

Ceramics

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Ken Sedberry
and Other Working
Potters Talk Business

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The natural environment is for most conventional landscape artists, despite their psychological or even spiritual affinity for the subject, a phenomenon to be carefully viewed and then rendered, in varying degrees of abstraction, in the service of expression. In that scenario, even a superficial observation of natural features can suffice. Winarsky, however, views the landscape fundamentally through the eyes of an ecologist and consequently cannot help but conceive of nature in terms of its many layers, most of which are not immediately visible at any given moment. The stratification of the landscape—both literal, in terms of geological levels, and metaphorical, with respect to the systems that operate within it—is forever before him. Not surprisingly, his artistic approach to landscape has from the start involved layering. His earliest sculptures were pieces that he aptly described as landscape sandwiches: layered affairs through which he attempted to convey a sense of the complexity that he perceives even in ostensibly simple patches of ground.

Perhaps the most unusual consequence of Winarsky's special awareness of complexity and dynamism in the landscape has been his series of "mobile" works: undulating, iridescent slabs fitted with wheels and hardware from toy wagons or skateboards. These whimsical sculptures derived their initial inspiration from fortuitous circumstances years ago when Winarsky's pickup truck, exceptionally dirty from construction work, developed spontaneously into a moving ecosystem. "Grass started growing from the bed of the truck," he recalls, "and there were anthills, worms and bird nests. This had me laughing, because, apart from deserts and a few other exceptions, landscapes only move around over millions of years." The unusual mobile landscapes consequently employ hyperbole to emphasize what is, in reality, the gradual transformation of the earth and its ecosystems: a metamorphosis that ordinarily cannot be witnessed within the paltry lifespan of human beings. By our terms, the earth is exceptionally slow, although we may recognize that it is never still. To represent the landscape in the manner of most conventional, especially classical, landscape artists is to render it inert, restricting its appearance to a conception of time framed in years rather than millennia.

In order to emphasize the continual stirrings beneath surfaces rather than the surfaces themselves, Winarsky's passion has been iridescence. For more than ten years he has pursued this quality through a variety of means, beginning with some fairly unsatisfactory metallic paints applied to forms with a spray gun. "It just didn't work for me," he recalls. "Then I saw a show of work by Beatrice Wood in New York and was blown away by the glazes. I realized then that I had to quit fooling around with paint and start seeking the effects that I was looking for in glaze." The inspiration of Wood's work and some

of George Ohr's pieces would prove significant to Winarsky's development, but equally influential was the fact that no information was readily available regarding the composition of their glazes. Compelled to develop his own formulas through careful experimentation, he resolved not to settle for the bright though opaque quality of luster, but instead to persevere until he had achieved true iridescence.

Although proceeding with a methodical precision that has generated volumes of detailed notes and an archive of test pieces, Winarsky conceives of his project as "part of a tradition of alchemists" in which mysterious transformation in the kiln—the radical change from chalky off-white surfaces to viscous flows of metallic hues—is as entralling as the ef-

fects achieved through it. The magic of this transformation has fueled Winarsky's dedication for a task that would otherwise have been tedious. "I label each piece," he explains, "and compare the effects on thirty to forty of them after each computerized firing. At this point I've done nearly two thousand tests. I've made drawings of each shelf when it's gone into the kiln and I've photographed them all so that I know what was next to each one. It's taken a great deal of discipline and a lot of passion to make it happen." The reward has been a richer iridescence than that of raku ware or of most work fired by potters in the Cone 10 range.

The ultimate living quality of his work—arising less from organic formal traits than from the sense of mysterious and elusive energy



"Wagon Landscape," 31 in. (79 cm) in length, slip-cast earthenware with iridescent glazes, steel, rubber wheels.

