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A display of vases, quiet, with poetry from vets, artists

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Last year, at Locks Gallery, Jane Irish pulled out all the stops with her monumental paintings of opulent interiors, rendered in De Kooning-esque pinks, yellows and blues, and simultaneously bearing the searing testimonies of Vietnam vets in raised letters that were almost disguised by the pretty painting over them. Irish's unlikely combination of materials - oil paint on workaday Tyvek - echoed the dichotomy of her images.



Jane Irish's vases, including "Cao Dao Vase" (left) and "Pacquet Connolly Vase" in low fire whiteware, china paint, lustre, and underglaze, are at Locks Gallery through Feb. 21.

The tone of Irish's current show at Locks, "Cochin Chinoiserie," is quieter, even elegiac, as though one has entered one of those hushed, empty rococo sitting rooms from last year's paintings. The play of dichotomy continues to be a strong force in Irish's work, this time carried out in lushly decorated whiteware vases in the style of 18th- and 19th-century French Sevres porcelain, onto which Irish has Katz and Carter Ratcliff. One vase features excerpts from a speech by Mario Savio, the political activist and Berkeley Free Speech movement leader.

Mounted on wall pedestals, these hollow but externally gorgeous objects strike you as the most unlikely surfaces for the passionate writing they display. A large triptych painting from 2001-02 - one of the artist's best-known works, juxtaposing images of protest with those of decadent beauty - hovers near the center of the back of the gallery, like a coda to the show.

Irish, who received an Independence Foundation Fellowship in 2008 that enabled her to spend 25 days traveling and painting in Vietnam, is also showing a series of small "plein air" paintings of landscapes that were sites of combat during the Vietnam war. These are almost eerily uneventful and undistinguished, much like Stephen Shore's color photographs of landscapes - a throwaway-snapshot sort of glimpse, but painted - and they too speak of dichotomy. But here, on, say, an empty, placid beach framed by jungle, one can only imagine the scene's horrifying opposite.

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