

The autobiography of H₂O, as told to Basia Irland

Miriam Sagan | For The New Mexican

Fantastic and magical libraries haunt certain poetic imaginations. Take the writings of Jorge Luis Borges, for example. This Argentine librarian's imagined Library of Babel was a surreal setting. And the lost library of Alexandria, Egypt, haunts myth and legend. The objects in Basia Irland's visionary book *Water Library* include vials of liquid, cabinets of objects, and assemblages like *Kit for Paddling Through Stars Floating on a Lake*, which is composed of handmade linden-wood paddles, constellation charts, aerial photographs, and maps that seem designed to guide us from known terrain on a shamanic or dream journey. Books appear but cannot be read in a conventional manner, because they are composed of soil, salt, and lichen. And there are discarded library books, which look swollen or pulverized as if dropped in the bathtub or a larger body of water. Covered in beeswax, adorned with wire and cord, these books provoke a response from the would-be reader; they cannot be opened or perused, and yet they tell a story, propose a narrative.

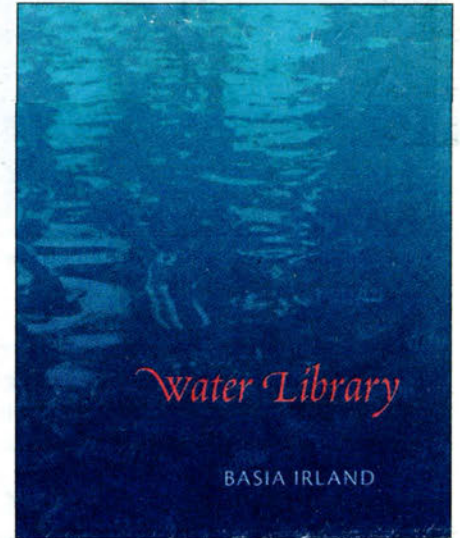
A library is not about ownership: readers are borrowers, and knowledge is free but not possessed. The books in this hypothetical library are a comment on the world around us — on ecology, the natural world, and human life itself.

The books in Basia Irland's work cannot be read in a conventional manner, because they are composed of soil, salt, and lichen. They cannot be opened or perused, and yet they tell a story, propose a narrative.

Irland is an artist obsessed with water, and her *Water Library* is several things: a collection of her work published by the University of New Mexico Press in 2007, an outtake from the book in the form of a show at the Albuquerque Museum of Art & History through Jan. 27, and an overview and collection of her numerous projects. The "library" is divided into nine chapters — she calls them "volumes" — arranged by theme and, in some cases, chronology. In an introduction to the book, Irland quotes British science writer Philip Ball: "Water needs many biographies, because in truth it is not a personality but more like a culture to itself, with laws, arts and a unique history and geography."

Volume One is "Stars, Tides, Ice." It includes *Kit for Paddling*, which was actually part of a performance piece in which the artist filled a boat with candles and ferried guests at night to a floating wooden dock. The event might have been ephemeral, but the kit retains some of its power.

A haunting triptych is dedicated to French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, whose book *The Poetics of Space* expressed his belief that simply touching objects, even while cleaning house, brings them to imaginative life. For Bachelard, water is the most basic element, the source.



Basia Irland: *River Books*; 1989; discarded library books, beeswax, wire, and cord; each approximately 9 x 6 x 2 inches

Right, *Salt Book X*; 1994; carved wooden book, rock salt, matte medium; 15 x 12 x 3 inches

Images courtesy The University of New Mexico Press





Kit for Paddling Through Stars Floating on a Lake, 2000, mixed media, 19 x 44 x 16 inches



Holy Water (for Ganesha), 1994, mixed media, 13 x 22 x 8 inches

Damian Andrus

Volume Two is “Hydrolibros,” home of the transformed library books. Each volume has a critical introduction, and this one is by British art critic Edward Lucie-Smith. He notes: “Some of the art objects produced by the ecological artist and activist Basia Irland in the series ... are ruined books — like the discarded library books she found dumped in a gorge near Taos, New Mexico. ... Basia’s books remind me of certain items from the remote past that bear inscriptions — for instance the Rosetta Stone. ...”

