

# AN EXPANDING UNIVERSE

Interview with Jane Irish  
by Nato Thompson



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**Antipodes Vietnam Peru I**,  
2016. Gouache, egg tempera,  
and metal leaf on paper,  
22 x 30 inches

**THOMPSON:** We are about to enter into a season of Jane Irish, with a show opening at Locks Gallery of work from the last three years, and the site-specific project at Lemon Hill, which is a culmination of many themes that we're going to get into. Let's first discuss some of your background, then we'll dive more specifically into the recent work. You got a BFA from Maryland Institute of Art in 1977 and your MFA from Queens College in 1980. In your recent artist talk at the Philadelphia Athenaeum you said, "I think even in my art historical training I was colonized early on." Can you speak to the kind of training that you had?

**IRISH:** My first training was at the Barnes Foundation when I was in high school. I started at the Maryland Institute—which is now MICA—in 1973 and majored in painting. We were trained in the French tradition, looking at Matisse, Courbet, Degas. But the professors—like Raoul Middleman, Paul Moscott, and Barry Nemmett—were young, and they encouraged self-expression. For graduate school I sought out a representational program, but also wanted to be in New York. Queens College at CUNY was known for second generation abstract expressionists; Charles Cajori was a great teacher there who was very heavy on constructed space, the kind of fractured space that's achievable in painting, like in Cézanne, Ingres, Velasquez. So a lot of my training was learning how to translate a perceived, shifting space into a symphonic composition. The art historian Pincus Witten was also a professor there, and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology was emphasized.

**THOMPSON:** So it was the early waves of French continental philosophy slowly making its way to these shores. By the mid-80s it had really heated up. Were you living in Queens?

**IRISH:** In Flushing.

**THOMPSON:** And when you were in graduate school, was the thought already in your mind that “I will be painting for the rest of my life?” Is that where your head was at?

**IRISH:** Yeah. [Laughs].

**THOMPSON:** [Laughs] Some people in graduate school are not sure!

**IRISH:** You know, Joseph Cornell lived in Flushing in a little row house, and that was inspiring. The idea of being an artist was more...*romantic* then, I guess. There was not the need to “train” for the career of it like there is today. When it’s affordable to live and you’re young, and you idolize people like Joseph Cornell, then you can easily imagine doing it for your whole life.

**THOMPSON:** So when you get out of grad school, you stay in New York. Did you move out of Queens?

**IRISH:** No. I met my husband in grad school—

**THOMPSON:** A lot of relationships are formed in grad school.

**IRISH:** Right, that’s when you’re really passionate about your ideas and around other people who are too. So we stayed a while in Flushing, kept a studio. Then we thought of Philadelphia; since there’s five art schools here, we thought, “Well, you’ll be able to teach, or do something.” We found a loft in Philadelphia for \$400 a month that was 3,000 square feet, right where the Convention Center is now. Across from the Fabric Workshop. So we moved here in like ’82.

**THOMPSON:** This relationship between Philly and New York’s art scenes is a long one full of tension and turbulence. As an artist living in Philadelphia—while showing at Sharpe Gallery (in New York) in the 1980s—who were some of the artists you were looking at?

**IRISH:** Really I was looking at my peers—Mike Bidlo, Rhonda Zwillinger, George Condo—a lot of whom were involved in the East Village scene in the early 1980s, where there was a lot of humor and insanity. Alfred Jensen I was interested in, and I loved Jonathan Borofsky. I liked Malcom Morley, too—there was a painting you kept seeing over and over again, of a train going through Venice; it always seemed to be in some gallery or another.

**THOMPSON:** Well this was the time of the rise of postmodern painting, with a lot of historical reference points kind of thrown together. At that time you were painting architectural exteriors (pl. 21-22). Where did the interest in architectural space originate from? It seems to be a real through-line in your work.

**IRISH:** It was really a form of conceptualism, maybe like Borofsky's counting or Nauman's measuring, where rendering in itself has no purpose, it's just nihilistic. I would render these buildings in egg tempera, doing like one square-inch a day. In the end, though, the paintings had a kind of pop-Americana aesthetic. In this sense, they had evolved out of work I had done in grad school based on 18th-century mourning art, which was a kind of formulaic painting taught to women in finishing schools. There would be a tomb, sometimes with the family name on it, and a bunch of people crying around the tomb, and a stream running through an evergreen forest, and some weeping willows—that was the formula. I used to say that it was the first truly American form of painting. In the architectural paintings, I was depicting monumental structures but was also trying to avoid famous architects.

