

Jane Irish

Paintings for Winning Hearts and Minds

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Essay by Carter Ratcliff

Pleasure and Protest: The Art of Jane Irish

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As Roberta Fallon said in 2005, “Jane Irish’s art has always been political, challenging stereotypes and questioning the status quo.”¹ This is true, though her political impulses are oblique, which is to say that her challenges to stereotypes and the status quo do not jump out at the viewer. In this exhibition, one is struck first by her images of Rococo salons and drawing rooms—privileged havens from the ordinary world where even the slightest hint of political protest would seem out of place. These interiors are not only grand but also beautiful. With its scallops, scrolls, and curvy cartouches, the Rococo is our most unabashedly gorgeous style of decoration. Irish doubles the gorgeousness with lush brushwork. Her painterly touch suggests a caress at once vigorous and minutely attentive to its object.

Irish works at the border where sensitivity is difficult to distinguish from a refined sensuality that would, for most painters, serve as an end in itself. Yet she too calls herself a protest artist. In a statement made this year, she said that *Save Waller Street/Yellow Room*, 2007, and other recent paintings “refer to the Vet Center Movement.” She goes on to recall a group called Viet Nam Veterans Against the War, which began in the early 1970s to establish “storefront cen-

ters in order to address readjustment issues” faced by former combat soldiers as they reentered civilian life. As Irish notes, these difficulties—which ranged from post-traumatic stress disorder to the debilitating effects of Agent Orange—were largely ignored by the military and other government agencies. Do-it-yourself attempts to make up for systematic neglect, the Vet Centers were remarkably successful, at least until the 1980s, when they were taken over by the Veterans Administration.² “Waller Street” refers to one of these Vet Centers. But what do those improvised relief agencies have to do with sumptuous forms and textures and colors of the “Yellow Room”? How do we negotiate the slash that divides these two phrases in the title of a painting that, from a distance, looks like a celebration of artifice at its most imperturbably sophisticated?

Examining *Save Waller Street/Yellow Room* (fig. 1) from close up, you sooner or later notice that its celebratory calm is complicated by a barely visible diagram—a slightly raised pattern of words and numbers and straight lines over which the image of the room has been painted. With statistical brevity, the diagram tells of the generation whose devastation led to the founding of Waller Street and other Vet



Fig. 1. Detail, *Save Waller Street/Yellow Room*, 2007. Oil on Tyvec with raised letters, modeling paste, and archival foam, 9 x 14 1/2 feet.



Fig. 2. Detail, *Room with Orange Chairs/Iron Triangle*, 2006. Oil on Tyvec with raised letters and modeling paste, 5 x 10 feet.

Centers. During the Viet Nam era, over eight million young men served in the military. Of that number, more than a million and a half saw combat. 270,000 were wounded, 51,000 were killed. Irish's diagram also numbers those who never registered for the draft, those who registered and then resisted, those who were prosecuted for their resistance, and so on. She presents these statistics without commentary. Furthermore, no caption accompanies the fragment of the map of Viet Nam that appears in *Room with Orange Chairs/Iron Triangle*, 2007 (fig. 2). With careful looking, you can make out "DMZ" (the demilitarized zone), as well as "Khe Sanh," "An Hoc," and a few other place names.

The raised, over-painted letters on the surface of *Thoughts on a Monsoon Morning/Orange Room* spell out the poem that supplies this painting with part of its title. Written by David Connolly, a Viet Nam veteran, "Thoughts on a Monsoon Morning" is a bitter denunciation of the corporate powers that benefit from war—or, more precisely, from the deaths of those who are sent into combat. Connolly's "Thousand Yard Stare" is about combat's effect on those who survive it. Irish has displaced this poem from the page to the surface of a large painting of a room with a yellow sofa. Like her outline map of Viet Nam, her diagram of the Viet Nam generation has a flat, impersonal feel, and the poems she borrows from Connolly are written in undemonstrative language. In his voice, you hear the weariness and outrage that dispenses with bombast and other literary effects. Nothing survives but unmovable conviction. The bleak sincerity of Connolly's poems carries over to

Irish's diagrammatic images, giving them a mute sort of eloquence. That much is clear, and yet it still has to be asked: what do any of these texts and diagrams have to do with the playful grandeur of Irish's painted images? Why does she disrupt the elegant, spontaneous weave of her brushwork with lines and letters cut with tedious exactitude from sheets of archival foam?

