

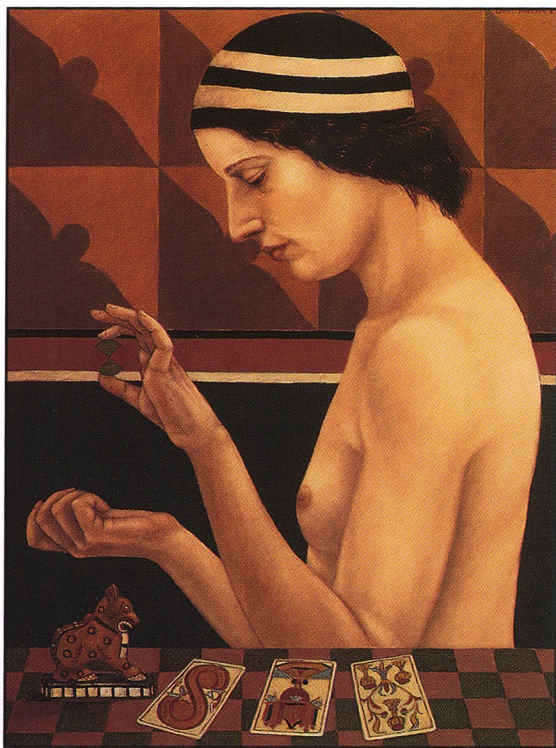
# The Interior Theater of Lani Irwin

By Gail Leggio

For a quarter-century Lani Irwin has been painting mysterious interiors populated by mannequins, puppets, toys and human figures. While her dolls are reminiscent of the lay figures Giorgio de Chirico deploys, her hushed tableaux may suggest the domestic enigmas of Balthus. Yet the artists Irwin most admires are not from the twentieth century but from an earlier period, the cusp of the Italian Renaissance. "I love the strange disquiet of some of the paintings," she writes. "I often do not know the particulars of the story, nor do I need to. And so it is with my own paintings."<sup>1</sup>

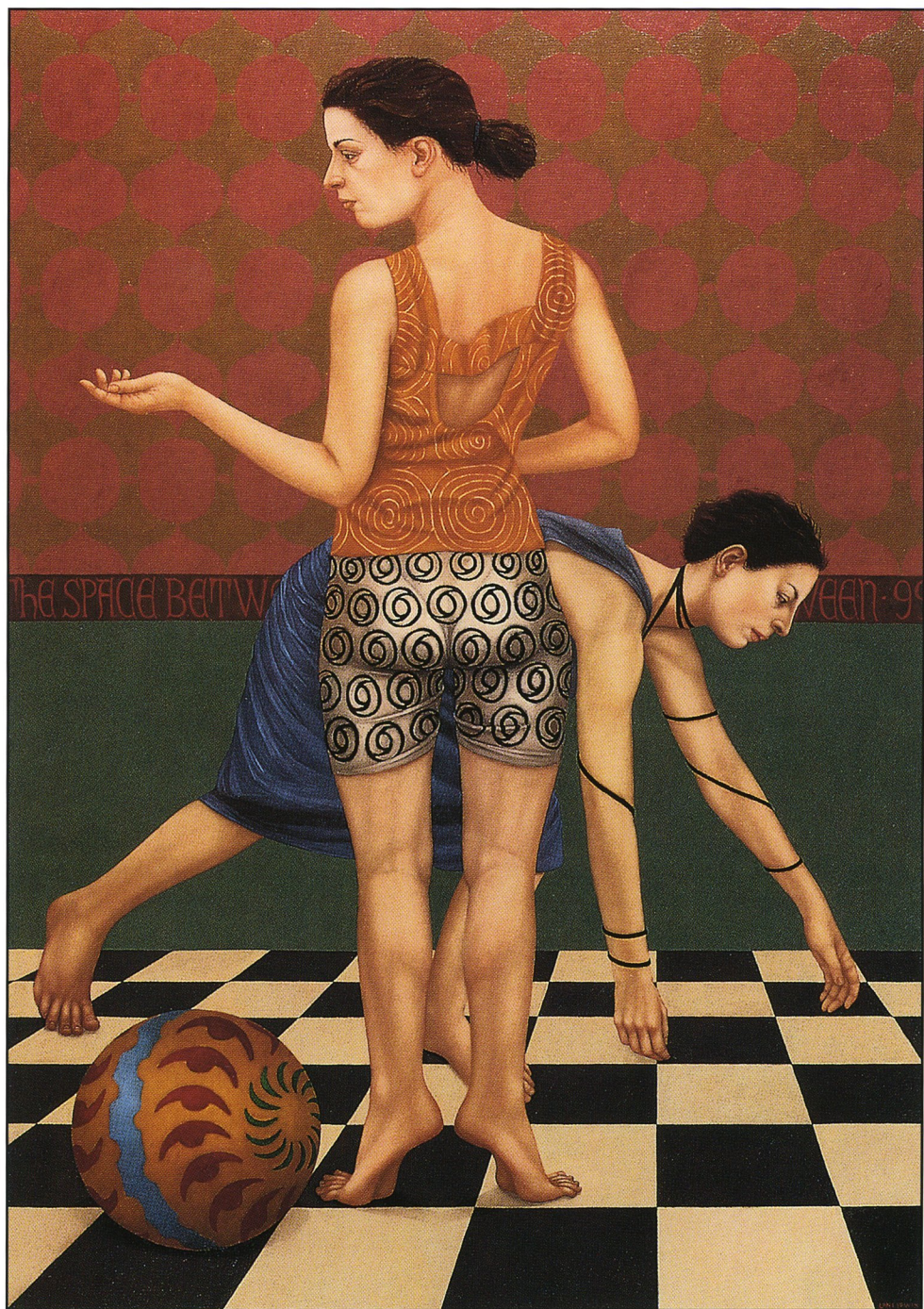
Born in Annapolis, Maryland in 1947, Irwin traveled throughout Europe as a child, studied in Munich and Grenoble, and earned B.A. and M.F.A. degrees from American University in Washington, D.C. She has been exhibiting since the mid-1970s, and examples of her work can be found in the Hirshhorn Museum, the National Museum of American Art and the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Since 1987 Irwin has lived and worked, alongside her husband, the painter Alan Feltus, just outside the Umbrian city of Assisi, a place of pilgrimage for admirers of both St. Francis and Giotto. Uccello and Piero della Francesca are among Irwin's other favorites, along with the Sienese artist Simone Martini (c.1283–1344), whose frescoes in the Lower Church of the Basilica of St. Francis entranced her when she visited Assisi in 1977.<sup>2</sup> Martini, a pupil of Duccio, was a contemporary of Giotto (1266–1337), but in his courtly elegance Martini seems a more chivalric Gothic artist. Unlike Giotto, whose figures can convey deep emotion, Martini maintains an aura of refined reticence. Irwin's own paintings have a similar atmosphere.

