


NEW CERAMICS

The European Ceramics Magazine

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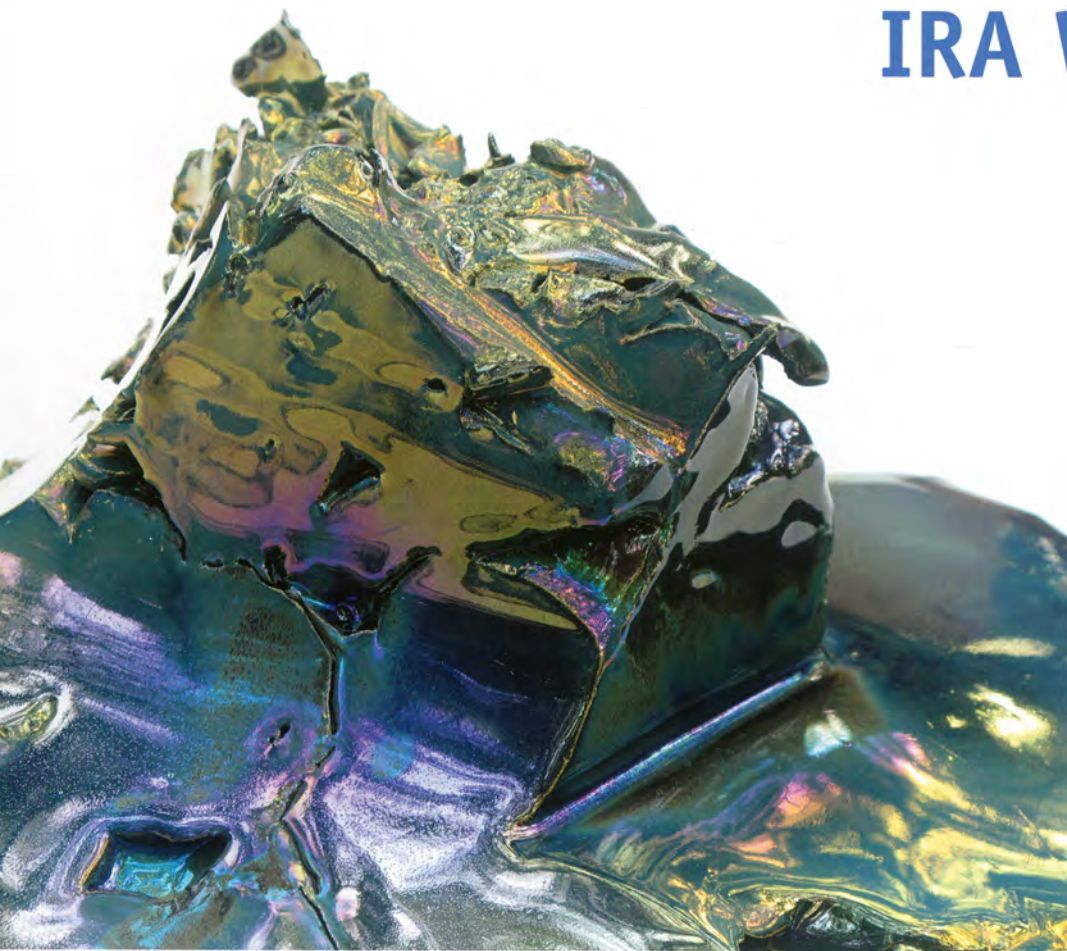
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ISSN 1860-1049
US \$ 11,00 | £ 7,00



IRA WINARSKY

Landscapes of Light

Glen R. Brown



Canyons break the sharp contour of a cliff, yielding alluvial fans that descend in ripples of evanescent colour like the hues of a rainbow in the settling mists of a cascade. Saddles between mountain peaks play cradle to alpine lakes, the mysterious depths of which teem with phantasms of coloured light: opalescent minnows darting and flashing among the shadows. Although the landscapes of the American ceramist Ira Winarsky are masses as monumental in effect as the geological formations that they imitate, the magic performed by their surfaces is an act of metamorphosis, of dissolution into weightlessness, fluidity of form and auroral ephemerality of colour.

An artist who earned an MFA at The Tyler School of Art, Temple University in 1968 then taught ecological design and sustainable architecture for 35 years as a professor at the University of Florida, Winarsky blends a sculptor's aesthetic with a geologist's knowledge of land formations and the chemical properties of materials. Visually, his sculptures begin in the observation of natural topographic features such as ridges, cliffs, saddles and valleys and the iridescence of peacock plumes, fish scales and the lustrous mother of pearl that decks mollusc shells with a regal lining. Materially, however, his work is a product of the laboratory and a researcher's patient experimentation with variables in a quest to conjure prismatic effects from fired glazes.

