

Holding Together Opposite Poles: A Conversation with Jane Irish

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by Cypress Marrs



View of Jane Irish's installation *Antipodes*, 2018, at Lemon Hill, Philadelphia. Courtesy Philadelphia Contemporary. Photo Emily Belshaw.



In the last line of *Eureka*, his 1848 prose poem which explains the origin of “the Material and Spiritual Universe,” Edgar Allan Poe implores us to “bear in mind that all is Life—Life—Life within Life—the less within the greater, and all within the Spirit Divine.” He meant that everything exists within one grand scheme, that opposites were reconciled in the One-ness of the cosmos. The poem was met with confusion and largely dismissed as a scientific and aesthetic failure upon its publication. More recently (and bizarrely) though, it has been heralded as prefiguring the Big Bang theory, in its descriptions of the universe originating from a single “primordial particle.”

Poe's poem is the inspiration behind *Antipodes*, an installation of paintings and ceramics by Philadelphia-based artist Jane Irish (b. 1953), on view through June 3 at Lemon Hill, a Federal-style mansion in Philadelphia's sprawling Fairmount Park. The show is presented by Philadelphia Contemporary, a fledgling art organization directed by former Creative Time fixture Nato Thompson, in partnership with Philadelphia Parks & Recreation, Fairmount Park Conservancy, and the Friends of Lemon Hill.

For *Antipodes*, Irish made bright, loose, and, lazily eloquent floor-to-ceiling panel paintings. These ring two oval shaped rooms, one directly above the other, at Lemon Hill. The works downstairs depict the Indian Ocean and the detritus of colonialism that spot green and brown ocean floors. The walls and ceiling upstairs are covered with images of protests against the Vietnam War that took place in and around Philadelphia in 1970; these hopeful scenes emerge from an electric yellow background. Six pairs of ceramic bowls are also installed in two other rooms at Lemon Hill; the decorated bowls, like the oval rooms, represent and hold together opposing poles.

Irish earned a BFA from Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore and an MFA from Queens College in New York, where she was represented by Sharp Gallery during the '80s; her early works were largely architectural studies. She moved to Philadelphia in 1982. Much of her later paintings depict interiors decorated with tableaux of resistance. (A show of framed paintings Irish made during 2016 and 2017 is on view at Locks Gallery in Philadelphia through May 25.) For Antipodes, however, she creates rather than depicts such an environment. We talked at Lemon Hill and then again on the phone.

CYPRESS MARRS: How did the show come about?

JANE IRISH: I've known Philadelphia Contemporary's founder Harry Philbrick for a long while now. He's visited my live-work space a couple of times. In 2014, I hung a series of red and yellow panels, depicting interiors, in a long hallway there. I also painted a rug on Mylar which covered the floor. The space looked like a long French hallway with rooms branching off. You felt like you were walking into a painting. Harry came over while I had this set up and we had a revelation: what if this was available to an audience to experience?

Then, in December 2015, Harry and I came to see the eighteenth-century villas in Fairmount Park which were open for the winter holidays. By that point, I was working on the *Antipodes* series, based on Poe's *Eureka*. Seeing these two oval rooms was so exciting. The rooms felt like a good way to represent the philosophical and geological notion of antipodes I'd been exploring. An installation there would be a natural extension of my work. I wouldn't just be an artist coming in to do a commission.

As it happens, the Friends of Lemon Hill, the philanthropic group that maintains the house, had just auctioned off all the period furniture that used to be in the house and were open to discussing new uses for the space.

MARRS: Could you talk about the process of putting the show together? our influences?

IRISH: Around 2000, I moved into a new studio and started doing paintings of people who I admired, many of whom had been part of the anti-Vietnam War movement.

One of my mentors, the poet and antiwar veteran W. D. Ehrhart, has his papers in an archive called "Imaginative Representations of the Vietnam War" at LaSalle University in Philadelphia. I began going there to learn more about this man who he had been so

generous with me. There are some ten thousand things in the archive. I spent a huge amount of time looking at the covers of records and pulp novels, movie stills and posters. It was a way of exploring the imaginary motifs of the war.

MARRS: And then there's Poe.



IRISH: Yes, a friend of mine, the journalist and academic Crispin Sartwell, was writing about Poe's Eureka, and Marilynne Robinson had published an essay about the poem in the New York Review of Books. I am drawn to Poe because he is more narrative, less coldly analytical, than most philosophers. Though Eureka is on the edge of madness, it has a unified philosophical core. Poe writes that "The Universe is the plot of God." I read it and thought: "Wow! this is a creation myth! This is American!" Plus, Poe lived in Philadelphia, which I like. I'm committed to this place.