Irwin's response to her historical models is complex. Avoiding overtly religious iconography and historicist pastiche, she shares the early Renaissance artist's fascination with geometry and spatial relationships. Often she draws on secular genres, such as the profile portrait. The inventiveness with which she manipulates the figure-ground puzzle is striking. Compare, for example, a matched pair of Irwin's paintings from 1996, *The Dice and the Dog* and *Three Wishes and Nine Lives*, with Piero's celebrated diptych *Portrait of Federico da Montefeltro* and *Portrait of Battista Sforza* (c. 1472). Spurred perhaps by a taste for antique cameos, Renaissance artists made profile portraits fashionable. In depicting the rulers who transformed the hill-town of Urbino into a principality noted for its learning and aesthetic riches, Piero had them face each other, half figures against a continuous background, a luminous miniature landscape. They are noble but unidealized individuals:



*Three Wishes and Nine Lives*, 1996  
Private collection, Rome, Italy





*The Space Between*, 1999  
Courtesy of Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery, New York City



the duke's broken nose is unmistakable; his wife's pallor may reflect the fact that hers is a posthumous portrait (perhaps based on a death mask).

Like Piero, Irwin shows her male and female subjects half-figure and in profile, with a continuous background. Irwin's devotion to the interior, however, precludes even a glimpse of the natural world through a window. The background is flat and decoratively geometric. Two rows of brick-and-brown tiles, divided diagonally by a curved line, surmount a border of black, rust and cream; below, the wall is black. At the bottom of the composition, the figures are truncated by a table or shelf in a checkerboard pattern. The fascination with pattern, another characteristic of Renaissance art, is carried over in the figures—in the bold black-and-white stripes of the man's hooded robe and the (otherwise unclothed) woman's cap. On the table in front of the figures are groups of small objects that seem to have emblematic value. The man, arms folded, looks straight ahead; the woman, her head bowed, contemplates the small bi-colored disk she holds between two fingers. Her gestures seem ritualistic. Irwin provides no clue about the identity of the man and woman or their relationship.

