waist-high sticks in a row against the wall. Each stick is covered with a mixture of earth and acrylic matte medium and is banded near the top with a thin ring of oxidized copper which has a turquoise color. Usually the sticks are labeled with the place of origin of the earth. Although they do not read chronologically, they are a sort of visual diary or journal of three-dimensional marks in a range of earth colors—greens, whites, grays, red ochres from Jemez, golds from Abiquiu and rich browns from Zuni. The sticks do not seem painted but rather suggest encrusted cave growths or crystallized geologic wonders. While similar as repetitions of the initial form, the sticks are all different in that they have various natural crooks and bends and, with their root-shaped tops, they become almost like animated figures.

In 1986 Irland received a UNM faculty grant to travel to Brazil and research a book on the iconography of the Afro-Brazilian ceremony of Yemanjá, the goddess of the ocean and the mother of waters. Celebrants travel to the ocean shore where they make sand sculptures, leave offerings, light candles, and throw white flowers into the sea.

In *Poem for Yemanjá*, 1987, seven cedar shelves are stacked above each other on the wall like a three-dimensional page from a book. On the shelves are many different tiny bottles of water that Irland and friends have collected over the years. Sealed with wax and usually labeled with their place of origin, each row contains a different category of water, and thus each layer classifies and documents a poetic idea—ice and melted waters, oceans and seas, unknown waters (we will traverse these waters in boats), bays and lakes, Pandapas Pond and reflective pools, running waters such as rivers and rain,

and holy or sacred healing waters (which includes a vial of tears).

In a paper titled *Water as Metaphor* that Irland presented at the National Conference of Women Sculptors in Cincinnati, she talked about the psychology of water, water as a symbol of the unconscious, its being nonformable and female, with the numinous properties of the mother. She quoted Gaston Bachelard, the French phenomenologist whom she admires, "Water in its symbolism can bring everything together," and Bernard Barber, author of *A View From Japan*, who says, "Rivers are a constant reminder that life is a progression from this to that, that present is quickly past, and making the most of now is of paramount importance."<sup>8</sup>

Irland has not tried to reenact the Yemanjá ritual, like a lesser artist pirating another culture and presenting what is ritual in one culture as performance in another. But, rather, she has let the ritual, the ideas of it as well as the visual picture of it and the feeling of it, carry her in a dreamlike state or reverie into another place. She has allowed the ritual to touch her and take her or carry her somewhere so that she can create something new.

The boat, as an ancient form of floating vessel, implies journeying, usually into the unknown. Irland's boats are delicate, skeletal, rib-like vessels made of waxed cord or various bent woods such as willow, tamarack or maple. In outdoor, site-specific pieces, she has suspended her boats from trees, over rivers, or even under bridges. Nonfunctional, they become spirit boats or carriers for the soul. Most of Irland's work relates to nature in some way but, in the outdoor pieces, she consciously tries to blend with nature, not to violate or dominate it. Placed in nature, the sculptures become objects for observation (the boat, the archway, the tower, the buckets for collecting water in *A Poem for a Stream*, 1987), for hearing the river, for seeing the sky reflected in the waters. They suggest the Zen sense of feeling nature through physical activity, "chop wood, carry water." There is time for reflection, for going inward, for contemplation.

Many of these boats are like line drawings in space, perhaps best illustrated in *Willow Vessel*, 1984, a bent-willow boat decorated with light-emitting diodes and hung from the ceiling in a darkened room. The resulting constellation of diodes encourages us to use our imagination and to "connect the dots" to complete the heavenly vessel shape. It is a beautiful and strangely moving and powerful image, and contains a sense of primordial mystery.

Things change and merge in Irland's work as they do in dreams. Microcosm and macrocosm reflect each other, nature and objects become identified with the body. This is made most clear in a series titled "Homage to Bachelard's Reveries," from 1987. Altered, color photographs are layered with sheets of clear plastic printed with black, pre-Keplerian diagrams of the motions of the planets and these are gathered with various writings about nature and other materials and presented together in box frames strongly reminiscent of Joseph Cornell. Shadows of the printed black lines are cast on the photos and sometimes the photos are scrolled or have been altered by fire. Like

old charts or maps, the scrolls imply not only knowledge or information yet to be revealed, but also secrets, held and protected. The titles, *Fire, Flow of the River's Song, Touching*, etc., suggest images that are hinted at—nature, sky, rocks, river. But, throughout, the sense of scale is thrown off as Irland deftly moves back and forth from microcosm to macrocosm. What appear to be grand views of rock formations against the sky—great boulders almost touching, creating a place where a shaman might jump in ecstasy—is in fact a close-up of two tiny rocks on the ground found naturally in this arrangement. Irland sees the small in the large, and the grand in the small and intimate.

*Moon's Pull on the Tides III*, 1987 a mixed-media installation piece, incorporates three vessels hung at different heights above each other and a piece of painted linen placed on the floor. An upper boat of thin wire covered with cheesecloth that has been dipped in earth and acrylic medium floats like a fragile rib cage or cradle. A second boatlike form hung about waist level is less a boat than a creature, recalling some sort of amphibian with flippers. It is a suggestive and mysterious form. If the top boat hovers passively and goes with the currents, this creature/vessel, while not menacing, moves of its own accord, even if it is to swim with the tide. Made of sticks covered with white lace and enamel, it is an indented tray holding red earth, a shallow, troughlike container that feels tentatively like a funerary vessel.

Beneath the two upper vessels, a small boat sits on a triangle of linen which is painted with diagrams of the tidal pulls. The linen is partially rolled up at one corner, again giving the sense that there is always more to be revealed and more to know in the journey ahead. The vessels move through time and space, leaving a wake of suggestions. At her best Irland carries us beyond the materiality of the sculptural materials and beyond cultural references. In a sense all her pieces are visual poems. They are about making the invisible visible. To traverse the waters in boats becomes a metaphysical journey of the heart. □

#### NOTES:

1. John Silverstein, *Artscanada*, July–August, 1981. Reprinted in *Basia Irland: Accretions*, catalog for exhibition of the same name at Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, Ontario, Canada, 1985.
2. Richard Potruff, *Basia Irland: Vessels*, publication of the Art Gallery of Brant, Brantford, Canada.
3. Joan Murray, "New Rites: Irland and Mordowanec," *Artmagazine*, September–October, 1980.
4. Lucy Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, New York University Press, p. 124.
5. Artist's statement in catalog for "Sky Art Conference," Center for Advanced Visual Studies, M.I.T., Boston, Mass., 1980.
6. Silverstein.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Paper presented at the National Sculpture Conference "Works by Women," Cincinnati, Ohio, May, 1987.

*Basia Irland is a professor of sculpture at the University of New Mexico.*

**Harmony Hammond** is an artist and writer whose most recent book is *Wrappings*, New York, TSL Press, 1984.