

## The Artist

“Creative research” is a predominant theme in contemporary art. That visual representations of memory – dramatically reified under the kaleidoscopic lenses of human imagination – can form the basis for research about a purely historical event defines the ironic frame for this exhibit. I have been mining the *Imaginative Representations of the Vietnam War* collection for 10 years in pursuit of this evolving, if chimerical, even eccentric “aesthetic.”

This show is an opportunity to re-experience both the changing lenses and the crooked road down which my own imagination lured me. I believe in influences. Before I walked into the IRVW collection, I thought of influence in mostly stylistic terms as from a canon of painters and ceramic artists; but I have learned that imagination mediating the memory of others is the artist’s gift to the audience, and that my medium is only one among many possible.

I literally appropriate the poetic words of a memory, transforming them almost as visual tropes, by masquerading them in new forms (e.g., ink and brush, letterpress, or cut out foam letters). The “visual poetry” of the ‘20s and ‘30s perhaps dialogues my intentions. My figurative imagery originates from my memory of experiencing individual poems, songs, films, and graphics. Still, I am a representational painter by nature and intellect, interested in light and space, deter-

mined to seek out landscapes from which I can extract living and antique images at first hand. Painting on site in the ineffable lights of Vietnam and along the trails of a troubled America signed by acts of protest and resistance has given me a pallet created of memory and imagination mixed as though from actual pigment. Including photographic documentation by artists who are little known, yet made the original journeys, offers both a commentary and a coda within this exhibition and in my work.

If these combinations are perhaps displacements then my intent is to contribute to a new narrative meaning. And I hope this meaning illuminates the varied potential of rare book and manuscript collections such as I discovered in the *Imaginative Representations of the Vietnam War*. My agenda is to paint intensely and to speak freely. These Vietnam War writers give us the gruesome matter of fact elocution of telling the truth, in hope that wars like the Vietnam War will cease by an act of will – and imagination. I intend that my work makes beautiful the alternative heroisms of the antiwar veteran in the Vietnam period.

Jane Irish



### SOME THINGS CAN'T BE HANDLED

I had to ask him,  
standing there  
high over the dark water,  
“You OK, m’man?”  
Not looking, he said,  
“Fine, Bro, jus membrin,  
talkin wit ma friens.”  
All I saw were tail lights,  
looking like tracer fire,  
on the far highway.  
He chuckled, dapped at no one,  
and said, “I kin handle dat.”  
Later, I heard he jumped.

—David Connolly

*Jane Irish: War Is Not What You Think* is a collaborative exhibition of the La Salle University Art Museum and the Connelly Library.

The La Salle University Art Museum is located on the lower level of Olney Hall on the campus of La Salle University at 19th St. and Olney Ave. Hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday through Friday. The Art Museum will also be open to the public from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturday, February 4, 2012. Admission is free, though donations are accepted. Please call to schedule group visits. Special tours can be arranged. For further information call 215.951.1221 or visit the Web site at [www.lasalle.edu/museum](http://www.lasalle.edu/museum).

The La Salle University Connelly Library is located at the corner of 20th street and Olney Avenue, and is open to the public from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday; 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday, and noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. For further information call 215.951.1293 or visit the Web site at [www.lasalle.edu/library](http://www.lasalle.edu/library).

Jane Irish was recently awarded a prestigious Pew Fellowship in the Arts in 2011. The artist is represented by Locks Gallery in Philadelphia, [www.locksgallery.com](http://www.locksgallery.com). More information about her life and work may be found on the artist’s Web site, [www.janeirish.com](http://www.janeirish.com).

Acknowledgements: Special thanks to poets W.D. Ehrhart and John Balaban.

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“Old Pagoda” by *Hồ Xuân Hương* translated by John Balaban. Reprinted with Permission from *Spring Essence, The Poetry of Hồ Xuân Hương*, ed. and trans. by John Balaban, 2000, Copper Canyon Press, Port Townsend, WA.

#### Image Credits:

*The Conversation*, 2010, ink wash on paper, 42 x 360 inches

*La Conversation*, 2011, ink wash on paper, 42 x 108 inches

*Old Pagoda*, Hoa Lu Ancient Capital, 2010, gouache on tyvec, 16 x 20 inches

*Connolly Long Bien Bridge Vase*, 2009, low fire ceramic with china paint and gold luster, 12 x 10 x 10 inches

*Vet Center Vase*, 2010, low fire ceramic with china paint and gold luster, 14 x 14 x 12 inches



## SOUVENIRS

“Bring me back a souvenir,” the captain called.  
“Sure thing,” I shouted back above the amtrac’s roar.

Later that day,  
the column halted,  
we found a Buddhist temple by the trail.  
Combing through a nearby wood,  
we found a heavy log as well.

It must have taken more than half an hour,  
but at last we battered in  
the concrete walls so badly  
that the roof collapsed.

Before it did,  
I took two painted vases  
Buddhists use for burning incense.