The small objects in front of them, however, hint at meaning, like the attributes carried by saints and allegorical figures in earlier iconography. The man's objects are a polyhedron, two shells, a pair of dice and a small painted toy dog on a pedestal. The woman's objects are a rather ferocious-looking toy cat (perhaps Indian) and three Tarot cards. The choices resonate with gender conventions: dog and dice, gambling, for the man, a cat and Tarot cards, associated with intuitive divination, for the woman. But the exact meaning remains deliberately elusive.

Tarot cards appear frequently in Irwin's paintings, and their appeal is understandable, first, because they descend from her beloved Italian Renaissance and, second, because they are clearly symbolic yet open to shifting interpretations. While its ultimate origin and meaning remain obscure, the Tarot deck as we know it descends from the Italian Renaissance *tarocchi*, which included astrological figures and personified allegories, the cardinal virtues, contemporary potentates such as the Emperor, the Empress and the Pope, alongside more cryptic characters such as the Hanged Man. The Tarot's twenty-two archetypal trump cards have fascinated interpreters for centuries. Readers have discovered systems based on comparative mythology, Jewish Kabbala, Neo-Platonism, various schools of occultism and Jungian psychology.<sup>3</sup> The trumps offer a *dramatis personae* for an infinite number of private narratives. Like gravitational fields, they attract constellations of meanings.<sup>4</sup>

Some of her titles allude to specific trumps—*The Hierphant* (1996), *Le Pendu* (French for the Hanged Man) from 1992, and *Anima Mundi* (1995), which gives a Jungian gloss to the final trump, the World, usually depicted as a beautiful naked woman dancing inside an oval or standing on a circle, a symbol of completion. In Irwin's painting a naked woman appears in the central panel, gazing down contemplatively at a big, colorful child's ball. Flanking the central panel are compartments—four on each side—that contain a variety of toys. The composition owes something to a popular medieval configuration, in which the full-length figure of a saint, presented hieratically frontal, is flanked by stacks of smaller scenes illustrating episodes from the saint's life. Such formal paraphrases, like the use of Tarot cards, allow Irwin to evoke an atmosphere of mythic meaning without divulging too much.

The Hanged Man, one of the most enigmatic of the trumps, is a favorite image. Suspended upside down by one leg from a gibbet made of tree trunks, the Hanged Man looks surprisingly serene. A sacrificial figure, he has been associated with Christ, Osiris, Odin and Attis, one of the death-and-resurrection deities catalogued by Sir James Frazer

in *The Golden Bough* (1890–1915) and subsequently mentioned by T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* (1922). W.B. Yeats, an adept in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, was steeped in the discipline of the Tarot, and its imagery arises frequently in his poetry. He refers to the Hanged Man in his poem “Vacillation”:

And he that Attis’ image hangs between  
That staring fury and the blind lush leaf  
May know not what he knows, but knows not grief.<sup>5</sup>

In a recent interpretation Jamake Highwater proposes as modern avatars of the Hanged Man outsider-artists such as Oscar Wilde and Arthur Rimbaud. “The Hanged Man,” Highwater remarks, “persists as a talisman of marginality....”<sup>6</sup> In Irwin’s *Transparent Whisper* (2000) the Hanged Man card is juxtaposed with the three-quarter figure of a woman who knots a scarf around her own neck. Her body is hieratically frontal, her head in profile. The scarf flies upward on both sides, defying gravity. Like the Hanged Man, she is serene, introspective, perhaps undertaking a ritual that entails risk and magical rewards.

The Hanged Man also appears as one of four cards—the others are the Ace of Wands, the Magician, and the Moon—in Irwin’s *Three Saints in Four Acts*. In Irwin’s painting three dark-haired women—with their enigmatic expressions and ritualized gestures, they could be priestesses, aspects of a triple deity or Fates—stand behind a slate-blue table. On the table are arranged the four Tarot cards, a few crumpled daffodils and three small red balls, the kind that might be used by a juggler. The Juggler is another name for the Magician trump, which appears in this spread. The space in *Three Saints* is as ambiguous as the iconography. While the three half-length figures are convincingly modeled, the salmon-colored background and—to a lesser extent—the slate-blue table read visually as flat fields of color. And yet the three red balls are casting shadows, suggesting weight. As a painter, Irwin self-consciously manipulates illusionistic space and flat shapes on a two-dimensional surface. By incorporating Tarot cards—stylized archaic representations printed on stiff paper—into her compositions, she adds another layer of visual and conceptual complexity. Irwin’s paintings resist straightforward interpretations. Jamake Highwater’s characterization of the High Priestess trump could be applied to her tableaux; they exist “as a contradiction without the need for resolution or mediation.”<sup>7</sup>

