



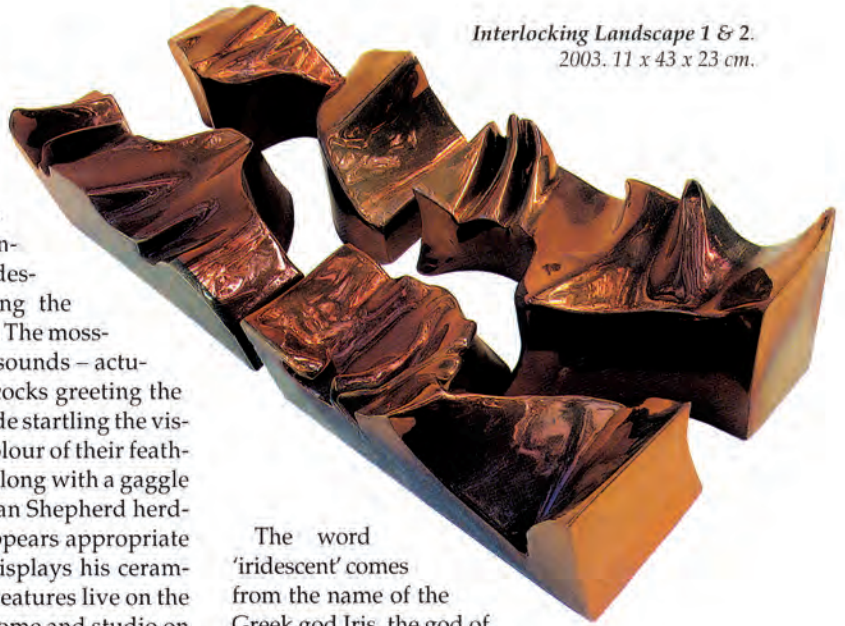
Ira Winarsky's  
**Interactive Glazes**

*Article by Elaine Levin*

**D**RIVING DOWN THE bumpy two-tract rural path off the highway toward the artist's studio, the towering pine and live oak trees barely make room for Ira Winarsky's truck. Flashes of an iridescent shade of blue appear along the underbrush of resurrection ferns. The moss-covered trees echo with strange sounds – actually the cries of 14 strutting peacocks greeting the familiar truck. They rush alongside startling the visitor with the arresting, shifting colour of their feathers. The presence of these birds, along with a gaggle of geese and a determined German Shepherd herding his charges toward safety, appears appropriate when Winarsky discusses and displays his ceramics. The artist and his guardian creatures live on the prairie edge, in and around his home and studio on acreage outside Gainesville, Florida, where he is a professor at the university.

The relationship between Winarsky's art and his outdoor companions is immediately apparent, displayed on a low table in his living room. Here the heads of geese are part of a lively design on a group of plates Winarsky produced early in his ceramic career. The images recall the simplified forms of animals on black and white or cream-coloured Mimbres bowls, one of the artist's favourite traditions within Native American historical ware. Although satisfying in some respects, Winarsky's earlier experiments with glow-in-the-dark art and phosphorescent materials for sculpture, led him, when he turned to ceramics, to seek a more colourful, exciting approach for clay. An exhibit several years ago of Beatrice Wood's lustre glazes at Garth Clark's Gallery in New York City bolstered his need to change directions. Her glazes, he remarked, "blew me away".

Wood never shared her glaze formulas. Indeed, little accurate information for achieving iridescent lustre glazes has been published. Persian potters discovered lustres around the 9th century. Secrecy prevailed even though, in time, potters in the Mediterranean countries and later in the rest of Europe, enjoyed some success. Winarsky searched in libraries and sent inquiries to various ceramists with little concrete success. Ultimately, experimenting with the base metals of gold, copper, titanium and silver produced the first results. But only after many years and over 1200 tests, each test tried at least four times on different clay bodies, in different locations in the kiln and fired at different temperatures did he achieve success in producing a full spectrum of iridescent colours. Sometimes just a hint of a glittering colour appeared but that spot finally gave him a clue to an understanding of how to achieve a rich palette of these most elusive glazes.



The word 'iridescent' comes from the name of the Greek god Iris, the god of the rainbow. Besides peacock feathers, nature has endowed the interior of shells – abalone, mussels and oysters, to name just a few – with a pearlescence that shimmers and changes with the light. That is the attraction for Winarsky. Iridescent glazes go beyond the intense monochrome colours, changing hues (like peacock feathers) depending on movement and the relationship of the viewer to the object, and on natural or artificial light which also shifts tints and shades. These glazes on a fired clay surface are like rivers of flowing colour, alive and interactive, responding to the viewer's lightest movement.

