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Lemon Hill mansion becomes an image of resistance in daring art takeover

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by Stephan Salisbury



JAMES BLOCKER / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Painter Jane Irish begins installation of murals and ceiling paintings at Lemon Hill.

Lemon Hill, if it's known in Philadelphia, is not known as a symbol of imperial colonialism tinged with traces of racism and violence.

Situated on the bluff overlooking the Schuylkill, Boathouse Row, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, it is perhaps most famous as the historic Fairmount Park mansion restored from dilapidation by legendary museum director Fiske Kimbell, who lived in the house for nearly 30 years.

Since Kimbell exited the restored city-owned house in 1955, this architectural wonder has been managed by the Colonial Dames of America and is still seen as one of the finest examples of Federalist architecture to be found anywhere. It is a certified national and local landmark.

For painter Jane Irish, Lemon Hill's beauty is undeniable. That's one of the reasons she agreed to mount a total-house installation there at the behest of Philadelphia Contemporary, an organization that collaborates on bringing visual and spoken art, and performances of different kinds to the city.

600 Washington Square South
Philadelphia PA 19106
tel 215.629.1000 fax 215.629.3868
info@locksgallery.com
www.locksgallery.com



Irish's Lemon Hill project, called *Antipodes*, can be viewed beginning Friday, with an official opening Sunday. It will run through June 3. At the same time, Locks Gallery on Washington Square has mounted a companion exhibition, *Jane Irish: Architectures of Resistance*, which runs through May 25. The project, in Philadelphia Contemporary's grand tradition, is in partnership with the city's Parks & Recreation Department, the Fairmount Park Conservancy, and the Friends of Lemon Hill.



JAMES BLOCKER / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Painter Jane Irish kneels next to a small model of her Lemon Hill installation.

At Lemon Hill, upstairs, downstairs, and ceilings will be covered by Irish's loose and sumptuously painted, tapestry-like muslin canvases, explorations of seemingly endless colonial exploitation and imperial domination punctuated by the beauty of place and the beauty of things made and traded.

At the crest of the house, where visitors ascend from what will be a dark, cave-like first floor, Irish offers a lemony hope, a kind of oracular Philadelphia epiphany that says: This can end. There is a future. There is a way out.

"You walk from the colonialism of downstairs to upstairs," Irish said recently. "There's like the freedom of a new possible future."

The upstairs walls, bright yellow, offer images of Philadelphia resistance, mostly focused on the protests of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, which mounted a 1970 march from Morristown, N.J., to what was then Valley Forge State Park. At Valley Forge, the vets broke plastic M16s to pieces in a cathartic rejection of war and its instruments.

Irish, 62, was not present at the Valley Forge encampment, but it has captured her imagination, serving as a synecdoche for resistance to the Vietnam War and other perceived wrongs and injustices down to the present day.

When Irish started painting the muslin panels that will eventually cover the walls and ceilings of Lemon Hill, she was not that familiar with the particulars of the house's history. The land was owned by Robert Morris, mostly known as the financier of the American Revolution, a man not unknown to dabble in the slave trade.



FAIRMOUNT PARK CONSERVANCY
Historic Lemon Hill mansion, built in 1800 by merchant Henry Pratt. Fairmount Park Conservancy.

Alas, Morris fell into debt and merchant Henry Pratt bought 43 acres the Morris land and designed and built the graceful mansion, which has great oval rooms atop each other on the first and second floors. Pratt was involved in the China trade and may have been involved in a variation of the triangle trade that led to enslavement of Africans and their shipment to the West Indies.

Irish says that Nato Thompson, who joined Philadelphia Contemporary late last fall as artistic director, pushed her to explore Lemon Hill in the work. "I was already into the project," Irish recalled. "I'd painted a lot of the overdoors and overmantels based on my ideas of trade and commerce and interiors and history and the Age of Exploration. [Thompson] came on and he challenged me about Lemon Hill. So I definitely got interested in Henry Pratt and the idea of the China trade and everything, and maybe human trade."



Irish began to consider the fact that Pratt had built a "show place" overlooking the river, a place he never lived in but utilized to woo potential partners and customers.

JAMES BLOCKER / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
A ceiling image from painter Jane Irish's Lemon Hill installation, which explores colonialism, imperialism, and the resistance to the Vietnam War.



JAMES BLOCKER / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Painter Jane Irish explains the figures in one of her ceiling paintings about to be installed at Lemon Hill.

Lemon Hill was, she said, “a place where decisions were made possibly. How to participate globally. The piece became stronger because of that, I think.”

One other major element informed Irish’s thinking about the project: Edgar Allan Poe’s prose poem, Eureka, which fascinates her by offering up an American myth of creation. When she first read it, Irish thought, “Wow! This is it! This is the coolest thing because it’s American. It’s a whole new story. I realized he also lived here [in Philadelphia] for eight years.” Poe’s ideas and descriptions of the expanding and collapsing universe have shaped Irish’s sense of worldly dialectics — a world suggested by her bipolar ceramic sculptures, and, ultimately her creation of a grotto-like Lemon Hill first floor, a yellow second floor, and a cathartic second-floor ceiling.

“Jane being Jane, all sorts of connections began to arise in the work,” said Philadelphia Contemporary’s founding director Harry Philbrick. “The idea started with more formal and aesthetic considerations” but quickly moved into the political and historical, he added. As work progressed, both Irish and Philbrick realized Lemon Hill’s stacked oval rooms were very much like the dualities expressed in her ceramic “antipodes” – the sculptural objects that will be placed around the rooms.

“These are almost like a guide into the big expanses,” she said, hefting a large antipode with references to the Indian Ocean and trade painted into the glaze. “The concept is a new future. When you walk in, I wanted it to be more like the Renaissance, dark and like a grotto. And upstairs I wanted it to be like a freedom of a new future, which is kind of like Eureka ends. It’s like this ecstatic vision of the future, which is crazy for Poe.

“Hopefully, the audience will see these small [ceramic] pieces and realize the whole thing is like the cosmos you’re in.”

Jane Irish: Antipodes
 Philadelphia Contemporary free exhibition
 April 13-June 3 at Lemon Hill, 3298 Sedgley Drive.
 Hours: 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays.