Jane Irish

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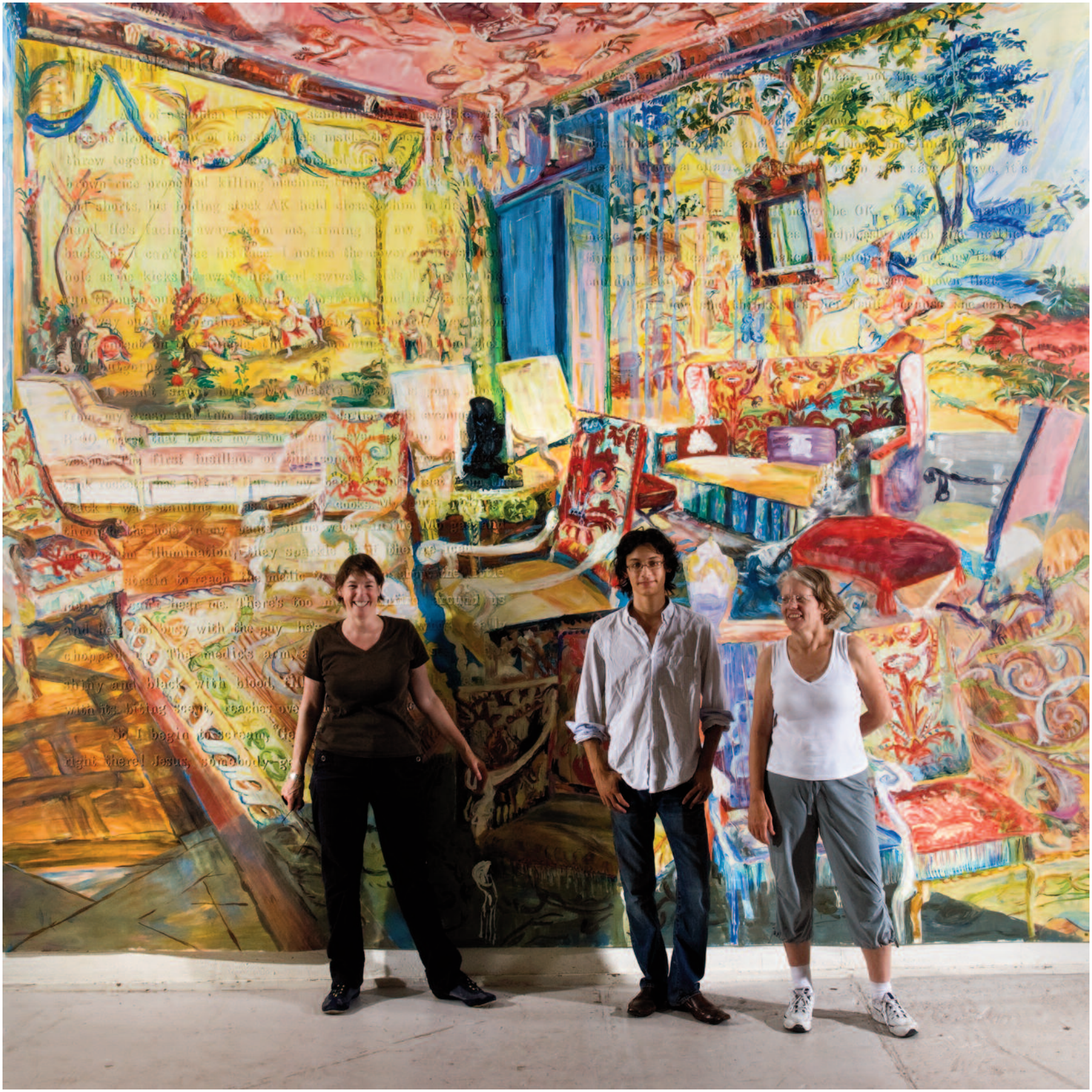

The Home Front: Jane Irish's Art of War

Glenn Adamson

Jane Irish describes herself as a "regionalist" – a curious word for an artist to use these days. The term calls to mind painters like Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood, who are well remembered and respected, but not necessarily loved. Their depictions of everyday life far from the centers of the art world do project a homely universalism, but their vision is nonetheless small in scale, private in its concerns. Regional art tends to match the geography of its subject: a bit off-center, over to one side of the map.