The word 'conjure' seems apt to describe Winarsky's process, since he ties the scant history of experimentation with glaze iridescence (as opposed to lustre effects, for example) to the secretive tradition of alchemy. "The alchemists and artists using these glazes never disclosed how they made them," he notes, "and they died with their secrets. So I had to start from scratch,

ILLUSTRATIONS -

above - Detail View "Scared Landscape #3" - 33.34 x 31.16 x 10.16 cm - # 1312 - 2010

below - "Saddle Formed Landscape" - 68,6 x 31,1 x 17,15 cm - 2010

opposite page - "Terrestrial Landscape #10" - 53.34 x 28.58 x 17.46 cm - # 1290 - 2010



with research into the chemistry of glazes and the physics of light." The latter was of particular importance. The effect of iridescence is achieved by Winarsky's sculptures because the glazed surfaces act as thin prisms, reflecting some light waves off their translucent exteriors while allowing others to penetrate to interior layers then refract outward. Different frequencies of light waves refract at different levels, causing a separation of the exiting light into the hues of the visible spectrum.

Pursuit of the desired prismatic effect occupied 15 years of research, over which time Winarsky conducted more than 2500 glaze tests in 300 firings. If such careful experimentation sounds coolly systematic, even tediously devoid of passion, one should remember that Sir Isaac Newton, who conducted some of the earliest controlled experiments with light and prisms was a devoted alchemist who attributed the "clockwork universe" laid bare by his empirical scrutiny to the enigmas of a divine spirit. For all Winarsky's exacting procedure and logical progression in pursuing his objective, he is before all else an artist driven by a fascination with expressive effects of energy. Like the work of late alchemist-painter Sigmar Polke, Winarsky's experimentation with materials has always been conducive to the facilitation of transformations and the preservation of mystery.

Earlier in his artistic career Winarsky sought to engage the viewer by incorporating electronic sensors and computer technology into his sculptures. In one of his more devious works, he fashioned fake prehistoric artifacts from phosphorescent materials and left them surreptitiously on riverbanks frequented by Florida projectile-point and potsherd hunters. In the mid-1990s, however, the gift of a pair of peafowl – which quickly populated the acreage around Winarsky's custom-designed home with a flock of the colourful birds – sparked his interest in the protean nature of iridescence. Glazed ceramics struck him as the ideal medium in which to pursue the dazzling chromatic quality of peacock feathers, and from that point

on he has continually refined this most salient characteristic of his work. Even after years of experimentation, he is still the first person to be seduced by the visual allure of his sculptures. They "seem to be alive," he notes, "forever changing."

The material forms of Winarsky's dynamic works serve as perfect complements to the vibrant surfaces, offering peaks and crevices for the play of crisp, golden-hued highlights against smoky shadows and planes that gleam in rainbow liquidity, like oil on tarmac. The title of Winarsky's recent series *Terrestrial Landscapes* indicates inspiration in actual geological formations, and the series *Unstable Landscapes* suggests reflection on the continual heaving and settling of the earth's crust that accounts for those varied formations. But perhaps the title of a third current series, *The Sacred Landscapes*, is the most appropriate descriptor of the work as a whole, since Winarsky's aim is not to produce topographic relief maps but rather to suggest the impossibility of mapping the incommensurable. Though there is enough geological accuracy in the thrusting, levelling and reposing of the masses to satisfy the literalist, the effect of the surfaces of Winarsky's ceramic landscapes is uncanny and otherworldly: in the artist's words, "a beautiful miracle."

Glen R. Brown is a professor of art history and Associate Head of the Art Department at Kansas State University. An elected member of the International Academy of Ceramics in Geneva, Switzerland, he has written extensively about contemporary and historical ceramics.



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Ira H. Winarsky is a self-employed artist, architect and professor emeritus of the University of Florida. He was born in Newark, New Jersey in 1942. He has a degree of Master of Fine Arts in sculpture, 1968, Temple University, Tyler School of Art and Bachelor of Architecture, Professional Degree, University of Kansas, 1965. Exhibitions: "Winarsky", Solo Show, at the University Gallery, University of Florida, February 20 to March 16, 2001; "Iridescent Landscapes: Ira Winarsky Ceramics", Solo Show, April 7- May 20, 2007, at the Thomas Center Galleries, Gainesville, Florida; "Iridescent Landscapes" Ira Winarsky Solo Show, September 14 - November 25, 2007, Museum of Florida Art, Deland Florida; National Contemporary American Ceramic Sculpture Exhibition, "Alchemy: From Dust to Form", Ham Museum, Gainesville Florida. March 1 to September 11, 2011.