These questions are triggered by our sense of decorum. We all have an intuitive feeling that every subject calls for a particular style. This intuition has an ancient lineage. Nearly two and a half millennia ago, Aristotle wrote a treatise entitled *Rhetoric*, in which he advised speakers to

employ the language of anger in speaking of outrage; the language of disgust . . . when speaking of impiety or foulness; the language of exaltation for a tale of glory; and that of humiliation for a tale of pity; and so in all other cases.”³

Intention dictates style, not absolutely but reliably enough to give Aristotle's comments a gloss of plausibility. If you want to tell tales of glorious heroism, he says, use exalted language. Of course, we say, and in our time artists have found suitable styles without much trouble. It is unlikely, for example, that Hans Haacke had to consult Aristotle's *Rhetoric* to arrive at the no-nonsense look of his early protest pieces. With *Shapolsky, et al.*, 1971, Haacke brought an indictment against the questionable practices of a Manhattan landlord and, by extension, against the system that

permits those practices to flourish. The work combines two mediums: typewritten text and documentary photographs in black and white. Stern message, severe style. We see a similar match of style and content in the work of Jenny Holzer, Martha Rosler, and other artists with things to say about serious matters. Aristotle would approve.

Of Irish's work he would disapprove, presumably, for her mixture of war protest and the Rococo—stern message and light-hearted style—breaks one of his rules for rhetorical effectiveness. Does this mean that she is a bad rhetorician? No, it means that she is not a rhetorician of any sort. Irish is an artist—a point one might have expected to go without saying. She paints pictures; her pictures are seen in art galleries. Of course she is an artist. Indeed, and yet it is characteristic of strong artists that they prompt us to ask large questions. What is it to be artist? What, to get right down to it, is art? Or, to make this question more manageable, what is the difference between art and rhetoric?

A rhetorician has a single goal: to persuade one to accept some sharply focused conclusion. War is bad. The Athenians should not attack the Spartans. Or war is, under the circumstances, necessary. The Athenians have no choice but to attack the Spartans. In the hope of inducing an audience to accept one or the other of these propositions, a good rhetorician would bring every available resource to bear. Moreover, these resources would be coordinated—harmonized—for maximum impact. Irish doesn't enforce that sort of harmony. She deliberately undermines it, even with her materials. In place of canvas, she uses



Fig. 3. Installation view, *Jane Irish: History Lesson*, Morris Gallery, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA, 2002-03.



Fig. 4. *Resistance, Wealth, and Heroic Protest*, 2001-02. Egg tempera, gouache, and gold leaf on linen, 3 panels, 10 x 11 feet overall.

Tyvec, a utilitarian material that comports well with her tough and practical objections to war. By leaving her expanses of Tyvec unstretched, she encourages their propensity to cling to the wall. Thus she invokes tapestry, a medium at home in the luxurious setting she pictures. Because Irish induces Tyvec—and all the elements of her paintings—to work at cross-purposes, she should not be judged as a rhetorician. In my view, the elegance with which she manages her ambiguities is enough to qualify her not merely as an artist but as a strong artist. Still, her work does convey a message: war is bad. And her antiwar feelings reach from her art into her life in the art community of Philadelphia, her home town. Recently, she gathered the work of 80 local artists into an exhibition keyed to the theme of Viet Nam Veterans Against the War. For a show called *History Lesson*, which opened at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts late in 2002, she mixed her own work with pieces drawn from the Academy's collection (fig. 3). The focal point of her “lesson” was one of her paintings from 2001, a triptych entitled *Resistance, Wealth and Heroic Protest* (fig. 4).

War is bad, as are the abuses of wealth and power that facilitate war. Irish believes this, clearly. Yet it is not clear that she is trying to persuade us to believe it. As she must surely know, many of those who will see this exhibition of her recent paintings are already convinced that the adventure in Iraq is a nightmarish debacle. If some in her audience remain unconvinced, it is unlikely that their hearts will be touched or their minds changed by her oblique, half-visible references to the Viet Nam war. So what response would she like to stir in the hearts and minds

she mentions in the title of a recent painting? What does she want us to do? She wants us to plunge into the realm of uncertainty she opens up with her disparities of message and manner, style and content. For that is the point of art: to challenge us to find meaning in the absence of those reliable cues that rhetoricians are only too happy to provide.