LAYERS FOR LUMINOSITY

Understandably, Winarsky is reluctant to unveil all the secrets of his unique glazes, but he has disclosed a few intriguing bits of information about materials and process. While achieving successful results with a variety of clay bodies, including porcelain, he prefers to apply his glazes to white earthenware. Iridescence results from refraction of light at different levels within the translucent surface, and to encourage this effect he utilizes an airbrush to apply three to five layers of glaze. In order to distinguish one muddy, unfired coating visually from the next, he tints the glazes with a red, blue or green food coloring that burns out during firing. "It's a process routinely used in architecture," he comments. "When you paint a room, the base coat has to be a different color from the final coat so that you can see that nothing has been missed." At the same time, a few details left to chance, or even some outright mistakes, have often led to breakthroughs, especially since Winarsky has developed a method of layering glazes that can revivify dead surfaces.



"Mated Landscapes," 7½ in. (19 cm) in length, handbuilt earthenware with iridescent glazes.



"Chasm (Copper Red)," 6 in. (15 cm) in length, slip-cast earthenware with iridescent glazes, by Ira Winarsky, Archer, Florida.

within—is crucial to Winarsky, whose art has always been to some degree active. While a graduate student in sculpture at the Tyler School of Art at Temple University in Philadelphia, he experimented with electronic art that reacted to touch or to movement in the surrounding space. Later, after his relocation to Florida, he developed cast-plastic sculptures composed of phosphorescent material in a range of colors that glowed weirdly in the darkness. These works—related to the Process Art that emerged as a reaction against second-generation New York School formalist theory in the 1960s and early 1970s—were answers to the entropy of traditional sculpture. In his role as architect, Winarsky has maintained a similar emphasis on dynamism. One of his most popular classes, titled "Energy, Ecology and Architecture," stresses the necessity of harmonizing human constructions with the fluctuation of existing ecosystems.

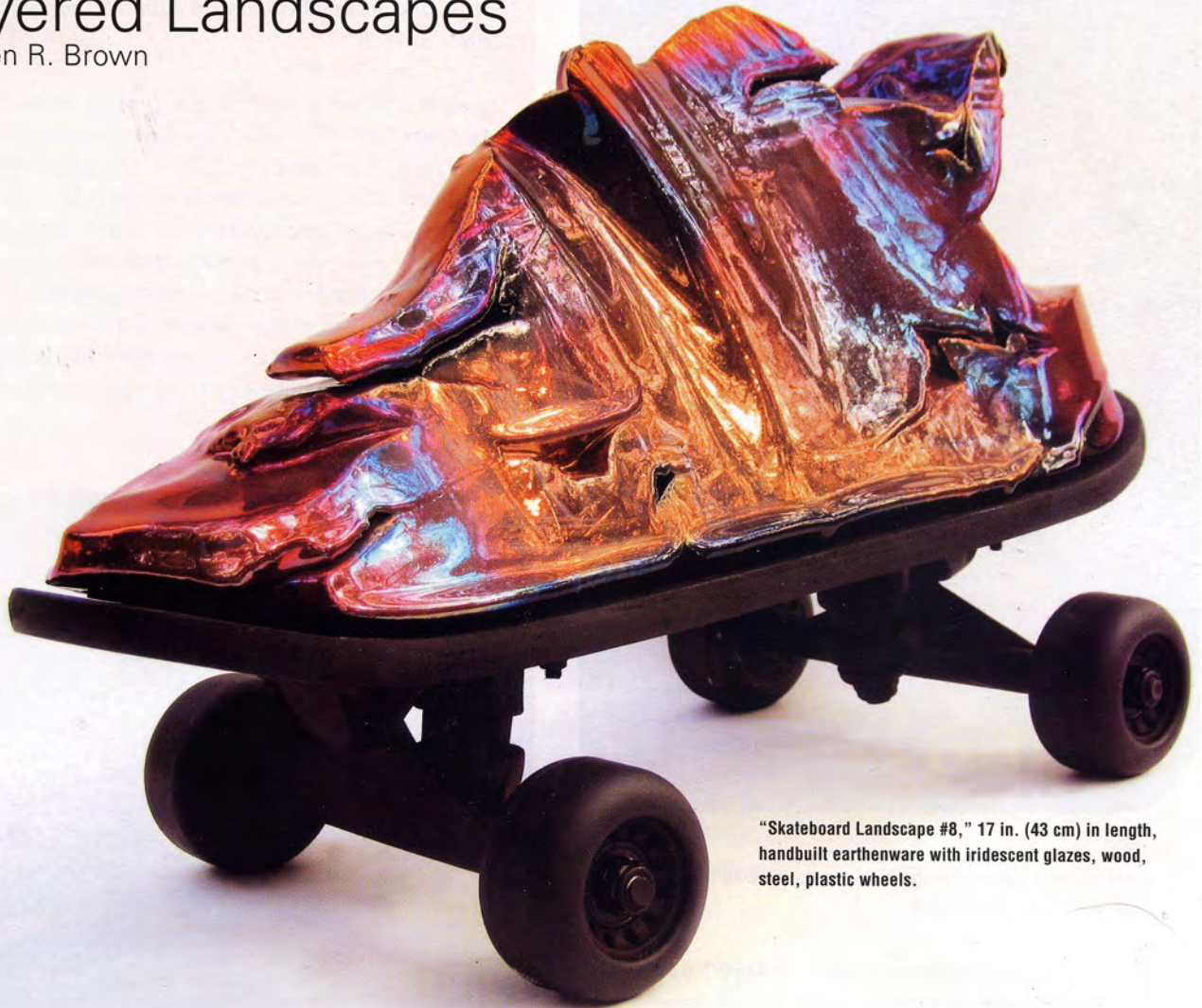
In a sense, this imperative governs his recent ceramic sculptures as well. Winarsky's home, a largely glass structure situated on fifteen acres of wooded land in a rural area outside Gainesville, is an ecological architect's paradise complete with eighteen peacocks that roam the grounds and shed their colorful feathers on the earth like scatterings of iridescent leaves. Visually, Winarsky's work in ceramics has evolved as an essential component of this ecosystem: an aspect of a dynamic environment of which he is himself a vital part. Self-expression has, in a sense, become for Winarsky equivalent to capturing the character of the landscape that he inhabits and that he has, by his presence, subtly altered. This landscape is understood to be fundamentally energetic: perpetually active as myriad factors interact within it. Capturing this inherent dynamism without thereby negating it—transfixing it in clay and glaze while not, in the process, rendering it inert—has been both a constant challenge and a consistent impetus to Winarsky's art.