To adopt the mantle of regionalism during our hyper-globalized, media-saturated age could easily seem like excessive modesty, or even escapism. At least in her professional conduct, though, Irish has had no fear of taking up a position of quasi-detachment. She lives in Philadelphia, a second- or perhaps even third-tier art city, and she is prominent within the scene there. In 2005 she organized an event protesting the ongoing war in Iraq entitled "Operation Rapid American Withdrawal," featuring eighty local artists. (Artists in Los Angeles and New York never seem to count as "local.") It was a galvanic moment for many, not least Irish herself, and the experience propelled her into a politicized body of work that has sustained her attention to this day. Much of her inspiration comes through contact with Vietnam War veterans in Philadelphia – men who were inserted into the calculus of global conflict in the most horrifying way imaginable, and then returned home to rebuild their lives as best as they could. Her moral compass aligns particularly with one group of these ex-soldiers - Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) – who practice a vernacular form of protest revolving around neighborhood centers, poetry books, theatrical productions, and what she describes as "political action storefronts."

To this sense of a politically active community, Irish brings her more longstanding interest in forms of expression that are putatively minor – notably decorative art, with its implicit inferiority to painting and sculpture. (That idea could have been borrowed from 1970s and '80s Feminist practice, though in both her works and her statements on the subject, the connection is less than explicit.) She cites, approvingly, the artist Joseph Kosuth's idea that "lesser" art works give us the chance to make up our own minds, free of the distorting effects of fame. Irish is certainly fascinated by the trappings of power – witness her spellbinding little painting *Oligarch Couple* (fig. 2), a portrait of two collectors seated in a well-appointed living room, a spiritual tomb completely of their own making. Comically tiny compared to their own vases and armchairs, the pair float adrift in a chilly blue sea of accumulated *objets d'art,* a wall of lurid Van Gogh yellow behind them. In some ways it is an unsparing satire, but the portrait is also strangely sympathetic, filled with the imagination of what it might be like to live through one's possessions.

As *Oligarch Couple* attests, Irish is the opposite of a traditional regionalist in at least one important respect: she is not trapped in a single point of view, a single psychological locale. She is able to adopt multiple "local" perspectives,

Fig. 1. The artist standing in front of *The Little Man/Multicolored Parlor*

Fig. 2. *Oligarch Couple,* 2007, egg tempera on linen, 16 x 24 inches

even a world of extreme privilege that would seem quite alien to her. Like an expert ventriloquist, she is able to step into and out of character without ever revealing her own location. Consider the many poses that Irish adopts, and their fundamental incommensurability. She frequently inhabits, for example, the role of the eighteenth-century interior decorator. Before looking closely, in fact, a gallery visitor might well take her to be primarily a painter of lavish rococo décor, a latter-day epigone of Fragonard and Watteau. In this aspect of her art, all that counts is lightness and freshness of touch, the physical seductions of paint and enameled porcelain. One is reminded of the comment of another Philadelphian, Ben Franklin: "Wealth is not his that has it, but his that enjoys it." Like Franklin, Irish is alive to both the corrosive and pleasurable effects of luxury, and to the possibility of experiencing both vicariously.

