

Power, Vulnerability and Responsibility: Jane Irish Confronts Colonization

Grappling with America's colonial past through a feminist lens at Locks Gallery, and the historic Lemon Hill Mansion, Philadelphia

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by Becky Huff Hunter



Jane Irish, *Antipodes*, 2018, installation view, Lemon Hill Mansion, Philadelphia. Courtesy: Philadelphia Contemporary

'I think even in my art historical training I was colonized early on,' artist Jane Irish observed in a 2018 interview with Nato Thompson, referring to her initial education as a painter in the French modernist tradition – 'looking at Matisse, Courbet, Degas' – at The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, and the Maryland Institute (now MICA), Baltimore, in the 1970s. Throughout her four-decade career as a figurative painter, Irish has confronted that colonization with a (white, American) feminist consciousness of her shifting positions of power, vulnerability and responsibility. Her two exhibitions, 'Architectures of Resistance' at Locks Gallery and 'Antipodes' organized by Philadelphia Contemporary, expand these investigations to her most ambitious scale and material complexity yet.

Locks Gallery presents Irish's large paintings of European and American colonial and revolutionary-era domestic interiors, including preparatory sketches for 'Antipodes.' Each interior juxtaposes period details with related tableau from historically exploited colonies and recent antiwar protests. For example, the egg tempera on linen *Plantation* (2017), which Irish began painting from life in Louisiana, depicts a French Creole home – complete with gilt-framed portraits, a fortepiano and curvaceous furniture – once inhabited by slave owners. There is little solid ground in Irish's scenes: her rooms take on the fluidity of paint. The house's traditional French doors open onto two impossible panoramas: to the left, a sugar plantation, and to the right, the French tire company Michelin's rubber fields in Vietnam, suggesting an uncomfortable symmetry between the slave trade and today's economic

imperialism. Both connecting and defying these narratives, a patchwork of protest imagery and poetry shimmers in golden hues, expanding across the top half of the canvas and producing what Irish calls a ‘resistance ceiling’.

‘Antipodes’ comprises two room-sized, floor-to-ceiling paintings, mostly in oil on un-stretched linen and ink on Tyvek, with glazed ceramics installed in adjacent rooms of the neoclassical Lemon Hill Mansion in Philadelphia’s public Fairmount Park, a historic nexus of political, commercial and aesthetic power for the city and the nation. Lemon Hill was the estate of Robert Morris, a primary financial backer of the American Revolution and a signatory to the Declaration of Independence and US Constitution, before the land’s sale to merchant Henry Pratt, who built the mansion in 1800. To visit Irish’s architecturally scaled, immersive installation is to step inside one of her paintings, one that incorporates this constellation of historical references.



Installation view, Jane Irish: Antipodes, courtesy of the artist, Lemon Hill and Philadelphia Contemporary.

On the mansion’s ground floor, the walls of an ovoid room have been covered in broad, washy strokes of murky brown and green. These colors, along with shell and seaweed imagery, evoke the gloomy depths of an ocean, signaling maritime trade and conquest as well as literal and historical wreckage. Glowing, self-contained vignettes depict the Amistad schooner and the enslaved Africans who in 1839 fought for their freedom onboard and in court; a chateau owned by the French India Company; and gleaming Chinese ceramic wares. By incorporating sketches from Philadelphian



Installation view, Jane Irish: *Antipodes*, courtesy of the artist, Lemon Hill and Philadelphia Contemporary.

neoclassical painter Titian Ramsey Peale and Edouard Manet's ghostly illustration for Edgar Allen Poe – a longtime Philadelphia resident – as well as careful black-and-white illustrations of numerous local historic mansions on the large whiteware work *Foyer Reparations Bowl* (2017), Irish explicitly addresses this city's complicity in colonialism. The surrounding installation's long, thick strips of linen, soaked with paint, lend the walls a warped appearance, as if buckling beneath the violent weight of history.

Lemon Hill's upper floor is emblazoned with bright yellow ink that vibrates with contrasting pale blue sketches of veterans' protests and Vietnamese temples. The room is crowned with a resistance ceiling that celebrates anti-war iconography: the long barrel of a gun stuffed with flowers, hands reaching to touch across distance and a repeated, handwritten protest sign that reads 'Your Son' – driving home the deeply personal effects of war.

Jane Irish: *Architectures of Resistance* ran at Locks Gallery, Philadelphia, 6 April – 25 May; *Antipodes*, organized by Philadelphia Contemporary, was on view at the historic Lemon Hill Mansion, Philadelphia, 13 April – 3 June.

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.