Additional information and images of Winarsky's work can be found on his website www.artfromiraland.com.

Ira Winarsky

Layered Landscapes

by Glen R. Brown



"Skateboard Landscape #8," 17 in. (43 cm) in length, handbuilt earthenware with iridescent glazes, wood, steel, plastic wheels.

Smoldering like live coals beneath a fine dusting of gray ash, the calescent colors of Ira Winarsky's ceramic works seem inherently active: aspects of energy gathering within rather than simply lying upon surfaces. The molten appearance of his vessels and sculptures suggests an origin in metallurgy or, more significantly, geological disturbances in which convection currents in the earth's mantle shift the plates in its crust, or magma from deep within splits the ground into fissures then seeps out in torrid rivulets along the wounds. The impression of heat rising to the surfaces from the interiors of Winarsky's works is in reality an effect not of temperature but of light in which unique iridescent glazes play a central role. Light penetrates the glassy surfaces and rebounds from points within, creating for the eye an illusion of radiance rather than mere reflection. Winarsky's sculptures, as a consequence, are experienced as luminous energy more than as matter.

It would perhaps be predictable for Winarsky, a professor of architecture at the University of Florida and a specialist in ecological design, to approach clay with a literalist mentality, envisioning it as earth and modeling it like a landscape. He does in fact admit to a profound aesthetic attraction to the land. "There's a scientific interest in it in terms of the ecology," he explains, "but there's also this beautiful passion for making it into my art. It's slowly pulling the parts of my life together: the architecture and the art. They're both concentrating on landscapes in general." This does not, however, imply a desire to render stylized representations of terrain in clay. Winarsky's landscapes are largely conceptual. His professional knowledge of ecology—which entails the ability to read stories of floods, plant life and distribution of animal species in a small sample of soil—ensures a conception of landscape that extends well beyond the picturesque.