Like Renaissance artists, Irwin uses pattern to manipulate pictorial space, both to establish an illusion of recession and to emphasize the flatness of the canvas. In *The Space Between* (1999) the orthogonals of the black and white floor tiles read as perspective lines. A colorful ball, suitable for a child or a circus performer, is fully modeled, a textbook geometric solid. The backdrop, on the other hand, seems perfectly flat: rosy brick circles on mauve-brown for the pattern above the chair-rail line, solid forest green below. Irwin borrows her patterns from Renaissance church and palazzo pavements, Etruscan floors, the sumptuous fabrics depicted in Flemish paintings and Oriental rugs. In *The Space Between* the two female figures participate in the artist’s demonstration of the dynamic between space and pattern. One, poised on tiptoe, wears shorts and a top in contrasting patterns, which are distorted and given volume by the contours of the body underneath. The other figure bends over, apparently measuring the room with her hands. As the phrase “the space between” suggests, the world of Irwin’s paintings is a fictional space, a theater of the mind where paradoxes are visualized and cryptic performances are imminent.

Despite the haunting stillness of her scenes, there are recurring references to play in



Irwin's oeuvre. The colorful folk art toys she collects evoke the primal magic of children's games. Allusions to theater or circus performances are common. In *Backstage* (2000), an acrobat stands on tiptoe next to a bright ball, looping a length of string behind her back. She wears a marvelous transparent dress with colored stripes that somehow suggest a planetary diagram. *Osirian Players* (1995) is more elaborate. The backdrop features a frieze of carousel soldiers and cowboys. Two women in Pierrot-inspired acrobat costumes stand back-to-back, arms linked, amid hoops and small white juggler's balls. The title allusion to the Egyptian god and a Tarot card on the floor, the Chariot trump, hint at the ritual origins of theater.

Irwin has been including mannequins in her tableaux for years, specifically several Italian church mannequins from the eighteenth or early nineteenth century. With their nearly life-size scale and naturalistic flesh tones, mannequins are among the most convincing of human simulacra, and their ambiguous status—somewhere between object and figure—makes them a disturbing presence. All figurative artists are illusionists, to some extent, but Irwin calls attention to the painter's role as trickster and stage manager. Although the church mannequins were originally supposed to be completed with elaborate wigs and clothing, Irwin depicts them without hair and arms, or reveals the mechanics of the form underneath, the perfunctory wooden bodies and ball-socket arms. The flesh tints, rosy lips and dark brows of these props can give them a startling humanity, especially in their vulnerable undressed state.

Irwin likes to play with the ontological status of her *dramatis personae*. She presents a variety of human simulacra, marionettes as well as mannequins, that seem both less and more than human. In a famous 1810 essay the German poet and dramatist Heinrich von Kleist articulated the theatrical power of marionettes. "Grace," von Kleist wrote, "appears purest simultaneously in the human body that has either none at all or else infinite consciousness—that is, in the puppet or in the god."<sup>8</sup> Irwin exploits the magic of the marionette in her painting *Different Worlds* (1999). A richly dressed marionette, perhaps a character in some Indian religious drama, confronts a woman, shown half-length and in profile in the style of a Renaissance portrait. Slightly smaller but naturalistically polychromed, the male marionette faces the woman, and the two seem to be making eye contact. His jointed hands hang loosely in front of him; his feet are folded up beneath him. Another colorful marionette hangs suspended from above, half-obscuring a third puppet. A brown curtain, a familiar Irwin device, is pulled aside to frame the tableau. The delicate strings of the marionettes are echoed by the thin red ribbon the woman coaxes from her hair, the long stem of a rose, which she holds in her other hand, and the spindly shaft of a peacock feather that materializes at the nape of her neck, rising from the red cap of the laughing clown toy.

There are other objects in *Different Worlds*, a pink rose, a child's ball, an Egyptian ibis figure, polychromed in red, blue and yellow, and the overturned base of another statuette, seen in synecdoche as a base and non-human feet falling out of the composition. These props combine playfulness with shamanic resonance. Many of Irwin's compositions suggest private altars. Cultural historian Kay Turner has outlined the principles of the altar-making aesthetic, popular, especially among women, in Roman Catholic, Hindu and Voudon traditions. Building an altar is based on setting "potent images in relation to each other."<sup>9</sup> Those potent images can be explicitly magical, like Tarot cards or marionettes from mythic theater, or more personal, a child's ball or a rose, a painted clown or a folk art animal. An altar is inherently theatrical, an aggregate of miniature forms representing cosmic power, a microcosm.





