



JANE IRISH

An Absolute Reciprocity of Adaptation

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ARTIST STATEMENT

The phrase (“An Absolute Reciprocity of Adaptation”) is Edgar Allan Poe’s, from his scientific treatise/prose poem *Eureka*. In reciprocal adaptation or coevolution, two or more organisms respond evolutionarily to each other over a series of generations, forming symbiotic relations between species and unities across the web of life as a single system or organism. Poe gives the following example:

“In polar climates the human frame, to maintain its animal heat, requires, for combustion in the capillary system, an abundant supply of highly azotized food, such as train-oil. But again:—in polar climates nearly the sole food afforded man is the oil of abundant seals and whales. Now, whether is oil at hand because imperatively demanded, or the only thing demanded because the only thing to be obtained? It is impossible to decide. There is an absolute reciprocity of adaptation.”

My coevolution involves not organisms, but mediums and ideas, focusing, as my work has done for a quarter century or more, on a prefiguration of peace. Specifically, in this period, I have embraced the visual and testimonial strategies of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, an organization that associated protest with healing and developed powerful expressive strategies in poetry, memoir, and visual culture. The returning soldiers of the VVAW, many of whom experienced atrocities firsthand and even by their own hand, testified to them, sought to reveal the injustice and trauma in which they had themselves participated.

One of the strategies of my prefigurative politics starts by excavating Western painting’s origins in violence and the ways it treats violence as a subject matter.

The largest work in the show is a working “plan” for my recently commissioned and installed ceiling painting at Princeton University Art Museum (PUAM) entitled *Cosmos Beyond Atrocity* (2024). It is painted in distemper on very thin muslin and is twice as big as the work for which it was the plan or diagram. We have mounted the mural as wallpaper, and on it, we have hung some of the drawings that originally served as studies for it. Here is a description of *Cosmos Beyond Atrocity*, opening this month at PUAM:

“Cosmos Beyond Atrocity was created with the intention of transcending our cycles of violence. In a space designed to offer a contemplative moment, the coffered ceiling decays, breaking away. Within the coffers are painterly representations of bas-reliefs depicting images drawn from the PUAM’s collections that I translated from flat sources into sculpted bas-reliefs and back again into painted surfaces.

Excavating the histories of war in works of ancient, Byzantine, and Islamic art in Museum storage, as well as engravings by Jacques Callot, Hendrick Goltzius, and Rembrandt van Rijn, I intuitively chose works that provide testimony to atrocity, historical and fictional, biblical and mythological, documentary and constructive or justificatory. Between the historical depictions of violence are

renderings of oil lamps found at ancient Antioch, circular in form and allowing the eye to rest (also drawn from PUAM's collection).

The central vision of an ecstatic future comes from my twenty-five-year project honoring Vietnam Veterans Against the War. You will see: a Vietnamese finger cymbal with a disembodied male arm, dominating in its transparency, a single ding and clarity of vibration—a perfect pitch; activists: women in prayer; performance artists Kim Jones, the brothers Lê Đức Hải, and Lê Ngọc Thanh; historic anti-war leaders Al Hubbard and Ron Ferrizzi, and the soldiers they were helping."

All the other work in the show evolved from this point, sometimes using the vocabulary of these violent motifs. Painting representationally or figuratively can be an act of imagination, but entails a code of truth, especially of the interior. A document of the decor, an acceptance that the artist is recording a facsimile. The depictions of colonialism and the luxury items in French chateaus, which are often my subject matter, have an overt or covert connection to world systems of exploitation, including especially French involvement in Indochina.

I try to exploit a certain doubleness: a harsh critique, as in *Agent Orange* (2025), coexisting with the optimism of political prefiguration, as in *Return* (2025). In the painting *Agent Orange*, I emphasize the violence in the room's decor. With a breaking heart, I ask, why wouldn't we repeat and preserve the abuse and killing since we idolize our lives around these acts.

In the political prefiguration painting *Return*, decayed colonialist wallpaper covers the walls, I allow pre-disfiguration of history, while a rainbow of light moves in, illuminating a floor covered in Vietnamese cloud tiles of the indigenous cosmos. Quoting Poe, "If we could fancy a beginning!", *Beyond*, makes co-axial that the acceptance of violence can be transcended in a supernal future of peace reflected in the polished marble sarcophagus.



My intention is to draw the viewer in by delight in color and by building a space that twists and reflects the viewer's eye movement. I show a series of small works that reveal each of these steps. The in-situ painting of a fountain at *Bastide Arnajon* (2025) in Aix-en-Provence, along with a studio work of the finished *Bastide* motif (*Bastide Arnajon 1* and *2*), allows the viewer to compare the two—the recorded and the composed.

I compare again the decayed *Grotto Arnajon* (2025)—whose design was in fact a recreation of the decay, along with a 2010 painting from Vietnam (one among 60 I have completed there over a 6-year period) titled *Ta Phin Cave in Sa Pa*, a natural wonder.

There are, in addition, two pieces incorporating text. One features the VVAW preamble from a 1971 U.S. congressional record in *Our Testimony* (2025) concerning atrocity. The other depicts the decor of a Marseille interior cut by slogans of the Bloquons Tout movement. The smaller work reads "EuroLINKS (a Marseille arms manufacturer) le Genocide made in Marseille," which reproduces a poster that appeared all over Marseille in the summer of 2025.

"The pleasure which we derive from any display of human ingenuity is in the ratio of the approach to this species of reciprocity." Edgar Allan Poe, *Eureka*.