At first, Winarsky applied these mesmerising glazes on his hand-thrown bowls and platters, examining how they flow over rims and sides, or puddle in centres. Although these were functional forms, he never considered them utilitarian for the serving of food. They were not meant for kitchen cupboards but rather for the wall or pedestal, as an art form.

To clarify his thinking once again, Winarsky contemplated finding a more appropriate form beyond the traditional. At first, the circular form of the nests made by his bird-companions intrigued him. Although these structures were satisfying, he realised his background as a professional architect could lead to more provocative solutions. Involved in promoting sustainable and environmentally sensitive design and in writing about ecosystems and wetlands, he is alert to the seasonal changes in the prairie landscape. His daily view from the floor to ceiling windows of his home provides a vista changing constantly by the shifts in light, the velocity of the wind, the variety in weather. The dip in the land several hundred feet from the deck at the front of the house is transformed during wet weather into a 2.1 m (7 ft) deep prairie lake. Perhaps unconsciously, it was a logical leap to envision the area as a bowl.



Top: *Iridescent Rock Landscape 3 (detail)*. Above: *Iridescent Rock Landscape 3*. 2001. 24 x 24 x 7 cm.

One of these bowls supports a glimmering puddle of cerulean blue set in and contrasted with rugged surroundings. Like the real lake it mirrors, any movement will shift the glaze's hues. Other glistening shades of blue in this series of bowls embedded in a landscape recall the startling impact on a hiker coming unexpectedly upon the shimmering blue-gold of a high mountain lake.

The fact that clay is an earth material suggested the next step in expressing the nature of this relationship. *Interlocking Landscape 1 and 2* pairs mountainous, horizontal columns as though they might fit together. Yet that fit is illusive and on closer inspection, the parallel slices of rough terrain appear to have been pulled apart and then unaligned by some natural phenomena. From a horizontal dimension, Winarsky moved to vertical possibilities. The six or seven glazes involved in the *Small Landscape Sandwich* series suggest the often distinctive colours in the stratification of the earth's layers. In his travels around the country, Winarsky has seen the effects of geological upheavals that have forced the earth's surface upward. The artist's fascination with the layers of stratum exposed by such an explosive power is inherent in this series. His artful pun in the title associates these layers with the many different ingredients in a tasty, towering sandwich.

The Florida prairie, like Winarsky's front yard, is interspersed with ponds, lakes, streams and rivers, a watery flat topography lying between the Gulf of

Mexico on the west, and the Atlantic Ocean on the east. The prevalence of so many bodies of water is characteristic of this region of the country. Water reflects the sky and its changes and it shapes not only the land around it but also elements within its confines. Water also transforms the colours and appearance of objects lying within it. Winarsky was challenged to express this effect. The myriad, harsh, sharp and angled rocks and stones clustered together at the edge of a stream, perhaps due to ancient glacier action, present an abstract pattern of hues and shapes. In his series of *Rock Landscapes*, the artist recreated rocks in natural, earth tones, gathering hundreds together in low black trays. Each rock was individually carved, glazed or painted with engobes for a realistic appearance. Suddenly a captivating colour catches the eye. A few glamorous, polished, iridescent-glazed stones are slyly interspersed among the tray of rougher images. A prospector suddenly finding a gold nugget among common rocks must have had the same 'aha' experience.

Once again another type of action by water attracted the artist – those stones that are rounded, polished and smoothed by the repetitive pounding action of a rushing river. Large square and round black trays of pebbles and small stones glow, iridescent hues giving these *Iridescent River Rock Landscapes* a jewel-like presence. To further the illusion of their discovery in a stream or riverbed, Winarsky has added water to the tray, the black background heightening the multi-coloured lustrous contents.

Winarsky's studio is a short walk, through the woods from his house. The 3600 sq ft three storey, structure which he designed and built, has a gallery along with separate spaces providing shelves for bisque ware and two spacious areas for forming, glazing and firing his work in two electric kilns. The gallery is flooded with natural light. In this special setting all the glaze colours show their true nature – like the reds which reveal a range of hues from violet to orange and blue. The spacious outdoor porch, a favourite place to work, contains airbrush and other glazing equipment.

The second floor, away from clay dust, includes offices with spaces for visualising his art projects. Most pieces are developed through a series of sketches before his hands touch clay. The third floor is an attic for the storage of art and supplies.

Through his fascination for these mercurial glazes, Winarsky has fused his concern for the environment with sensuous images of earthly delights. This interactive art seduces the viewer and encourages participation through movement for the full – almost psychedelic – effect of a lush landscape.

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