*Different Worlds*, 1999

Private collection, New York City

Unlike public altars, which must maintain a certain level of orthodoxy, private altars can also be eclectic, even perverse in their combinations of elements. As the title of *Different Worlds* suggests, objects and images from diverse traditions can be juxtaposed with endless variety. The marionettes come from a world of Indian myth; the ibis alludes to the Egyptian god Thoth, patron of writers and judge of souls; the clown looks like a variation on the commedia dell'arte. The human figure herself, who is after all but the painted image of a woman, could be a paraphrase from an Italian Renaissance portrait.

The spatial dynamic of altar-making, as described by Turner, also fits Irwin's compositional



strategy: “the interplay of dimension and intersection: a two-dimensional plane (a table, dresser or other flat surface) holding three-dimensional objects (statues, candles and so forth) often intersected by a vertical plane, usually a wall, displaying more images.”<sup>10</sup> The very act of bringing diverse objects into the sacred precinct of the altar changes them in subtle ways. The confined spaces of Irwin’s paintings work a similar magic. The objects on an altar accumulate over time, and they are selected and arranged intuitively. Irwin often spends months on her paintings, altering positions and contours, but she is also sensitive to the near-autonomy of an object, which can “take on a life of its own.”<sup>11</sup>

In spite of the eclectic quality of her objects and the disjunctions of scale she exploits, Irwin’s scenes are calm, with none of the jazzy juxtapositions of collage. Everything is absorbed into and permeated with her own atmosphere. The geometric forms, with their history of mathematical idealism, contribute to this serenity. The human participants in her scenes are usually impassive and smooth-limbed, stylized in a way that brings them close to the mannequins who inhabit the same spaces.

Slowly building up layers of oil on linen, Irwin achieves a flat and very smooth surface. Her brushstrokes do not call attention to themselves. What unifies these compositions most strikingly, however, may be her unusual chromatic harmonies. In the early 1980s dusty rose and slate blue, brick and sage green predominated. Stronger blacks and reds have enriched her palette since, but the range within a single canvas remains limited. Usually a single tone unifies figure and ground, which glow like banked embers or shimmer with a dusky silver undertone. *The Armadillo* (1998) features the eponymous animal on a slate gray table in front of a dark-haired woman, whose black cloak matches her hair. Her brown dress varies the brown of the armadillo. She wears around her neck an Italian ex-voto heart. The wallpaper behind her is magical: a design of salamanders or lizards curved into arabesques, in rose-pink on mauve, colors that pick up the luminous pallor of her skin.

All representational painters play with the paradox of perception. We acknowledge that fact when we refer to an apparently three-dimensional object in a painting as both “realistic” and “illusionistic.” Our double awareness is part of our enjoyment, a recognition of the artist-magician’s skill. Lani Irwin takes this legerdemain a step further by juxtaposing human figures and their simulacra, by exploring the liminal space between object and figure, between figure and ground. On the threshold between reality and illusion, Irwin’s paintings are simultaneously reticent and dramatic.

#### Notes

1. Journal entry, reprinted in “Lani Irwin: Paintings,” Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery, New York City (October 2000), n.p.
2. Cited, Jill Wechsler, “Lani Irwin,” *American Artist* (June 1983), p. 40.
3. For a good overview, see Richard Cavendish, *The Tarot* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).
4. For a compendium comparing designs and commentaries, see Bill Butler, *Dictionary of the Tarot* (New York: Schocken, 1975).
5. See Kathleen Raine, *Yeats, the Tarot and the Golden Dawn* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1976), p. 56.
6. Jamake Highwater, *The Language of Vision: Meditations on Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Grove Press, 1994), p. 210.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
8. “On the Marionette Theater,” trans. by Roman Pasha; see also Pasha’s essay “The Inanimate Incarnate” in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, Part One, ed. by Michael Feher with Romona Nadaff and Nadia Tazi (New York: Zone, 1989), pp. 410–429.
9. Kay Turner, *Beautiful Necessity: The Art and Meaning of Women’s Altars* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1999), p. 96.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
11. Cited, Wechsler, p. 44.