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The beauty might blind you to the message Colorful paintings, potent antiwar statements

By Edith Newhall
For The Inquirer

If you want to see sensuous, celebratory painting, rendered with a delicate but absolutely confident touch, go no farther than Locks Gallery, where Jane Irish is exhibiting her work of the last two years.

And if you like art that pulses a potent antiwar message, you can visit the same show.

Irish, who started her career at the height of New York's East Village gallery boom - and, unlike many '80s artists, survived that era - is producing some of her most exciting, provocative work two decades later.



The sheer beauty of Irish's paintings is unusual enough. Besides her deft paint handling, she is a daring colorist in the molds of De Kooning, Florine Stettheimer, and Malcolm Morley. The opulent rococo drawing rooms she depicts, with ornate chandeliers, plaster wall decorations, carpets and furniture, glow like hallucinatory visions.

But then you learn Irish is painting on common Tyvek, not canvas. And your eye begins to follow the raised letters and numerals on the surfaces of her paintings - initially camouflaged by her riveting colors - that form statements, statistical diagrams and poems about the Vietnam War. All that beauty has lured you into Ireland's over-the-top interiors while a harrowing accounting of war has been literally at the forefront of these paintings (the effect is more or less the reverse of Maya Lin's dark, minimalist Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which, under certain light conditions becomes a mirror, reflecting the sky, the trees, the grass, and its various onlookers behind the deceased's engraved names).

Irish's paintings are unsettling even without words, and there are several small works on paper here that depict interiors only. Such seductive, vapid beauty automatically stirs thoughts of its evanescence. With their bas-relief observations of

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the toll of the Vietnam War, however, they become chilling testimonies to the horrors of all wars.

Elizabeth Osborne, who is also exhibiting at Locks, is represented by a group of her paintings from the 1960s that show her developing the style she initially became known for - large, colorful paintings of interiors and landscapes (she has since moved into near-abstract).

These particular works depict arrangements of people, or a single female figure, in rooms of typically modern geometric '60s design, and show an affinity with contemporaneous paintings by Alex Katz and Richard Diebenkorn.