**THOMPSON:** Right, you have a painting of Shea Stadium from this period, and one that depicts a strip mall somewhere that looks like Arizona. You're dealing, clearly intentionally, with these vernacular architectural



**21**

**Penn Centre, 1988.**

Egg tempera and oil on linen mounted on board with painted frame, 58 x 70 inches

**22** (opposite)

**Keystone at the Crossing, 1989.**

Egg tempera and oil on linen mounted on board, egg tempera and gold leaf frame, 33 x 33 inches

forms. This makes for such a stark contrast with your present work that focuses predominately on much older historic buildings and ornate interiors. It's useful to know that you began in this kind of vernacular. I would say typically the trajectory goes in reverse for many artists, starting with classic structures that appear in Renaissance paintings and perhaps eventually finding its way to the vernacular.

And at some point you went from painting these early exteriors to painting interiors. At some point you go 'through the front door,' so to speak. And that was when you became interested—I believe—in Rococo interiors and such, because the interiors become much more elaborate settings in which to construct an image. Can you talk about that transition?

**IRISH:** There was really a combination of things around that time. In 1989 there were a bunch of shows in New York commemorating the French Revolution. You could go around and see the political motifs, with the politicians surrounded by their contemporary décor. I also saw the Marcel Broodthaers show [at the Walker Art Center] in Minneapolis that year, and saw that he was doing these white rooms and French Revolutionary interiors. At the same time, after Sharpe Gallery closed, I took up showing in more alternative spaces and actually doing installation-based work. For the first ones I did, I took reprinted Rococo-style fabric and attached it to big pieces of plywood, then painted these buildings on it. It was making those



sculptural works first that really brought me “inside,” so to speak, when I began using the Rococo decorative motifs.

**THOMPSON:** You refer to yourself as a history painter, but it’s a big shift though to go from painting 20th-century Americana to painting French revolutionary interiors. In fact, it’s not very “American” to think about the French revolution or about French rooms at all. To be simple about it, Americans like things to be about America, and the visual relationships that most Americans—Philadelphians, for instance—have to these kind of interiors come from the history rooms at the PMA. So for you to shift that gear, was it conceptual? Or was it something in your life that attracted you to that subject?

**IRISH:** Well I was also thinking about context. Things were all about “the white cube” then, and so I was interested in thinking about the opposite of the white cube. I also started working with ceramics at that time. I was always interested in looking at the motifs on ceramics. If there’s a metaphor for what I began trying to do, think of how you see a vase presented in a period room—I put myself on that vase and looked around. I wanted my work to reflect the paradoxes of decoration and political order that I saw in such a setting. One can be oblivious to what is contained in the wallpaper or on a vase, but one does so as an unrealistic detachment from the world. It is all right there in front of us, but so many refuse to see it.

**THOMPSON:** The other subject matter or period that is central in your work is the Vietnam War. It’s when you begin to mix Vietnam-era images with these Rococo interiors that your work really matures in a sense. There are a lot of questions to ask about that transition, but I’d like to start further back. What was your personal relationship to the Vietnam War itself in your formative years?

**IRISH:** I was the youngest of three sisters, and I graduated high school in ‘73, so I was a little late, but my sisters were active in the peace movement. My parents had no sons, so the draft wasn’t at the dining room table, and all the talking about it kind of went on in my sisters’ bedrooms. I don’t even really remember seeing it all on TV. Or if I do, I’m not sure whether what I remember seeing was actually Nam June Paik!

**THOMPSON:** And at what point did you consider yourself a political person? Or was politics always expressed through your art? Even in the early grad-school work you described, turning formulaic painting into a kind of feminist history, “resistance” of one kind or another has always featured prominently in your work.