While reading Eureka, I did a series of illustrations based on the poem.

MARRS: And Poe lead you to the geographical and philosophical concept of antipodes?

IRISH: Yes, Poe mentions the word "antipode." He says, "there cannot be antipodes." Things can exist only because of their antithesis. I like that idea. It suggests that it is possible to define the present through past and future possibilities. Antipodes is certainly trying to move towards that.

MARRS: How is it different doing painting for interiors rather than paintings of interiors?

IRISH: It can help an audience experience the elusiveness of a painting, to experience the multiple view points and sense of shifting space. Walking into an installation, your body becomes a part of the piece. I think about this, especially with the tableaux on the ceiling upstairs: the experience of looking up adds a level of empathy.

MARRS: I found that the longer I spent looking at the paintings the more there was to see and to think about. There are all these layers of reference in Antipodes. I was hoping you could talk about how history and research shape your work.

IRISH: I like having contact with people rather than just diving into facts and literature, although I do that sort of research too. I've met a lot of antiwar veterans who were involved



in Operation RAW, a three-day protest, march, and piece of guerrilla theater organized by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) in 1970, when I organized a show to commemorate the thirty-fifth anniversary of the protest at Crane Arts in Philadelphia. The veterans started giving me photos of the march, and I drew from that imagery for the tableaux on the ceiling at Lemon Hill.

MARRS: Right. I read that it's part of your practice to travel to Vietnam and work on paintings there.

IRISH: Yes, I've visited three different times. Vietnamese artists tour me around the country. I also spent time painting en plain air there. Some of the imagery in this show comes out of those experiences.

MARRS: In so many of your paintings, there's a tension between the way interiors are decorated and the architecture itself. The structures are those of oppressors, grand rooms built with dirty money, but they are decorated in these wild and hopeful ways, often with antiwar imagery. At the show up at Locks, there's a painting, Violet (2017) which turns the idea on its head. A painted ceiling is placed over what appears to be a jungle.

IRISH: That painting was part of my Eureka cycle. There's a part of that poem where Poe writes very romantically about the primordial ooze. A cypress swamp in Louisiana is as close to that as I've experienced and so is what I painted. In the South, swamps were escape routes for enslaved people. So I placed into the swamp a cosmology with imagery of antiwar actions and indigenous Vietnamese people: a peace mythology.

It's similar to the Lemon Hill show insofar as it sets aside Renaissance and Colonial history to construct of a new, hopeful mythology.

MARRS: What was it like working with Philadelphia Contemporary?

IRISH: It's opened up new possibilities. Nato Thompson was really important; he pushed me to make connections with local history, especially in the downstairs piece. He helped me connect my thinking to Lemon Hill, to the house's place in African-American history. The man who owned Lemon Hill originally was a merchant in the Caribbean; there are strains of slave culture and the slave economy in the paintings downstairs.

MARRS: It's striking that the show is lit entirely by natural light.

IRISH: In Eureka, Poe writes about models of the universe, and about how light moves in space. This space—the windows in these oval rooms—acts exactly like a sundial. I thought that was somehow important.

Also, the light bounces. I started doing the paintings for the room upstairs in January and when I brought a panel inside, the yellow on it just glowed. I knew then the lighting was going to work.

MARRS: Yes! The panels upstairs are a canary yellow.



IRISH: The paintings I made for the room upstairs contrast with those I made for downstairs. The yellow is the opposite of the darkness—the browns and greens—that are downstairs. I think it really glows when you're in here. It feels so much lighter, especially compared to the depth of colonialism downstairs. This is the freedom of antiwar actions.

MARRS: It feels so hopeful.

IRISH: I wanted that. The painting on the ceiling draws your eyes up, whereas in the downstairs room there's a rug. It was already in the space. It's funny though, the pattern is similar to the tiles on the floors of typical grottos in Italian Renaissance gardens. And because both the floor downstairs and the ceiling upstairs are covered, there is this uncanny feeling that there's no separation between the two floors, that the space between the floors is continuous.

MARRS: My last question concerns something you wrote in the material for the show. You write that "the work of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War is artist work." I was wondering if you conversely see your work as a protest work, work of resistance?

IRISH: I do. It's a long-range view: if this stuff lasts, if I do as well as I can so the work lasts, then there will be interest in the subject.

I've been dealing with the Vietnam War and resistance during Afghanistan and Iraq. There is a long tradition of antiwar protest in the US. A lot of Iraqi Vets who opposed the war imitated VVAW tactics. A lot of veterans went to Standing Rock. There are different strains of these antiwar actions alive in our culture. A young person came to my studio, looked at these images, and said, "Oh, right, that's like Standing Rock." You use the best tools you have, and this is my best tool.