Here's a thought about Irish's juxtaposition of texts and pictures: she intends the harshness of the former as a reproach to the insouciance of the latter. In a world that leaves soldiers with thousand-yard stares, how can we indulge ourselves in the pleasures of the Rococo? Linger over this question and you will find yourself in the company of Jane Irish the indignant moralist. However, it is not certain that this is the true Jane Irish. Undeniably, a strong moral sense animates her. Still, nothing prevents us from subjecting my first reading to something like a reversal: in a world that subjects young people to the devastation of war, isn't it necessary to preserve and to celebrate whatever beauty has managed to survive? Let us remember the war in Viet Nam. Let us note its distorted reflection in the havoc wreaked present war. But let us bear in mind, even as we acknowledge the horror, that it is not and never has been all pervading. The Rococo emerged in the early decades of the 18th century, a time of war in Europe and of colonial maneuvering in the rest of the world. Though it did nothing to mitigate the worst impulses of European society, this fanciful style spread a bright, sparkling light in certain quarters. At our most optimistic, we might praise the Rococo for keeping alive an ideal of civilized life, even though the comforts of that ideal

were felt by very few.

I am not saying that Irish wants us to interpret her paintings along these lines. What I am saying is that these works are open to this and many other readings. That is because they are works of art, and therefore put meaning up for grabs. Or it might better to say that, because they put meaning up for grabs, they count as works of art. We can be certain only that no easily understood motive prompts Irish to infiltrate her beautiful pictures with war protest. She is not a rhetorician, determined to guide us to a single, correct conclusion about war or anything else. So we can never see her paintings once for all. Unlike single-issue images, hers demand—and reward—repeated viewings.

Irish puts her palette through extreme shifts, from a wide range of high-keyed colors to the sobriety of grisaille. Though I couldn't help noticing this right away, it took me a while to wake up to it fully. When I did, I began to see variations in her use of monochrome. Sometimes she renders an entire image in darkish, absorbent tones. It's as if the objects that fill an interior space—the pieces of furniture, the chandeliers—are losing track of themselves in their own shadows. In other monochromes, bright tones predominate, and even the heaviest, most elaborately carved tables and chairs acquire a look of weightlessness. This ebullience increases when Irish turns to yellows, oranges, and variations on sky-blue. Her big, polychrome images are dazzling.

As vision acclimatizes itself to the dazzle, it becomes easier to see that here, as in her monochromes, there are variations. Usually, the effect is of

interior lighting adjusted to suggest the airy brightness of summer sunlight. This is what one would expect in settings as well-appointed as these. So there is a certain surprise in the realization that that in some of her large paintings—*Room with Blue Vases/VVAW San Francisco*, 2006, for example—the artist has pushed her colors to emotionally charged extremes. She induces a kind of heat, a chromatic intensity that reminds me of women’s make-up. I am reminded, too, that the Rococo is understood as feminine. Of course, the idea of femininity proposed by this style is unabashedly old-fashioned: woman as amusing, flirtatious, seductive. And these qualities are bolstered by the rhetoric of make-up, which employs images of sexually aroused flesh. There are moments when the surfaces and forms in Irish’s paintings look startlingly lush and alluring. The next moment, one recalls her invocations of violence and death.

She is an artist of contradictions—an obvious point, the obviousness of which might be tempered by noting the possibility that she is an artist with a tragic outlook, who sees our happiest, most pleasurable impulses intertwined with our most destructive ones. Guided by this reading, we would see her brightest images as not so much haunted by sorrow as infused with it. The more powerfully alluring, even glamorous, the world she evokes, the more certain the promise of a tragic reversal. Early I mentioned the figure of Jane Irish the moralist narrowly focused on the disasters of war. Now I am scaling up that figure to that of the artist as the agent of a grand and pessimistic vision. It needs to be said, however, that these figures of the artist, like all the others we might

invoke, are fictions. They are imaginary, just as Irish’s paintings are works of the imagination. Works of art, not rhetoric. Never presenting themselves as susceptible to just one, correct interpretation, her paintings leave it up to us to say what they mean.

It requires courage to protest abuses of power, and Irish’s paintings display that sort of courage. It requires another sort of courage for an artist to trust her audience to make humane sense of her art. By displaying this latter variety of courage in such abundance, Irish presents us with a challenge—not to define her art but to take at least a few steps toward defining ourselves, as we decide how to understand her inexhaustibly interpretable images. For that, ultimately, is the point of art as strong as hers: to bring you face to face with your choices, as they are shaped by your needs and your desires.

Carter Ratcliff is a poet and art critic. His most recent book of poetry is Arrivederci, Modernismo, published this year by Libellum Press. A contributing editor to Art in America magazine, he has written monographs on a number of artists, including John Singer Sargent, Jackson Pollock, and Andy Warhol.

1. Roberta Fallon, "Irish Rebellion," 2005, The Philadelphia Weekly, online at philadelphiaweekly.com.
2. Jane Irish, statement, October 16, 2007.
3. Aristotle, Rhetoric Book 3, chapter 7, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, with an introduction and notes by Eugene Carver, New York: Barnes and Nobel Classics, 2005, p. 425.