One vase I kept,  
and one I offered proudly to the captain.

—W.D. Ehrhart



# Jane Irish: War Is Not What You Think

A Collaborative Exhibition of the  
La Salle University Art Museum  
and Connelly Library

January 17 – March 29, 2012

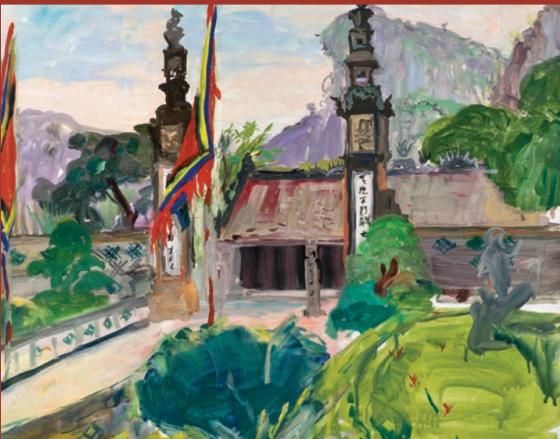


## For the Journey

The artist’s movement through time and space is echoed by the performance of the mind. Walking forward, one leg stays behind, then propels forward in a continuous dialogue between past and present. The body leaves traces of its passage, footprints vivid and fresh, then faded into blue. These residues leave lasting imprints, blending lived experiences with nostalgic memories, and surface in the imaginative representations of the artist.

The contemporary fascination with the past, and its relevance for the present, inspires the work of Philadelphia-based artist Jane Irish, who has spent the past ten years sifting through the Connelly Library’s special collection, *Imaginative Representations of the Vietnam War*. Through her paintings and ceramic vessels decorated with pastoral landscapes, people and poetry, Irish explores the enduring impact of the Vietnam War, highlighting the heroism of the soldiers as well the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, both of whom fought valiantly for freedom and peace.

Drawing from imaginative materials rather than documentary archives, Irish’s work raises important questions of meaning and interpretation in our understanding of the past. What is “true” history, and who decides what is to be remembered? What does it mean to re-enact past events, and to re-interpret history through the ever-changing lens of the contemporary? As Irish’s sketch-book creates a foundation for future work, the rare books and manuscripts offer the artist an interesting locus of intersection between past and present, where the seeds of the imagination can grow and flourish.



### OLD PAGODA

Master and servant amble pagoda paths,  
poem bag almost full, wine flask almost empty.

Pond fish, hearing prayers, flutter their gills.  
Hillside birds, hearing changes, bob their necks.

Crowds gather at this door of compassion,  
placing incense sticks on smoking altars.

Buddha asks so little of his monks.  
Blessed, they gather many gifts.

—Hô Xuân Hương (translated by John Balaban)

With her *Conversations*, Irish adds another layer of imaginative renderings to the multimedia Vietnam War collection, in a creative dialogue that weaves strands of connection between past and present, and that engages the viewer in an evolving interpretation of history. Her artwork sets the stage for re-activating the past in the present, for memorializing patriotic lives, and for protesting injustices that continue today.

War is not what you think, but a giant screen of imaginative renderings, made out to be glorious by the media. While Irish commemorates the bravery of both soldiers and protesters, she also explores the façade of public perceptions. Behind the rich Rococo surfaces of her paintings, we find human lives disrupted by violence. We see societies separated by thousands of miles intertwined in a life-or-death struggle. We discover the stark human emotions of survivors and witnesses, expressed in a creative panorama of images and text which blends fact and fiction, horror and beauty, history and performance. Finally, we see the traces of the artist herself, of her personal journey to Vietnam, and of her footsteps in a landscape at once pastoral and lost, folded into memory and recollection.

Klare Scarborough, Ph.D.  
Director and Chief Curator, La Salle University Art Museum



## Points of Reference

During the Vietnam War, Jane Irish began using art as a form of resistance. That war has remained central to her work in the decades since. For the exhibition *War Is Not What You Think*, Irish has wrapped the Special Exhibitions Gallery of the La Salle University Art Museum in three large, scroll-like ink washes on paper. On the occasion of her 2002 Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts exhibition, poet and Vietnam Vet W.D. Ehrhardt introduced Irish to La Salle’s Connelly Library’s *Imaginative Representations of the Vietnam War* (IRVW) collection. Much of Irish’s source material for the current exhibition comes from this collection and a corollary exhibition at the Library gives viewers the opportunity to see the collection first hand.

In the largest and earliest of the three compositions, *The Conversation*, 2010, Irish evokes the land and villages of Vietnam and includes Vietnam War veterans’ poetry alongside verse by late 18th century female Vietnamese poet, Hô Xuân Hương, translated into English. The text, which looks as if it were printed onto freshly-washed sheets blown by a soft breeze, is set above and adjacent to images of an outdoor Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) rally alternating with Vietnamese scenes. In her recent two compositions of *La Conversation*, 2011, Irish expands the themes of the earlier panel to reference colonialism. She also includes Jacques Prévert’s “The Discourse on Peace,” appearing in the original French, and a poem by Lt. Stuett who died in Vietnam. Together, these paintings completely wrap the gallery space, producing the sense that one is immersed in the scenes and texts.