**IRISH:** I think my early work was anti-progress, like the vernacular architecture paintings. And then, in the 1980s—when I was trying to push through a bout of creative block—I decided to paint images of people I admired, and that turned out to be Mario Savio, and the Black Panthers, and Joan Baez. I began commemorating their heroic resistance, because that was what I wanted to be—a heroic resister. I started with little portraits, and then made a huge painting that worked as a trompe l’oeil

stage flat, taking installation (sculpture) and making it a painting. I had a one-person show coming up at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts Morris Gallery, and I was planning to install this large piece and all the smaller studies, but I felt unsure about them. I was working for the Pew Fellowship at the time as a day job and so I knew many multidisciplinary poets throughout the city, and I asked the poet Bill Ehrhart, who is a Marine Corps veteran, to come to my studio. I asked him, “If Angela Davis is in this picture, is that wrong?” [Laughs.]

**THOMPSON:** [Laughs] like, “What’s my purview?”

**IRISH:** More like, if the government is making us think someone is evil, are they really? I was a little too young in the Vietnam era to know the difference! And Bill was great, he gave me all of this oral history from the period, and he recognized some of the more localized imagery in my paintings. He has been a mentor ever since. It was through him that I first learned about the literature of Vietnam antiwar veterans. This work is gut-wrenching truth-telling. I had been looking for a model of heroic resistance that was huge in scope and meaning, but local. Through Bill Ehrhart I found that in the VVAW (Vietnam Veterans Against the War). In 1970 the VVAW held their first national protest, Operation Rapid American Withdrawal, which was a protest “march” from Morristown, NJ, to Valley Forge meant to demonstrate the horrors of the Vietnam War through guerrilla theater, re-enactments, community engagement, and a final rally on Labor Day 1970. And the VVAW was incredibly inclusive; they were accepting draft dodgers, and Vets with bad paper (discharges), and people of all ethnic and racial backgrounds. To me the work of the VVAW is artistic work, and in 2005 I organized a show with 50 artists about Operation RAW at the Crane Arts building in Fishtown (Philadelphia). In my piece composed of 38 canvases, the viewer marched around a freestanding 30-foot-long shelf. On one side they saw the beautiful route through New Jersey and Pennsylvania; on the other, the horrors of war.

**THOMPSON:** Since then, these narratives of the traditions of power and resisters have produced almost their own genealogy in your work. From this point each work has built on the last. You could call it a cosmogram involving these historical focal points, decorative histories, resistance movements, and then of course Vietnam itself as a place. You have built this cosmology that has followed you. Was that a conscious thing or something that just evolved over time?

**IRISH:** Well after the first show here at Locks Gallery, *Paintings for Winning Hearts and Minds* (2007), which mixed the poetry of Vietnam anti-war veterans within large paintings of Baroque French interiors (pl. 58–60), I got certain feedback that pushed the work—people asked, “You’re painting about French Indochina, right?” And after that I went to Vietnam for the first time, in 2008. The Veteran writers I had been collaborating with had been going back to work with Vietnamese writers, so they all had contacts that they set me up with.

**THOMPSON:** And from there your work really became more robust in its narratives. It requires a lot of unpacking, which is why I think it’s useful to

go to the beginning, to see these layers really build up. Like Rococo artists maybe, you're really unafraid of throwing it all in at once. When you went to Vietnam for the first time, what was your experience and how did it inspire the work from that point?

**IRISH:** Well the Vietnam anti-war veteran poets I had been collaborating with had certain motifs in their work, so I went looking for those motifs and did paintings on site. I'm like a historical novelist, I seek out places for visceral experience. The old form of alla prima painting suits me well, so I went back to my plein-air experience. It's a wonderful way to do research, because you're in these places for hours at a time and getting a sense of what goes on, seeing the kids coming by and how the place is being used.

My second trip to Vietnam was really guided by the translations of one Vietnamese poet, Hồ Xuân Hương, who was an 18th century female poet, and I followed the motifs in her poetry, going to places she had written about in north Vietnam and painting them, and talking to people about her. The next trip I stayed in Huế and painted, trying to find the motifs I needed for my work. In terms of the work beginning to build on itself, before that trip I had done a residency in Brittany, France, and spent a month painting interiors. Some of the people I painted in those houses had grown up in Vietnam—their grandparents were all colonizers. I realized there was more to include in the work.

