

ARTFORUM

Jane Irish

September 2016

By Becky Heff Hunter

LOCKSGALLERY



The title of Jane Irish's most recent solo exhibition, "A Rapid Whirling on the Heel," adapted a phrase from Edgar Allan Poe's epic 1848 prose poem *Eureka*. Poe's text unfurls a cosmology that anticipated the "big crunch" theory of an infinitely collapsing and expanding universe. Mobile conceptions of time and location, the likes of which undergird modern cosmic physics, similarly permeate Irish's decade-long painterly inquiry into the histories of Western imperialism and resistance knotted around the Vietnam War. The exhibition comprised fifteen framed egg-tempera paintings, ink drawings, and preparatory studies, each ostensibly depicting an ornate European period room or a Vietnamese heritage site, and a large-scale triptych, *Cosmos* (all works cited, 2015), which was suspended theatrically from the gallery's high ceiling. Each work takes anachronism as the structuring device for its depictions of dreamily warped interiors. The tempera-on-linen *Malouiniere Chipaudiere with Figurehead* presents a Breton colonial-era foyer and dining room, decorated with warm-toned Louis XV furniture and a wall-mounted slave-ship figurehead surrounded by chinoiserie paneling and trompe l'oeil wallpaper. Yet these wall decorations and panels bear 1960s and '70s antiwar iconography—veterans' helmets, daisies, discarded medals—juxtaposed with idyllic scenes of pre-French-occupation Vietnamese pastoral and spiritual life, all rendered in camouflage hues of forest green and golden brown.

While traveling in Hanoi Province in 2008 and '10, Irish studied the archaic Vietnamese Nom alphabet and pictograms from motifs on ancient ceramics, whose gestural shapes she would later incorporate into her work. As with cursive script, these forms articulate the movement of the hand across the grounds of Irish's paintings. In the gouache *Malouiniere Launay Ravilly Reception Study*, loosely calligraphic marks perform a kind of visual shorthand for objects in an eighteenth-century chateau. A plump burgundy "figure eight" sprouting spindly curves indicates a chair; a quickly brushed blue circle amid a stack of horizontals signifies a carved mantel; human figures are zigzag tangles with inky trailing limbs. The swift, straggly action of the brush lends this interior a malleable, ephemeral quality: A maroon chair bleeds into a maroon rug; stalactite-like drips imply dereliction. It is as if all the painted lines, static for now, might at any moment reanimate their wriggling movement and destroy the room's fragile integrity. The more fully worked—but no less visually active—*Malouiniere Launay Ravilly Reception* hung immediately to the left of the gouache study. Ghostly images of protest and pasture drift on this room's pale ceiling, sketched in electric magenta and in some places inverted as if revealed via camera obscura. Protesters' signs read GOLD STAR MOTHERS, in reference to a service organization for mothers of fallen soldiers, the text rendered as fluidly as the figures. This "resistance ceiling," as Irish calls it, appeared in several exhibited works, replacing traditional decorative painting mythologies of warring gods with images of mourning. These people, objects, signs, and army-green panels slip, move, and recur throughout Irish's oeuvre, inscribing a painful loop of trauma.

House of Tan Ky, depicting a preserved historic dwelling in Hoi An, was one of three works in the exhibition with a Vietnamese interior. While Irish's subverted chinoiserie is again present, rather than being capped by a ceiling the dark wood interior opens out into an expanse of oceanic blue-and-green wash

studded with Vietnamese zodiac and mythological signs—including a bucking horse, floating crustaceans, and monks in prayer—concisely dotted and delineated in white tempera. These pictograms evoke a shared experience of gazing in wonder at distant galaxies. The show's linchpin, the suspended *Cosmos*, made in direct response to Poe's *Eureka* and to Vietnamese cosmology, develops its theme across three hefty and densely covered tempera-on-canvas panels. Floating above the viewer, the work's deep blues and grays, reminiscent of the palette of traditional ceramics, conjured watery heavens inhabited by dragons. *Cosmos*, embedded with some of the same antiwar vocabulary as the wall-mounted paintings, is a literal manifestation of the resistance ceiling. Hovering ominously overhead, the painting implicated the gallery and visitors in the difficult histories that Irish confronts, and invited viewers to seek connections between the deep impact of European colonialism and the burgeoning US imperialism that ravaged Vietnam and persists unabated to this day.

—Becky Huff Hunter

Jane Irish, *House of Tan Ky*, 2015, egg tempera on linen, 50½ × 55".

