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A clash of colors

By Amy S. Rosenberg
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W.D. Ehrhart wrote the five lines of "The Sniper's Mark" in 1972, back from Vietnam, gripped by the memory of seeing a fellow Marine in his death throes - a brainless savage flurry of arms and legs and eyes.

It seems a very long way from the poem's searing origins in a rice paddy 20 miles south of Penang, late summer 1967, to its latest home: embedded in a gorgeously detailed 14-by-6 1/2-foot painting of an ornate 18th-century French rococo dining room, currently drying in the Northern Liberties loft of Philadelphia artist Jane Irish.



But maybe not.

"You want to talk about disconnect?" Ehrhart said last week from his Mount Airy home, weeks before the painting, Multicolored Dining Room/Winning Hearts and Minds, was to be the centerpiece of an arresting exhibit of Irish's work that opens next week at the Locks Gallery. "Spend 13 months in a war and suddenly find yourself dumped on a civilian street. Hey, Bill, how you doing? That's disconnect. I'm perfectly happy if you find this disconcerting."

Disconcerting is one way to describe Irish's series of room paintings, in which raised letters spell out war poetry by Vietnam veterans. Ironic juxtaposition might be another. Or subversive. Or jarring. Or complicated. The words lurk and invade, hide and appear, fade into the background and burst out of the surface of the oh-so-civilized settings. They are the snipers hidden in these lush interior landscapes.

Then again, viewers of the massive, colorful paintings (the palette of de Kooning, Irish notes) might all but overlook the words if they get caught up in admiring the lavishly rendered images of rugs, upholstered chairs, vases, chandeliers, mirrors, tables, place settings, door moldings, fireplaces and paintings.

But that viewing experience might be as profound as any other - especially if a viewer catches himself dwelling on a coffee table at the expense of, say, a chart detailing the number of soldiers killed, wounded and less-than-honorably discharged (Save Waller Street/Yellow Room).

"It's a joyous kind of palette," says Irish, 51, standing in front of the painting with Ehrhart's poem (and five others from a ground-breaking 1972 collection of vets' war poetry), which on this Saturday morning is still hanging in her third-floor studio and home in Northern Liberties. "It's a visual love of the thing, but also what it signifies."

For Irish, the rococo style signifies notions of class, of robber barons, of elitism, of society's impulse to to ignore - to literally paint over, in these works - unpleasant or disturbing truths. The Locks exhibit pulls together a number of long-standing interests of Irish, a 1973 Radnor High School graduate whose day job is administering Penn's master of fine arts program. Those interests include juxtaposition, history, memorializing the art of other media (performance art, poetry, protest as art), heroic resistance, and French decorative arts. She finds the last both aesthetically pleasing in a straightforward way and symbolically meaningful in a complex way.

"Visually, it looks one way, but it means something else," says Irish, who in the 1980s lived and showed in New York, but now says she is both content with and stimulated by the Philadelphia region's art scene. "I started thinking about rococo as a presentation of a level of society. All these other visual clues excite me. I like the complicated quality of that."

She says her interest in heroic resistance began when she was in France researching the decorative arts. She found museums devoted to the French Resistance located next to buildings where decorative arts were being created. "It was like an 'aha!' moment for me," she said.

It eventually brought her into contact with Vietnam veterans' poetry and with the large collection of images, artwork and words by Viet vets housed at La Salle University. "I started to realize artists are creating a history," she said. "We actually do have control about how history is interpreted."

In a 2003 installation at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts titled History Lesson, Irish explored similar themes, though not in the same painting: She essentially took over a gallery and juxtaposed her own works - both rococo-themed paintings and large plaster reliefs of New York performance artists - with works from the museum's collection.

In 2005, she became interested in the 1970 Vietnam Veterans Against the War protest march from Morristown, N.J., to Valley Forge, during which marchers enacted scenes of soldiers mistreating Vietnamese citizens. Irish marched the route herself and painted scenes along the way - art that became part of a Philadelphia Fringe Festival exhibit she organized at the Ice Box Project Space called Operation Rapid American Withdrawal (RAW) 1970-2005.

Here, in the Locks exhibit, she houses those sharp dualities and their provocative messages within the same canvas (Tyvek, actually, which is tarp material). The acceptable clutter of the rococo decor competes with the unacceptable clutter of the war images.

In the painting Thoughts on a Monsoon Morning/Orange Room, for example, viewers might be startled as their eyes refocus from a ring of red rococo chairs to this line from Boston poet David Connelly near the chandelier on the right: I hate every f-ing one of you who make dollars from our deaths.

In Save Waller Street/Yellow Room, you might start out looking at the various shades of yellow on the wall and carpet and end up following a chart tracing a generation's involvement in Vietnam (51,000 killed, 270,000 wounded, 563,000 less-than-honorably discharged.)

In the Winning Hearts and Minds piece, Irish draws on six poems from the collection of the same name, by veterans Basil T. Paquet, Jan Barry, Stan Platke, Don Receveur, Ehrhart and Herbert Krohn. All have reacted positively to the intriguing new life given their words.

Krohn, whose "Ferryman's Song at Binh Minh" is in the painting, noted that the use of French upper-class decor was not truly at odds with his experience in Vietnam, which 40 years ago still showed the influence of French colonialism. "I like the spooky vagueness of your detailed Tiepoloid interiors, uninhabited save by ghosts," he wrote Irish in an e-mail. "Poetry by Baudelaire would fit more expectedly than VN war poems. . . ."

Although the words and images seem deliberately out of sync, Irish says she chose formats to go along with the poems. In *The Thousand Yard Stare/Room With Yellow Sofa*, a 7-by-11-foot painting featuring a work by Connelly about an ambush, she placed the verse in a vertical setting where a painted ceiling takes up the majority of space, so that you are literally staring upward as you encounter it.

For the words in the paintings, Irish used foam letters she cut with an X-Acto knife, then glued to the surface and painted over. The effect is that the lines of poetry appear to be pushing through the surface of the rooms, and the painting.

You might avert your eyes, or you might begin to read the rest of the poem, either blotting out the horror contained in the images ("Terrified of the death grins") or forcing yourself away from the lovely decor of France's ruling class. For Irish, it will work either way. As gallery director Sueyun Locks noted, "Jane's a very quiet, subtle protester. She's not a screaming protester. It's not just about that poem. Ultimately, you're a visual artist - that's more important. You can't lose your focus."

War and Peace

"Jane Irish: Paintings for *Winning Hearts and Minds*" will be displayed Dec. 7 to Jan. 12 at the Locks Gallery, 600 Washington Square South.

Hours: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays.

Information: 215-629-1000 or www.locksgallery.com.