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Jane Irish: *Sông Hu'o'ng: Withdrawing Room*

By Gabriele Vainsencher



Malouiniere Mauve, 2012, egg tempera on linen, 36 x 54 inches

Walk into Locks gallery anytime between now and May 10th, and you will be delighted. The vast gallery is filled with colorful paintings of lush indoors and lovely outdoors. The rooms depicted are French and gorgeous, with high vaulted ceilings and exquisite furniture, paintings and chandeliers. The outdoor scenes are all Vietnamese (sort of, we'll get to that in a second) and feature pure open skies, jungles full of temples and palm trees and seas filled with boats. If you look at all these, and don't read the press release or the paintings' labels, you will come out believing you understand what it is all about—I thought the paintings were a backward look toward impressionism, at the conflict between the landscape that inspires a bourgeois mural and the mural itself—never a correct representation of one place, always an amalgam of variously-sourced exotica. Maybe I thought they were about colonialism in a general sort of way.

Locks Gallery chose “*Malouiniere Mauve*,” 2012, for the show's invitation card with good reason. The painting contains the basic elements of the show: European interiors, Vietnamese exteriors and the fiction-making medium between them, the mural—in a tight bond. In the painting, a light-filled luxurious French interior painted from observation in one of Jane Irish's recent trips to the Brittany region of France, is decked out in diaphanous curtains and plush upholstery. The painting offers two views of the outside world: one through windows and French doors, in which we glimpse a general, luminous countryside, and the second is a mural, framed by a decorative trompe-l'oeil edge, which offers

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Red Curtains, 2012, egg tempera on linen, 26 x 54 inches

a seaside view of what Irish describes as a mix of oriental exotica, something a wealthy French family would commission to have painted in its living room in the Rococo era. On the gallery’s opposite wall is a corner-hugging mural-sized painting (*Sông Hu’o’ng*, 2013), in which the same decorative edge returns, this time to frame Irish’s own composition of actual places along the Sông Hương river in the Hue region of Vietnam.

Irish’s painting style is post-impressionistic, something between reveling in the effects of light and suffering the effects of 21st-century guilt over beauty felt by many painters today. The paintings move from meticulous renderings of architecture and furniture to almost harried vertical stripes that do little more than cover up some of the more beautiful details. To me, that seemed like the most interesting conflict contained within the works: what could, and should, a painter in the 21st century do with so much beauty? Irish acknowledges having a double conflict with beauty: firstly, she sees herself as an artist driven foremost by a political agenda rather than a formalist one—two painted vases on display feature images of Vietnam Vets Against the War (VVAW), whose cause has been Irish’s main motivation for over a decade. Secondly, according to her, she consciously tries to make the paintings “not too frou-frou”, or overly done, a mechanism of conscious self-vandalism that has a long history in art.



Installation view of *Sông Hu’o’ng*, 2013, 94 x 240 inches

“Sông Hương: Withdrawing Room” is at once deeply satisfying to look at and equally tricky to understand: seemingly on display are French interiors and Vietnamese exteriors. Actually, several of the rooms depicted were a pastiche of multiple spaces Irish painted in, and some of the landscapes were



Thousand Yard Stare Urn, 2012, low fire white-ware, china paint, luster and underglaze, 15 1/2 x 8 x 8 inches

not painted from Irish's observations of Vietnam, but from her observations of French murals, which, in turn, did not depict Vietnam, or any other place, accurately. But some of her paintings are of real places in Vietnam like Sông Hương. Irish told me that her work is about Americans: how American aristocracy developed its taste according to a French model, aided by the likes of art dealer Joseph Duveen, and about the cause of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War and about doing the right thing for the Vietnamese people by depicting their country's beauty as it really is. While Irish's complete and sincere devotion to the political causes that have propelled her to travel and paint in Vietnam and France is compelling, it is striking how much this show, despite its creator's intentions, does not scream 'political art.' Furthermore, I think it is exactly this show's relative ambiguity, compared with previous bodies of work in which VVAW rallies were juxtaposed with traditional Vietnamese poetry, that makes it more interesting and more effective.

The show's most intriguing work is the large "Yellow and Red," from 2013. It looks like a giant sketch-pad, an enlarged version of what we might find in the hidden depths of an impressionist's trove of preparatory sketches: set atop a flat milky-ochre background are the red, purple and burgundy images of elephants, temples, droopy flags and flying ships. A giant tree-trunk in mid-descent hangs from the top edge of the picture. This scattered, bewitching painting seems like a strong direction for Irish's work, as it embraces its own inherent confusions and intricacies.



Yellow and Red, 2013, egg tempera on three canvases, 96 x 144 inches