**THOMPSON:** Certainly one of the evident things in the Lemon Hill show is colonialism; the central idea is that of "antipodes," the opposite sides of the planet which are reflected in the paired ceramic bowls you've made that depict two different parts of the world (pl. 20, 25-27). Colonialism is a tricky spot for a white American artist to dip her toe into. Here you are talking in broad strokes about colonialism by highlighting these interior spaces that the colonizers live in, rather than the spaces of the colonized. You choose to paint the interior spaces of the powerful—the masters' quarters. Can you talk about that?

**IRISH:** Yes, the most extreme maybe being in Louisiana [in 2016], where I was painting in the plantation masters' houses (pl. 36-37). It's like taking responsibility for these histories, and doing research. In some ways I'm trying to speak to the powerful, to tell the truth. A poetry of war lining the walls of opulent interiors creates a quiet insistence that one learns the history and the politics of our time. For instance, one painting from the new exhibition (Plantation, pl. 2) depicts a French creole house in Louisiana, the same design as their house in Brittany, the same families were living in them. On one side of the painting, looking out the veranda, I show the Mississippi sugar plantation, and on the other side, there's the Michelin rubber plantation in Vietnam. The ceiling of the room, which spans across the two sides, shows imagery of conflict and anti-war protest. I think what's strong about these new paintings is that the resistance is on the top—it used to be on the bottom, but now it's moved up onto the ceilings of the spaces.

But you know, I don't entirely know how to talk about this work. I live a simple life financially, and I'm female, so I've had some sense of being





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Jane Irish, *Lemon Hill*, 2017.  
Ink on paper, 29 1/4 x 41 1/2 inches

oppressed, but I definitely haven't experienced the intensity of African American and Asian artists. So I'm trying my best to be within my own context of what feels authentic.

**THOMPSON:** It's interesting how these paintings can be somewhat elusively straightforward, when they're not straightforward at all. They don't look like postmodern paintings, but in fact you're producing these mythological spaces that do not exist. You combine elements that push up against each other visually and historically within the spaces, and you draw out the historical tensions that give any space its existence.

**IRISH:** I often juxtapose images, but I don't like the collage effect really. Certain kinds of postmodern constructions I steer away from. I prefer to make a believable space, but still have a subversive image that shows strife. That's why interiors are such a wonderful construct; it's like a grid, but it's also a historical setting that has every possible reference. The short lines of poetry that I incorporate in the paintings work for me too, because the viewer can see a passage and absorb the visual construction at the same time.

**THOMPSON:** The Lemon Hill installation introduces a whole other level to this work because your architectural paintings here exist inside an actual, historical architectural space.

**IRISH:** It's like a hall of mirrors!

**THOMPSON:** The land the mansion stands on was purchased in 1770 by Robert Morris, who was a big financier of the American Revolution, and then sold in 1800 to the merchant Henry Pratt, who then built Lemon Hill. The building inspired you initially because it has these two oval rooms on top of each other, which serve your *Antipodes* narrative by beautifully reflecting these ceramic bowl pieces you've been making. So it works for you on a formal level as well as on a historical level, but the entrance of American colonialist history evoked by this neoclassical building adds yet another element to the different periods that your work touches on. How has that opportunity inspired or challenged you?

**IRISH:** When you go into one of these historic spaces, into a palace or palazzo, there are all these messages about wealth and colonization, and past people, and families. There are so many messages, and I try to simplify and to make it a particular narrative that I feel is present. In July 2015, I began my exploration of *Eureka*, Poe's cosmological scientific essay. He calls it a prose poem. In it he speaks of the collapsing and expanding universe—the Big Bang. He speaks of the principal particle, dark matter, spiritual existence. Slippages of space and time. I had been looking for a model that could make a mythic leap from decoration, something that was huge in scope but local in origins.

