

The University of New Mexico

Quantum²⁰⁰⁵
RESEARCH, SCHOLARSHIP & CREATIVE WORKS



Overview of Basia Irland's rainwater harvesting project at the northwest corner of the Student Union Building, UNM campus, see story on pages 22-26.
Photo by John Sumrow.



Water

Desert Fountain, a sculpture at the Albuquerque Museum, by Basia Irland.
Photo by John Sumrow.

Library

Professor of Art
and Art History
Basia Irland explores
the phenomenon
of water.

By Valerie Roybal

Water is essential; it flows, carries, contains, and feeds. Water is mysterious and sacred; it is a conveyer of ideas and elements; and it is a holder and inscriber of histories. At the most basic level, water is a crucial element of life; however, the importance of water is often overlooked or taken for granted.

It is the unseen and overlooked qualities of water that have captivated Professor of Art and Art History Basia Irland. For over twenty-five years, Irland has made artistic and practical investigations into the diverse and fascinating aspects of water, with a strong commitment to local and international water issues.

“Irland’s work engages critical issues surrounding

the use and abuse of water sources throughout the world. She is an artist working at the intersection of environmental issues, governmental policy, human rights, and natural science, always informed by an awareness of the spiritual dimensions of water,” describes Kathleen Howe, director of the Pomona College Museum of Art in California.

Irland has organized her pursuits into a body of work called *Water Library, A Sculptor’s Research Into the Phenomenon of Water*. A record of this body of work will be published as a book by the same title by the University of New Mexico Press. This library includes seven chapters with essays, art works, and projects.

The first chapter, “Inscriptions, Stars, Tides, and Ice,”



Basia Irland's rainwater harvesting project at the northwest corner of the Student Union Building, UNM campus. Photos by John Sumrow.

explores the ways in which water engraves its presence. "Hydrolibros," the next chapter, contains mixed-media sculptures that serve as archives, encyclopedias, and log books reflecting Irland's water research.

"A Natural History of Salt," the third chapter, grew from the artist's investigations of this marine evaporate. The following chapter, "A Gathering of Waters: Rio Grande, Source to Sea," was a five-year long grassroots project developed to increase awareness of the plight of the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo and connect people along the 1,875 mile length of the river. The resulting sculpture and video documentary served to raise consciousness about the rich cultural diversity that exists among the communities along the river and to establish a dialogue and common ground for discussion on water issues.

"Holy Water," the fifth chapter, looks at the sacredness of water when it is blessed by priests, collected from holy and healing sites, used for baptisms, and left

as offerings.

Irland describes the next chapter, "Waterborne Disease and Non-potable Agua," as an ongoing series of international projects focusing on the pathogens and pollutants that find their way into world water systems and are frequent causes of illness and death. The investigation was inspired by Irland's personal experience of being diagnosed with giardia, a parasite she contracted while doing research in Java on a Senior Fulbright Research Fellowship. An exhibition of her work in Bath, England, 2001, showed enlarged images of water-borne bacteria known to cause illness and death.

Three years ago, seven inhabitants of Walkerton, Ontario, Canada, died and half of the small population of four thousand became ill because their main source of drinking water became contaminated with fecal matter, exposing them to two primary bacterial agents. For the second anniversary of the tragedy, the community



"Walkerton Life Vest, 2002," by Basia Irland. The vest contains water samples, front-page newspaper reports, sample testing kits for bacteria, carved wooden boat and paddle given to the artist by a long time Walkerton resident, and the names of the seven who died etched into a birch-bark scroll. Photo courtesy of Basia Irland.

Irland believes in the importance of collaboration and cross-disciplinary dialogue and often works with colleagues from other departments across campus.

Several of her rainwater harvesting projects reside on the UNM campus. "The inspiration for the pieces came from the dismay I felt when water would end up on the sidewalk after a heavy rain. I realized that water could be harvested and used to feed xeriscaped areas," she says. One project is a contemplation garden residing on the east side of the Museum of Southwestern Biology. A swale resembling a natural creek bed was dug to catch water for feeding plants. Another installation is on the northwest corner of the recently renovated Student Union Building. This installation consists of a cove with a garden and is lined with tiles containing sixty-three different words for water, including American Sign Language, Swahili, Japanese, and numerous Native American languages. Describing the project, one of the tiles reads: "Harvested on the roof scarce rainfall flows into a subterranean drip system. Overflow circles the xeric fragrance garden in a stone swale and drains to the Rio Grande."

Irland recently completed another project behind the Jonson Gallery with students from her Art and Ecology class. "After gallery showings, people would gather in a barren asphalt parking lot. We wanted to create an arbor where people could relax in the shade," says Irland. The space is landscaped with stone benches and plants fed with rainwater harvested from the gallery roof.

Irland has also collaborated with Beverly Singer, associate professor in the Departments of Anthropology and Native American Studies, on a rainwater harvesting project at the Isleta Pueblo south of Albuquerque, resulting in a large xeric garden and video documentary of the project.

Irland believes in the importance of collaboration and cross-disciplinary dialogue and often works with colleagues from other departments across campus. This includes team-teaching "The Culture of Water" with Michael Campana of the Water Resources Program, José Rivera of Architecture and Planning and Public Administration, and Marilyn O'Leary of the Utton Law Center.

With her work, Irland is making connections: between the environmental, natural, spiritual, and artistic characteristics of water; and between people and disciplines in recognizing the importance of water. According to Irland, "all the works, projects, and chapters are interconnected like a river in a delta flowing into the ocean, forming a larger picture about the significance of water." □