Carved wooden books, using materials from specific sites, are included in the museum exhibit; their pictures appear in the book version of *Water Library*. The artist explains: “When I moved to New Mexico in 1985, I began to carve wooden book shapes, coated with earth from certain locations, and inscribed on the edges to resemble paginated volumes. Then I used small, natural objects from each site, which have things to say about the specific place.” For example, fool’s gold and rust adorn a volume about a mine and its impact on the earth.

Volume Three is “Salinity,” which begins with a picture of a book Irland sculpted out of salt; the book is emblazoned with the alchemical sign for salt — a circle with a horizontal line through it to signify salt’s transformative properties. As Jungian psychologist James Hillman says, emphasizing its archetypal meaning, “Salt is soluble. Weeping, bleeding, sweating, urinating bring salt out of its interior underground mines.”

Because salt is the ingredient that distinguishes fresh water from ocean, it is fitting that the next volume on the mythical library’s shelf is called “Source to Sea (And Back Again).” Irland may be best known for *A Gathering of Waters*, a performance piece that took three years to create and involved hundreds of collaborators. Water was passed, in a special canteen, from the headwaters of the Río Grande all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. Its journey was a reflection on water use, ecology, and life along this vital waterway. Documentation includes photographs of the Santa Fe Indian School cross-country track team carrying vials of river water and the canteen going through airport security — all in an effort to bring the river to the sea.

Boats are the theme in Volume Five. The skeletons of old vessels, boats made of salt, and seaweed-hung craft pictured in the book are spirit boats, like those in Egyptian tombs or Viking ships buried in the earth, intermediaries between worlds that are capable of carrying the soul. More political is the look at “Polluted Waters” in

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Volume Six. Among the most vivid objects from the library to hang in the Albuquerque Museum is a silk and rice-paper scroll bearing a picture of the microorganism that causes giardia. Images of water-borne diseases are enlarged and hung as if they were landscapes. And, indeed, their forms in nature are organically beautiful, if deadly.

Volume Seven documents the artist’s work with “Receiving Rain and Conserving Water.” It includes photographs of a corner of the UNM Student Union Building that was transformed by Irland’s efforts to channel rain.

Composer Christopher Shultis collaborated with Irland on Volume Eight, “Absorbed Listening.” Although this volume constitutes an interesting part of the Albuquerque Museum exhibit, it’s unfortunate the museum had no audio to convey how the different sounds of water — from waves to waterfalls to rain — are among our most frequent and intimate connections to the natural world.

Irland’s work can be sweeping, as in *A Gathering of Waters*, and it often focuses on the sacred, as in the spirit boats. Altars are the focus of Volume Nine, “The Ecology of Reverence.” The museum show includes a vessel of holy water set in an altar for the Hindu deity Ganesha, and there are also vials that contain tears and vials with water from the healing sites of Lourdes, France, and Chimayó, New Mexico.

The book *Water Library* brings together so much of what is important in Irland’s vision. It collects objects, performances, events, collaborations, interviews, critical essays, and musings.

The Albuquerque Museum show, though small, is well worth seeing, as it emphasizes objects to their advantage. *A Book of Drought*, for example, is cracked and parched like the earth. The Do Not Touch signs seem well-placed; these objects are powerful, and the viewer naturally wants to touch a book of salt or lichen because it seems part of the earth.

Although only a part of what Irland does, the creation of evocative objects makes a compelling display. And all of her work returns us to an awareness of life’s sustaining element, water. ◀

details

- ▼ Basia Irland: *Water Library*
- ▼ Exhibit through Jan. 27
- ▼ Albuquerque Museum of Art & History, 2000 Mountain Road N.W.
- ▼ \$4 (\$3 for N.M. residents with ID), \$2 visitors 65 & older & \$1 children 4-12 (no charge first Wednesday each month or 9 a.m.-1 p.m. Sundays); 505-243-7255