The decorative artwork I've created in reflection of the architecture at Lemon Hill is a cosmogram of a new truth, one that releases us from past definitions. *Antipodes* is a framework connecting the Indian Ocean and Philadelphia, which lie opposite one another on the globe, connected via the mansion's

two overlaid oval rooms. For me, walking up the spiral staircase of Lemon Hill feels like being cast into orbit. On the first floor you will see images of the commerce of Henry Pratt, the 18th-century merchant who owned the house. There's also depictions of 16th century trade routes between Egypt and Vietnam, and of French Catholic Martyrs in Vietnam, and Titian Ramsay Peale's paintings on the Wilkes Expedition explorations, and images of Poe's writing in Philadelphia [*The Conchologist's First Book*, his critical essay on Dickens's *Barnaby Rudge* which contained seeds for "The Raven," and his sea-faring novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*]. And on the Lemon-colored second floor is an ecstatic vision of the future inspired by the ending of *Eureka*. The story centers on the Vietnam Veterans Against the War and tells of Philadelphia's resistance to the destruction of beauty.

**THOMPSON:** We all know that when somebody goes to war with a place they end up falling in love with the people they're killing. That was certainly true of France and Vietnam, but it's also true of America and Vietnam. It's also the same with trade, insofar as the people who are manufacturing your goods come to actually live in that place. I bring that up because of the narratives of occupation and globalism that are in your work, as well as the kinships. There is a tragic romance in colonialism that is difficult to depict. What I find so impressive about your work is that it's not some detached study of history. I want to read a quote from *Eureka*, because certainly Poe is anything but detached. He says:

**“What you call The Universe is but his present expansive existence. He now feels his life through an infinity of imperfect pleasures—the partial and pain-intertangled pleasures of those inconceivably numerous things which you designate as his creatures, which are really but infinite individualizations of himself. All these creatures—those which you term animate, as well as those to whom you deny life for no better reason than that you do not behold it in operation—all these creatures have, in greater or lesser degree, a capacity for pleasure and for pain.”**

You mention a sort of ecstatic spiritual dimension to this work. It's not just a detached historical cosmogram, there's something more going on—a dimension of interconnectedness.

**IRISH:** One thing I think about is the way decoration is a cultural truth. It reflects the cultural truths of its time. But if we assume that the truth is different now, and start from there, we can let go of these horrible histories. And that's what I'm getting at with Lemon Hill.

**THOMPSON:** There's imagery from many different times and places mixing on the walls at Lemon Hill, and it raises an interesting fact, which is that there's nothing current, like you don't have Mark Zuckerberg up there—and

it would be weird if you did—but considering that we certainly live in a gilded age again, in terms of the wealth inequality, it seems inevitable to end on this note: What are the implications for the current moment that we're in?

**IRISH:** I guess what I'm trying to say with *Lemon Hill* is that we must go forward instead of backwards. Poe's *Eureka* spoke to me of a way of approaching history, and the present, differently than through this militaristic cycle that is reinvented over and over again. I took it as a basis for this enormous suite of paintings.

**THOMPSON:** Right, while we are not living in a high point of American militarism, it seems like you can certainly hear the drum beat in the background getting louder and louder, and the mythological buildup of nationalism and patriotism is happening. I guess you're reminding people of these sort of narratives that recur in spaces of power. It's great to have it paired with this Locks Gallery show, with the works you did through the Joan Mitchell Foundation down in New Orleans, looking at Antebellum and American Southern spaces.



**IRISH:** Yes, I'd never really been South, and Poe led me there too, because his upbringing was in the plantation society, and that's very evident in his understanding I think. It's the same with Lemon Hill—it's totally American. When you did your studio visit with me at the outset of the project, you asked, "What does this really have to do with Lemon Hill?" It really challenged me to make the work more attached to the experience I had in New Orleans, and to this revolutionary history Philadelphia has.

**THOMPSON:** And it feels very local in the sense that Philadelphia is a place that both benefits and suffers from being laden with history. As a history painter, how do you take on this material?

**IRISH:** You know, with Lemon Hill, I just went along with the instinctive buildup of it at first. And the outcome really surprised me. I hope the audience feels the change there, the release from past definitions. As an artist I am given the possibility to create an imaginative representation of history.

**Nato Thompson is Creative Director of Philadelphia Contemporary. He and the artist spoke at the Locks Gallery in Philadelphia on March 29th, 2018.**

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**Life Life Life**, 2015.  
Ink on newsprint,  
12 x 36 inches

