

ARTS AND CULTURE

Irish Rebellion

A war-protest exhibit recalls a little-known moment in guerrilla theater.

By Roberta Fallon

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Jane Irish's art has always been political, challenging stereotypes and questioning the status quo. In the '90s she made faux Wedgwood vases whose sides were adorned with depictions of the homeless. She's painted the police Roundhouse as a beautiful castle in the clouds. Her 2002 PAFA William Morris Gallery solo exhibit included paintings commemorating Vietnam War protests.

But over the last year the artist, who says she's never been a "to the barricades" activist, has been doing something new. She's been grassroots organizing, bringing together artists, poets, a filmmaker and Vietnam vets for an exhibition honoring a little-known local political history. Operation RAW (Rapid American Withdrawal), the 1970 Vietnam Veterans Against the War march between Morristown, N.J., and Valley Forge, was one of the first acts of guerrilla theater put on by the then-fledgling veterans' group.

Irish's "Operation RAW" opens this weekend at the Icebox Project Space. "I approached the Icebox in December after the election," Irish said. "They wanted to do it because they wanted to do a political show."

Including new work by more than 60 mostly local artists, the show honors Vietnam vets. But the exhibit must also be read in light of the war in Iraq-as a group statement of resistance.

Irish, 49, is too young to have been a protester in the '70s. When we spoke last week in her office at Penn's School of Design-where she's the assistant to Fine Arts Department chair John Moore-I asked her why she focused on Vietnam.

"In 1998 I went to France," she said. "I was researching French decorative arts. Each town has a Resistance Museum. I thought, 'Wouldn't it be cool to put together the decorative and the resistance?' But when I looked up 'resistance' in the library here I kept coming up with Vietnam.

"When I was working on the Academy show I invited [local poet/ Marine Corps Vietnam vet] William Ehrhart to look at the paintings to see if anything was incorrect. There was a small image of Operation RAW in one of the paintings and he knew what it was."

Operation RAW reverberated with the heroic resistance Irish saw honored in museums in France. She also had a shirttail connection to the 1970 event. As a teen living in Radnor, she said, Valley Forge felt like it was her backyard.

Irish bankrolled most of the project herself with the sale of a political painting, a Vietnam protest piece, *Dewey Canyon III*, which was purchased by PAFA after her 2002 show.

And as with all grassroots activities, there are volunteers helping out.

"I have a group to hang the show. I live in Northern Liberties and there are lots of artists who organized the Open Studios there, and they're helping-Ira Upin, Susan Moore, Sarah Roche. Mark Shetabi's doing the wall labels."

The four-day-long Operation RAW march started with 84 Vietnam veterans in battle dress marching single-file with toy M-16s as if on a search-and-destroy mission. By the fourth day there were 200 vets. Along the trail the soldiers would stop and "harass and torture the villagers"-actors from the Philadelphia Guerrilla Theater Company. Sometimes the soldiers were jeered at and spat upon by onlookers.

In the finale at Valley Forge the troops charged down the hill, their toy guns raised. At the bottom they broke the guns over their knees. John Kerry, Jane Fonda, Donald Sutherland and others gave speeches. Two thousand people watched, according to newspaper reports.

Irish retraced the march route and did plein air landscape paintings at 19 of the sites. The works are luscious oil sketches. She also made 19 companion paintings based on newspaper images of violence from the Vietnam War. And she'll show the works back-to-back (beauty and the beast) on a freestanding shelf she's built.

Irish also made a monumental painting of the Valley Forge scene with the soldiers breaking their toy guns. This work she reproduced on vinyl like a billboard (it's 45 feet long), and it'll be placed above the Icebox exit door, making it the last thing you see before walking out. "It'll look like one of those post office WPA murals. It's an uplifting image. That's what the whole thing is about," she said.

Uplift and resistance-that sounds like the right sentiment for the times. Don't miss it.

"Operation Rapid American Withdrawal: 1970-2005: An Exhibition"

Opening reception: Fri., Sept. 2, 6:30-9:30pm. Free. Through Sept. 25. Icebox Project Space, Crane Arts Bldg., 1400 American St. 215.923.0245.