Just around the corner from Jane Irish the decorative artist is Jane Irish the pastoralist, another guise drawn from the repertoire of the eighteenth century. This aspect of her work is self-regarding rather than sensualist. The pastoral stance – as explored by writers such as William Empson and Raymond Williams – is composed of play-acting (one thinks of French royalty dressed as shepherdesses), landscapes so ideal as to be positively unreal, and a quiet sense of loss for better times, now gone by. Irish has mainly directed her pastoral energies toward the Vietnamese landscape, making extensive use of the allusive, erotic verse of eighteenth-century female poet Ho Xuan Huong, made available to her through the translations of John Balaban. With its fans and swings and veiled political commentary,

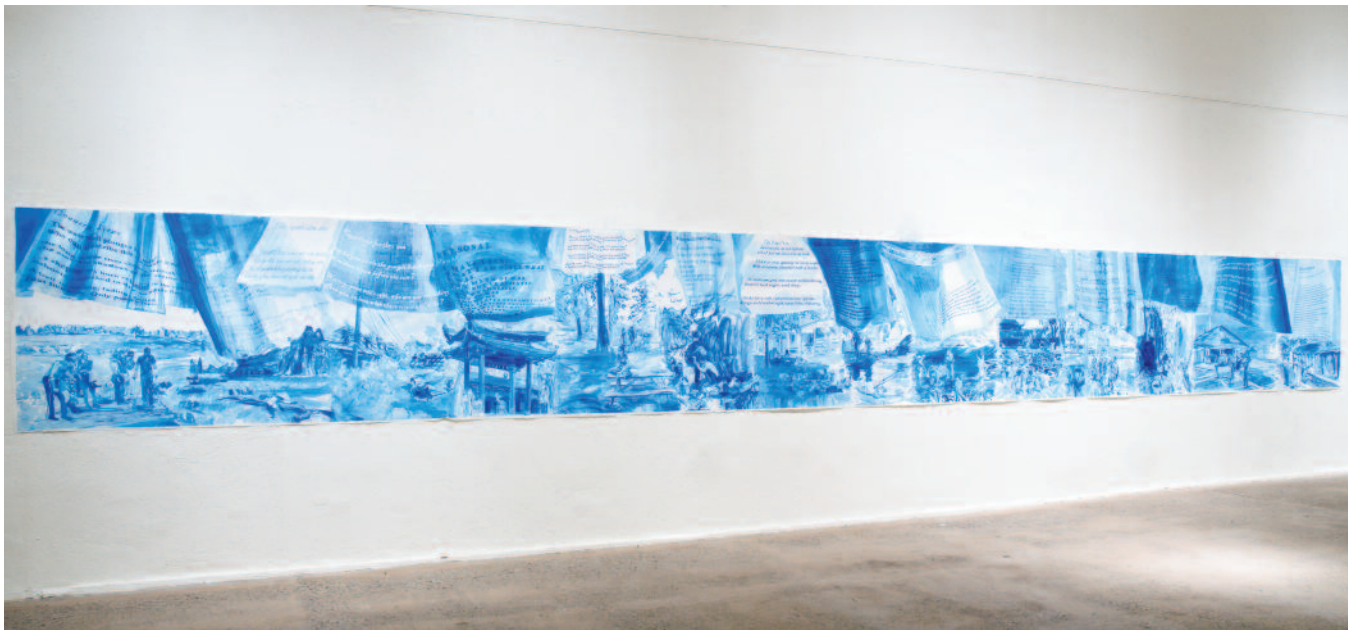

Fig. 3. *The Conversation,* 2010, ink wash on paper, 42 x 360 inches

Ho's writing is an uncanny counterpart to French literature and painting of the same time. In addition to this rich literary source, she has drawn from photographs (by Everette Dixie Reese, Sheldon Ramsdell and others) that captured Vietnam in the years both before and after the devastations of war came. In her use of these texts and images, she adopts the rather unexpected posture of someone nostalgic for the golden age of Vietnam. That stance is of course anti-war, like most pastoral expressions, reminding us of something fragile that has been destroyed through human cruelty and blindness. Yet the pastoral mode also allows her to project her artistic energies into a lush imaginary world, as rich in detail and color in its way as any French aristocrat's parlor.

