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A modernist paints a case for Renoir

By Amy S. Rosenberg
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Not long ago, when a young painter asked Northern Liberties artist Jane Irish to name her favorite painter, she thought first about the expressionist work of Britain's Malcolm Morley, hesitated, then gave an unexpected answer.

"No, it's Renoir," she said. "His strawberries."

"I think I was trying to bother her," Irish, 54, recalled this week, standing amid the Philadelphia Museum

of Art's "Late Renoir" exhibition, surrounded by gauzy paintings of fleshy nudes and overgrown landscapes - works that have been variously mocked, snubbed, or, in a minority view Irish shares, embraced with a sly, cultish devotion.

"Imagine a hand, all crippled, a brush with lead white, ultramarine blue, and vermilion," Irish said. "He dabs it and flicks his hand on the canvas, a spastic gesture - and it's a strawberry. At the end of his life" - he died in 1919, at 78 - "he could make this lushness that was so over the top."

That over-the-top quality is just part of what leads a provocative contemporary artist like Irish - whose own work includes lush, wall-size paintings of French Rococo interiors embedded with the poetry of Vietnam veterans - to defend the much more complacent Renoir, even as a New York critic dismisses his pair of Michelin-Mannish nude Bathers as "two croissants on a plate of greens."

For Irish, who will be part of a panel discussion Friday at the museum entitled "Love 'Em or Hate 'Em: Grappling with Late Renoir," there's no need to roll her eyes at the work of the aging artist with arthritic hands and an unapologetic preoccupation with doughy, small-headed, small-breasted, big-posteriored women. Matisse and Picasso



Artist Jane Irish discusses "Reclining Nude" (right), part of the "Late Renoir" exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

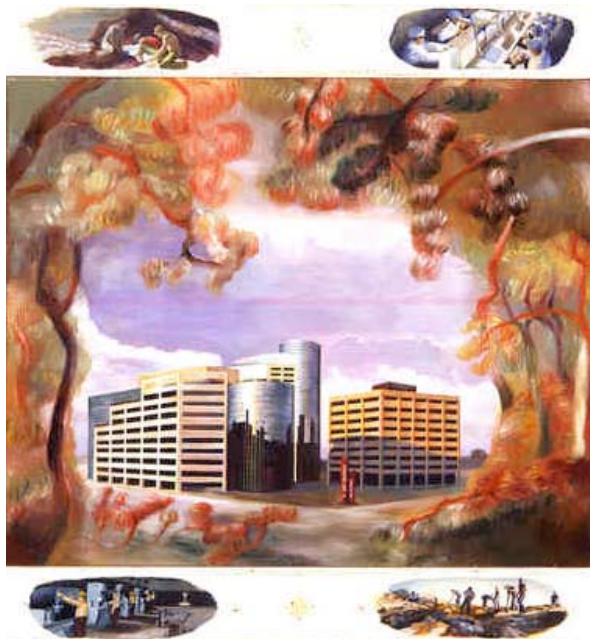


took the same view, embracing Renoir in his final years.

“It wasn’t necessarily breaking ground into cubism, or breaking ground into a new form of art,” she said. “It wasn’t leading to Jackson Pollock. But it’s certainly unique. He just had a vision. It’s really a delight in painting, at being able to take a huge range of color and orchestrate it.”

Irish said that as an art student in the 1970s, spending hours at the Barnes Foundation, where late Renoirs are more than well represented, she, like her instructors at the Maryland Institute College of Art, initially dismissed him and his fuzzy nudes, which evoked nothing so much as soft-focus 1950s porn.

“Renoir was always sort of icky to me, cottony, too sweet,” she said.



Jane Irish painting

But a 1977 conversation with Lamar Layfield, a respected conceptual social-sculpture artist, changed her thinking. “Renoir is the best painter of flesh,” he told her.

“I thought, I can look at this again in a new light,” she said, and she eventually came to embrace his use of middle-class memes in her own work, while giving them a subversive subtext.

As dozens of audio-tour patrons milled around a gallery of landscapes, she zigzagged through, describing the connections a contemporary artist can find in an aging master’s works. She walked up to one and pulled out a slide of a paint-

ing of her own, *Near Williams Creek* (1989).

In it, Irish had appropriated the bucolic foliage of Renoir’s *The Vineyards at Cagnes*, from 1908, and filled it in with insurance buildings, bleak architectural portraits of dispiriting contemporary sprawl that tear a hole in Renoir’s paradise.

To compare the two is striking, and Irish admits it’s part mocking, part homage. “It’s like a satire,” she said. “I was using it to bring the audience into the picture. It’s a middle-class idea of what a wonderful painting is. There’s a lively lightness to this painting. It’s so gorgeous, it’s hard not to love.”



She said Renoir's brushwork, his love of painting, his embrace of the baroque voluptuous, his veering off into almost comical absorptions, influenced contemporary - and more daringly and intentionally outrageous - artists like De Chirico and Magritte, Cindy Sherman and Lisa Yuskavage. "It's idealized and also observed," she said. "His subject matter is so mundane, he doesn't want you to think about anything but the fracture of the painting surface. It's minimalist."



Renoir painting

Irish has found other things about late Renoir that have inspired her:

the way the figures don't entirely integrate into their lush backdrops, but seem superimposed, as figures against a theatrical set. Her own work often has background (the interiors) and foreground (the searing Vietnam poetry) that do not entirely fit together.

Irish compared Renoir's *Jean as a Huntsman* (1910), in which he dressed his son in a hunting costume and painted him in a formal, high-art manner, to her current project of painting Vietnam veterans who opposed the war in pastoral settings - a subversive way to slip in subjects that otherwise might not clear the high-art bar. And she applauded the integration of a working clock into a sculpture - an unapologetic acknowledgment of art with a functional element, something that normally is added later.

Still, can a provocative painter like Irish, who embeds political messages in her own work and always leavens its lushness with a jolt to the conscience, truly embrace a message-free artist content to while away the decades painting big gals and overgrown gardens?

Yes, and no.

"One of the questions I had was, he's painting [during] the French occupation of Indochina. Like, where is that?" she said. "That bothers me. What's missing? Why does that make me angry?"

"I love it, but it also makes me angry. It probably drove me to look for meaning. How come nothing about Indochina? What gets your blood boiling? Usually things that bother you, you also love."

Indeed, by the time Irish gets to the end of the exhibition - to the exhilaratingly jumpy

two-minute film of Renoir painting with his gnarled hands, being handed cigarettes and brushes, tilting his head back to squint at what he'd just dabbed on the canvas, an old man who'd figured out a way to keep painting until he died, surrounded by joy, throwing his final efforts into a work you can either dismiss as croissant-ish or embrace as a precursor to the bizarre, bulbous strains of R. Crumb portraits or outrageous Yuskavage nudes, a painting that can make you laugh at the manic off-kilter joy or frown at the diminishing returns - it is easy to catch the train of appreciation. May we all be so lucky.

"It's cool to have a legacy of painting, to see we're not flying solo," Irish said.

Hear about it, look at it

"Love 'Em or Hate 'Em: Grappling With Late Renoir" artist Jane Irish; Joseph Rishel, curator of European painting before 1900; Inquirer film critic Carrie Rickey, and staff lecturer Matthew Palczynski discuss Renoir's late work. 6:30 p.m. Friday in the Van Pelt Auditorium at the Art Museum, 26th and the Parkway. Tickets: \$8 plus museum admission. 2215-235-7469.