The first of the new panels presents an image of the VVAW in the same cyan blue above a watery reflection in red with representations of colonialism. The second of the new panels showcases Vietnamese landscapes with a hanging bridge motif of Vietnamese figures that appear to be looking down on the viewer. In these rippling “reflections” that fill the bottom half of both compositions, Irish depicts a Rococo room in a *Malouinière* built by the merchants of the French East India Company, who were active in Vietnam during the late 17th- and early 18th-centuries; and French church interiors, representing the Society of Foreign Missions of Paris’ presence in Vietnam from the 18th century. The sepia color of the reflections suggests blood in the water and gives the added implication that fault lies with the world depicted in those images. In the new panels, text appears in the bottom rather than the top half of the piece, compounding the reflecting and doubling of motifs in the upper and lower bands.

The VVAW imagery of the large panels is based on Sheldon Ramsdell’s documentary photographs of the Operation RAW (Rapid American Withdrawal) rally, Labor Day, 1970. Sharing much of the vernacular spirit of other contemporaneous live art forms such as Happenings, FLUXUS, and performance art, protesters marched from Morristown, N.J. to Valley Forge State Park dressed in combat fatigues and carrying toy weapons. The action dramatized an infantry combat sweep of indigent Vietnamese towns to raise awareness, and opposition, in the United States about search and destroy missions.

In her employment of Rococo details, Irish mixes elements of decorative art, with its cultural baggage as a “minor” rather than “fine” art, and its associations with the feminine, with the politics of resistance. Rococo interior design, as the domain of 18th-century French aristocracy, evokes a sense of intimacy and indulgence, not grandeur. It was characteristic of a pre-Revolution elite out of touch with the main of society, but, importantly, of nobles with no real political power. Irish’s loose, expressionistic brushwork adds a charge to the Rococo forms. Instead of playful, sensual scenes of frivolity, Irish substitutes narrative content about the legacy of the Vietnam War.

The relationship between Vietnam and France began in the 17th century with the arrival of Christian missionaries in Vietnam. France became increasingly involved in Vietnam over the course of the 19th century culminating in the creation of French Indochina (1887-1954) after the French victory over China in the Sino-French War (1884-5). Even though it is tempting to assume that Irish’s inclusion of Rococo imagery somehow relates to the French colonial history, the period of French colonial control is the period that the Rococo falls out of fashion in France. Irish’s use of Rococo thus reflects her broader interests in collapsing and combining art historical references.

Carmen Vendelin  
Curator of Art, La Salle University Art Museum

## Origins and Inspirations: Memory and Imagination

The exhibition is staged simultaneously in two locations: La Salle Art Museum and Connelly Library. Though relatively simple in conception and design, the two-part exhibition is a richly varied combination of expressions based on the visual media of painting, printing, graphics, and ceramic art counterpointed and explicated by fictive texts, poetry readings, film clips, music recordings, record album covers, and artifacts. Allowing one form of visual culture to comment upon another form by its counterpoint placement in the exhibition, a viewer may sense an individual piece *sui generis*, or choose to explore more deeply the dialogues created by a poem described by a poem, or a painting resonating with a musical passage, or a ceramic vase on whose surface a painting uses poetry to describe war experience.

The underlying paintings, stylebook collages, and ceramic vases represent the artist’s notion that certain mythopoetic patterns are to be found in the images of war protest expression, and that these “mythologies” themselves are based on patterns that can and ought to be doubted and examined.

The special collection at the Connelly Library, *Imaginative Representations of the Vietnam War*, houses over 20,000 items, including novels, short stories, poetry, music, screenplays, graphic art, films, sound recordings, posters, prints, video and board games, as well as literary and visual pornography. The collection seeks to present examples of what occurs when human memory is examined through the myriad lens of aesthetic imagination (e.g. painting, literary fiction, poetry, music, film, etc.). This sort of collection is intended to function as a heuristic for examining the origins of beliefs, myths, legends, and the sources for revised historical texts concerning actual historical events. This research collection is where one would come to discover how a popular icon or cultural trope first appeared and then evolved into a “fact” that a larger mass culture eventually accepts as “true.” This is why the paintings and ceramics in the exhibit found their origins in material that Irish did not seek but eventually found in the Imaginative Representations of the Vietnam War collection.

John Baky  
Director, La Salle University Connelly Library



## MAKING THE CHILDREN BEHAVE

Do they think of me now  
in those strange Asian villages  
where nothing ever seemed  
quite human  
but myself  
and my few grim friends  
moving through them  
hunched  
in lines?  
When they tell stories to their children  
of the evil  
that awaits misbehavior  
Is it me they conjure?

—W.D. Ehrhart