As her use of Ho Xuan Huong suggests, Irish's most obvious acts of ventriloquism are linguistic – direct appropriations, in which displacement is her only contribution to narrative meaning. Another of her preferred sources is poetry published by veterans, which she inscribes onto many of her works. In the monumental, 30-foot-long monochrome drawing *The Conversation* (fig. 3), the veterans' verse is interleaved with Ho's. The technique of slamming two bodies of quotation headlong into one another is quintessentially postmodernist, and it is perhaps worth remembering that generationally speaking Irish is not a contemporary of certain painters whose work superficially resembles her own, like Lisa Yuskavage and John Currin, but rather artists of the 1980s like Cindy Sherman, Jenny Holzer, and Louise Lawler. Irish is indeed a product of the postmodern moment, and she has much in common with these latter

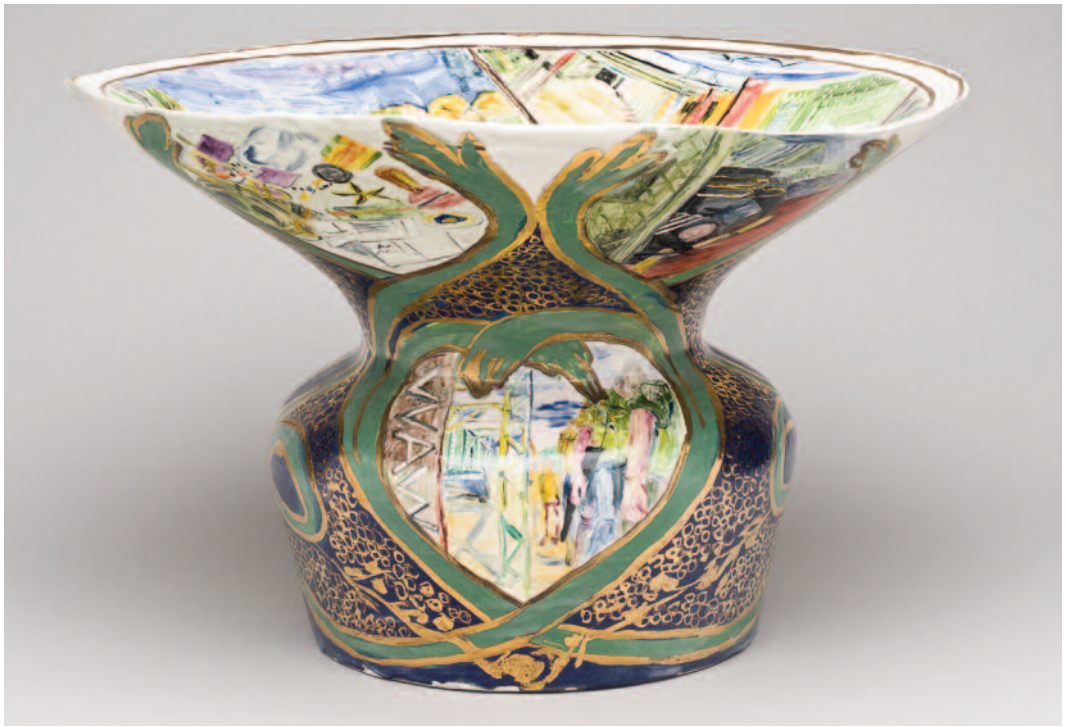

Fig. 4. *Resistance Trail Vase,* 2010, low fire ceramic with china paint and gold luster, 14 x 14 x 12 inches

artists (especially Lawler, whose non-judgmental investigations of luxury are an interesting parallel). But there is never any suggestion, in Irish's use of appropriation, that she is interested in the "death of the author", herself or anyone else. On the contrary. Her images are directly expressive of her own sensibility, and also acts of veneration for the vets' "unauthorized" poetry – verse that will never be awarded laurels for its literary greatness, perhaps, but nonetheless does exactly what poetry should do in opening its readers to the deeply-etched contours of another person's mind.

