

The Philadelphia Inquirer

‘Antipodes’ at Lemon Hill shows a way forward: Philly’s mansions don’t need to be musty antiques

April 25, 2018

by Thomas Hine



Photography by Karen Mauch.

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I know it sounds unlikely, but the contemporary has come to Lemon Hill.

You probably think of the 218-year-old villa in Fairmount Park as an antique, filled with antiques. But the Colonial Dames, the group that long cared for and furnished the building, moved out two years ago and sent its contents to auction. And this spring, Philadelphia Contemporary, the newish and peripatetic arts organization, has moved in for a few months and turned this grand and delicate mansion into something else entirely.

The building’s two grandest spaces — elliptical rooms one atop the other that look out to the Art Museum, the skyline, and the city — have been transformed by local artist Jane Irish into a work, or a show, called *Antipodes*. It is free to the public and will be open through June 3.

Antipodes is a crazily ambitious effort. It attempts simultaneously to provide an interpretation of Lemon Hill both as a social phenomenon and aesthetic artifact, tell a story of American imperialism

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and resistance to the Vietnam War, and embody a theory of the cosmos from a poem by Edgar Allan Poe that Irish believes anticipated the insights of modern physics.

It would have been a miracle if she had succeeded in realizing such a complex ambition, and she hasn't entirely. The work doesn't really cohere. In large part because Irish's vision is so personal and idiosyncratic, she has made a great public gesture that may make sense only to her



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The most important thing Antipodes may do, however, is bring new attention to Lemon Hill and encourage Philadelphians to start thinking about its future. The old-style genteel house museum, with period furnishings as a document of the lifestyles of the rich, dead, and sometimes infamous, is of little interest to the public nowadays. We already have too many of them.

And let's remember that there is a lot more to making art than making sense. Irish's art is scattered by design. She clearly doesn't expect you to see everything she sees, but she provides plenty of opportunity for viewers to find something to respond to.

In Antipodes, she did not just pull a few things out of the closet and put them around the rooms. Instead, she went at it like Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, producing canvases that cover every available surface in the two rooms — though Michelangelo had the advantage of telling a well-known story.

On the upper floor, even the ceiling has turned bright and slightly violent. In the other rooms, Irish has placed several ceramic works: pairs of large bowls attached to each other, painted with scenes and maps that evoke specific places

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After a while, you might figure out that the conjoined bowls relate to the form of the house with its stacked ovals. The bowls, configured in ways that make them useless as containers, can be seen as the explosions of Poe's big bang theory, and they also evoke terrestrial globes. That relates to the title of the exhibition; antipodes are places on opposite sides of the earth.

Some of the paintings on the ground floor relate, in a general way, to Lemon Hill. It was built in 1800 by a wealthy merchant, Henry Pratt. He was involved in trade all over the world, especially China and the Caribbean. In the room where the beauty of the house is most evident, Irish shows uglier things. One vignette shows Pratt among a group of Philadelphia men implicated in the slave trade, and others deal with imperialism, especially by the French in Vietnam.

She mixes these scenes with quirkier ones, such as a group of conch shells to evoke a book Poe wrote on the subject. Who knew?

These seemingly whimsical elements demonstrate that Irish's view of history is broad and generous, and not a rote condemnation of Western civilization. She acknowledges that along with real evils, the age of discovery also brought real discoveries.

In contrast to the dark palette and dense imagery of the lower oval parlor, the upper one is bright lemon yellow with mostly blue figures. The imagery juxtaposes monuments and landscapes of Vietnam with the activities of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, which she sees as a hopeful instance of different people coming together to try to correct a wrong. "I am painting beautiful paintings of Viet Nam because we destroyed that country," she writes in the guide for that gallery. "I am like a monk cleaning a street or public garden daily, as a penance for a sin."

She refers to her design of this upper room as an "ecstatic vision" inspired by Poe's dream that individuals can transcend themselves and see themselves as part of a greater entity. You won't get that message from looking at the pictures, but through her mastery of color and her sensitivity to the room's architecture, she has made it a beautiful place.

Irish often uses interior architecture and decoration in her art. Here, she has made art of the interior. Her colors are not the same as the bright pastels that were typical of the period, but they are close enough to establish a relationship between past and present.

We do not know who designed Lemon Hill, but it is one of the finest and most elegant houses in America of its time. It commands the most expansive and dramatic vista of any house in Philadelphia. Indeed, it is a viewing pavilion — a belvedere — as much as it is a house.

Historic Lemon Hill mansion, built in 1800 by merchant Henry Pratt. With its curved floor-to-ceiling windows, it was extremely expensive in its day. Its gardens were elaborate and filled with plants Pratt collected from all over the world, and a small army of gardeners worked full-time on them. Pratt even allowed a measure of public access to them.

Such extravagances are built not by the good but by the powerful. Irish's work shows we need not respect everything about Pratt the businessman, even as we enjoy Lemon Hill's grace and view.

Antipodes demonstrates that the building does not need to be treated as an antique to be appreciated. It prods us to find a new place for it in the life of the city. You should go have a look.