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ART

History Repeating



Jane Irish, *Resistance, Wealth, and Heroic Protest* (2001-02), 10 feet by 11 feet, egg tempera, gouache and gold leaf paint on linen.

Art history meets contemporary social issues in Jane Irish's installation at PAFA.

by [Susan Hagen](#)

Jane Irish: History Lesson

Through Feb. 2, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Broad and Cherry sts., 215-972-7600

In a long-awaited one-person exhibition, Philadelphia artist Jane Irish has created a rigorously unconventional installation of her paintings. Irish established her reputation in the East Village art scene of the 1980s with a series of exhibitions at Sharpe Gallery that included paintings of buildings, such as *The Court at King of Prussia Mall*. Painted in a deliberately primitive style in egg tempera, these paintings revealed the irony of their mundane subjects and at the same time offered raw visual pleasure.

For a few years the populist sensibility of the lively East Village scene made it possible for ordinary people to collect art, and after the scene evaporated in about 1990, Irish became interested in class issues in the art world. This has become the conceptual basis for much of her recent art. In a telephone interview, Irish explains that her early work had a subtle social agenda, but then

she began to work more directly with sociopolitical themes. The disparity between rich and poor and, more recently, protest and social reform movements throughout history became major interests. Her artistic process is highly intellectual, drawing from a plethora of ideas, historic events and cultural and political issues. Irish's dual education in studio art and art history has allowed her to eloquently use art historical references and direct appropriation of imagery.

History Lesson, Irish's aptly titled installation, shifts its form continually -- combining her own work and work by others, on the wall and off the wall, and through a variety of media -- constantly presenting new ideas and reiterating others. Circling around the gallery, the viewer could become overwhelmed by the dozens of intricately crafted paintings of opulence, poverty and social protest. However, Irish was particularly concerned about the point of entry into the work, and carefully designed the installation to make these complex ideas accessible and interesting to the average museum-goer.

Visitors to the exhibition are confronted first by a huge freestanding triptych, *Resistance, Wealth, and Heroic Protest* (2001-2002), which tilts out diagonally from the wall. This piece combines three horizontally stacked canvases, painted with egg tempera, gouache and gold leaf paint, and supported on a metal stud frame like a giant billboard. Distinct painted photographs and newspaper clippings, painted in a faux trompe l'oeil style, contrast sharply with a large central image of an opulent interior. The room is the Rococo boudoir of Helen Clay Frick, painted by Irish with lush pinks and greens and just a bit of lasciviousness. The top panel in the triptych juxtaposes paintings of relief panels representing protesters along with two dangling bundles of expensive objects like jewelry, fans, silks and objets d'art, while the bottom shows a richly decorated orange wall covered with protest posters.

Other walls of the gallery are hung with eccentric clusters of paintings that combine oil paintings from the Academy's collection with related or contrasting tempera and gouache paintings by Irish. Some are uncanny in their congruence. For example, Walter Gay's painting, *Madame Frick's Boudoir*, is hung next to Irish's painting of the same subject, contrasting Gay's tone of somber respect with Irish's emphasis on frivolousness and decadence. Another arrangement of 10 paintings is centered around Reginald Marsh's *End of the 14th Street Crosstown Line* (1936), which shows construction workers, a fashionable store and a group of union protesters. Irish's paintings are hung nearby, such as *Washing Blood from the American Flag (Australia Anti-War Protest, 1968)* (2002), illustrate similar scenes of contemporary protest.

Comparing the disturbing persistence of urban poverty in the PAFA neighborhood, Walter Stumpf's *The Wall*, painted in 1946, is hung next to Irish's *St. John's Hospice*, painted in 2002.

On the far wall of the gallery, Irish has painted an enormous pink, yellow and black check-cashing sign, also inspired by the neighborhood around PAFA. Over this she has installed four relief panels made from cast gypsum and resin in the style of the decorative frieze panels on the Academy itself. Irish's subjects in these reliefs, rendered in a deliberately primitive style, are conceptual art projects from about 1970 that dealt with social issues. *After Adrian Piper* (2002), showing a woman walking down the street with a sock in her mouth, was copied from a photograph of one of Piper's street performance pieces in New York about social diversity and tolerance. Another panel, *After Terry Fox* (2002), depicts a disheveled homeless man sleeping on the floor -- and is based on a photograph of a performance piece by Fox that dealt with social inequity. The discovery of the parallels between the processes of artists and protesters is one of Irish's most original ideas, as is the less-than-perfect translation of appropriated images into a more formal medium.

Jane Irish's work is fundamentally didactic, but like any good teacher she offers a wealth of ideas with great passion and generosity. In this fascinating installation, she has invented a creative format as interesting and complex as the ideas it contains.