Then there are the art historical personae that populate Irish's vases, figures like Niki de Saint Phalle (p. 18) and Joseph Beuys (pp. 38-39). These choices are somewhat confounding, as these artists' works have only a teasingly distant relation to her own. With her fixation on the after effects of violence, one can see how Irish might identify with the rifle-toting Saint Phalle, who fired bullets into paintings embedded with bags of wet paint, letting the rivulets run out in a gorgeous neo-Rococo pageant. Is it possible that Irish really identifies with Beuys, though? The notoriously egomaniacal cult figure with his diagrammatic chalkboard scrawlings, whose artistic vocabulary was as gray and cerebral as her work is polychromed and instinctive? To this question, Irish's portrait vases of Beuys seem to return the answer: why not? For her Beuys is just anoth-

er point of reference, not a figure to emulate. His place in her pantheon might be compared to that of Mario Savio the political activist (he was leader of the Berkeley Free Speech movement), who is the subject of another of her vessels (p. 34). The jardinière form is festooned with a miniature protest banner – an acknowledgement that Savio's political certainty, like Beuys' didactic Conceptualism, is appealing for Irish but also somewhat remote, just out of view past the historical bend.

So what does all of this reactive artistic material add up to? Irish seems to want each of her viewers to make up their own mind on that question, but the total effect of her additive method can be discerned by looking closely at one example – for example, *Resistance Trail Vase* (fig. 4), a work of unusual density even for her. The shape of the vessel is that of an open spittoon; like all of her ceramics, it has a wobbly surface and an irregular silhouette that bespeak its handbuilt construction. (Like many contemporary artists who work with ceramics without quite being potters, Irish is aware that inexact, even amateurish technique can be emotive in a way that perfectionist craftsmanship tends to foreclose.) The images on the piece, executed by Irish in an equally approximate but more obviously expert hand using china paints, stage the contrast, familiar in her oeuvre, between rococo ornament and contemporary narrative scenes – in this case depicting America and Vietnam.

On the exterior of the vase are two vignettes: VVAW members marching across a bridge in mid-protest; and a Vietnamese man (perhaps a peasant, given his broad-brimmed hat) walking alongside a bicycle loaded down with ammunition carried in two saddle bags. The latter scene is clearly set in the present day, yet a tiny seated figure who gazes from the background, plopped down legs akimbo at the edge of a curving pink path, could have migrated from a *chinoiserie* teapot. The implicit comparison between these two images of walking is more evident in the four scenes on the vessel's open, flange-like rim, which echo one another more strongly. In one pair, figures are arrayed in front of a series of tents – actors perform at a street theater in Vietnam, and homeless veterans seek shelter in a subway station. The other two panels provide a visual rhyme between the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington D.C., designed by Maya Lin, and the Long Bien Bridge in Hanoi, designed by Gustave Eiffel. Constructed at the turn of the century by French colonial authorities and much damaged during the Vietnam War, the bridge still stands today, a patchwork of original ironwork and repairs.

Irish's working drawings for the vase record her observation that, if Lin's black gash of a sculpture looks like a "sleeping Washington Monument," then the Long Bien Bridge could be similarly read as a recumbent Eiffel Tower. Such unexpected juxtapositions, which float unmoored (and unexplained) on their historicist ceramic support, attest to the strength of Irish's artistic method, in which the deep focus of local perspective is set within a macroscopic, laterally mobile view. While each image on the vase is intimately sketched, giving the feeling that you are there (or at least, the artist was), the cumulative effect is massive in its scale. It seems to tell a secret history of correspondences between life in America and Vietnam, these many decades after the conflict.

Like her pastoral works based on historic photographs, *Resistance Trail Vase* can (if you so choose) be read as an anti-war statement – a portrait of two cultures that have more in common than they might have guessed. Yet the piece is as free from didacticism as any of Irish's work. If she has a theory of protest art, it's that you might get more attention with a whisper than a shout. But in fact, she is not

terribly concerned with the genre of protest art in the first place, or any other genre for that matter. As befits an artist with the soul of a regionalist, her convictions are more localized than that – observations rather than doctrines. And yet, it is also appropriate that she so often places her images all around the walls of a vase, both inside and out, creating an impression of 360-degree-vision. This is Irish's great insight, drawn from years of looking through the eyes of others: there is no side of a situation that can't be viewed as the home front.

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