

Polly Burnell and Irene Lipton A PAIRING

By Reva Blau



INSTALLATION VIEW OF THE BURNELL/LIPTON SHOW IN THE NEWLY RENOVATED PATRONS AND JALBERT GALLERIES AT THE PROVINCETOWN ART ASSOCIATION AND MUSEUM
PHOTO BY PHIL SMITH

POLLY BURNELL AND IRENE LIPTON have known each other for twenty years, circling around each other in Provincetown's art community, their orbits intersecting in increasingly fateful ways. Last spring, in a show curated by Donald Beal, the two artists exhibited side by side in a survey of their work at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum. It stands as a visual celebration of the town's working artists and what can happen when established public institutions give mid-career artists their due.

Beal, a painter and a member of the museum's exhibition committee, saw paintings by the two artists hanging on a wall at the home of Paul Resika, his former painting teacher. Resika had purchased these paintings separately and, instinctively, hung them in tandem, as if they belonged together. Their synergy jumped before Beal, prompting him to propose the resulting exhibition.

Before the two women became friends, each had seen and known about the work of the other. Burnell remembers being "floored" upon seeing paintings of Lipton's in 1988 at PAAM, when she was a fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center. Today, they sit together, talking about art and painting in a way that clarifies their creative process. Recently, they have been reading and discussing a long interview in the *Brooklyn Rail* featuring the artist Bill Jensen, whom Burnell and Lipton tremendously respect.

POLLY BURNELL, in the few months leading up to the show, found herself temporarily without a studio. Lipton, who designed and built a studio a

few years ago on her property in North Truro, invited Burnell to share it with her. The way Burnell and Lipton chose to share the solitude of the studio—essential to each when painting—is poignant. In a culture that often pits one artist against another in competition, they have deliberately set out to honor their own instincts, making art regardless of whether it sells, and to quietly, but assuredly, defy the status quo.

On the museum's wall that is visible through a large window to street passersby, Beal aligned six of Burnell's small paintings in a row, flanked on the left, right, and below with Burnell's ceramic vessels and animals. Along another wall, her work is similarly presented, with the paintings acting as miniature frontispieces of a Romanesque chapel, and the animals standing as sentries. Each painting, drawing on medieval iconography, reveals an interior landscape containing narrative elements that together offer escapes as well as instruction to their viewers.

Burnell populates these dreamscapes with animals, although they feel so familiar that one would barely notice that humans are missing. On two occasions, when I called Burnell for this article, she answered while walking in the woods in Provincetown's Beech Forest. (Later I found out that the warblers were stopping off on the peninsula in their continental migration.) The mandate she feels to tune in to the lives of animals makes her more sensitive to the pain that humans inflict and endure. "After September 11," she said, "I questioned what I was doing as an artist. I think everyone did." She tries to honor her responsibility to bear witness to others' suffering and to intervene on their behalf.

Burnell often depicts animal subjects in the distant foreground, as in the case of the galloping horses in *The Herd*, 2002. Alternatively, she creates oval cameo shapes in abstracted clouds to form skyborne cocoons for her animals. In *Horse Country*, she does both. One large cloud encloses a horse in a fetal position, its neck curved toward its forelock. Below appear two more clouds with horses the size of flecks grazing in their faraway pasture. Her palette is made of earth tones, but with one hue brighter, much as the colors in a dream seem intensified.

Indeed, horses appear often in Burnell's work and carry an allegorical significance, although they resist interpretation. Sometimes the horses have leads, as if their horse spirits were tethered to human history. Two of the titles refer to legendary racehorses, *Riva Ridge* and *Secretariat*, who won the Kentucky Derby in 1972 and 1973, respectively. While her dreamscapes assimilate the return of the *unheimlich* into familiar, even cozy, maritime environs, these equine memorial portraits also disturbingly echo the strange battle cry of the exploited animals they portray.

IRENE LIPTON is the daughter of two Greenwich Village writers who summered for years in Provincetown. She grew up as part of a circle of artists and writers for whom New York and Provincetown were antipodes on the same axis. Lipton's older sister, Jackie, is also an abstract painter. "It was always a big mystery to me how to enter that world and believe in it," Lipton said when talking of the respect and admiration she has for her sister.

Even before her two Work Center Fellowships, Lipton's drawings showed her talent for conjuring positive space from negative. She has a love for the tactile poetry of the smoky gray line of graphite that finds full expression in her drawings. Fields of black made painstakingly of thin lines seem to presage the later planes of black paint in her recent work.

Her early paintings are as different from the drawings as New York is from Provincetown. They are pictographic, with many layers of paint resulting in only the essential forms, following steadfastly the age-old advice summed up by George Braque when he said "out of limitations, new forms emerge." In 1987, her work was included in a group exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum organized by curator Charlotta Kotik. (One critic suggested that her work was like Egyptian hieroglyphs, echoing Henri Rousseau who said that Picasso painted in the "Egyptian style.") When Lipton moved to Provincetown full-time in the early '90s, she began to work intensively again, synthesizing the passion of her drawings with the simple elegance and efficiency of her paintings.

The shapes in Lipton's work like each other. Sometimes they electrically turn each other on, sometimes they cuddle like lovers, sometimes they sink into each other like an old couple. While Lipton's paintings show geometric forms of color on a flat plane, it is in the forms' rhythm, dynamism, and, ultimately, almost disquieting intimacy that her paintings attain a singular voice.

Bold ovals and cylinders intersect trapezoids of color and double back on themselves expressively, or find openings in the next plane of color to snuggle and nestle. Beneath, the primary plane makes room, responding to physical pressure and entry. Indeed, the shapes sometimes look exactly like human prototypes, anatomy distilled into its essence and in heroic proportions. Sometimes, they surprise us by exposing their insides made of scraped-away paint revealing delicate vein-like lines. Quite often, male and female prototypes turn inside out, with the powerful synchronicity of yin and yang, and become each other. Each painting puts on display the special powers that Lipton gives to each shape without ever betraying the two-dimensional plane or abstraction.

A small painting in the exhibit, *Untitled (SP402)*, has an off-white hourglass shape, reminiscent of the prehistoric stone sculptures of fertility goddesses. The shape standing to its right is an outline of what could be a spinal column. These two S



POLLY BURNELL, *HORSE COUNTRY*, 2002, OIL ON PANEL, 9.375 BY 7.5 INCHES
PRIVATE COLLECTION

shapes standing together seem to sum up human form and its disappearance into a photographic negative. I have seen this painting several times now, and, each time, I still experience a frisson.

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IRENE LIPTON, *UNTITLED (LP301)*, 2005, OIL ON CANVAS, 60 BY 72 INCHES, COURTESY ARTSTRAND

In the interview that Burnell and Lipton had been reading, Bill Jensen relates how he made an important early painting, *The Black Madonna*. He describes a moment in which he sat down, watching the canvas, and suddenly felt the space between him and the painting disappear. Jensen quickly painted an image, a black shape, then looked down at some paint that had run down the canvas—it had pooled into his own portrait, as if he were looking into a mirror.

Trying to put that moment into words, Jensen said, "People are part of it, and nature's part of it, but there is this thing. Somehow artists are able to see it and make objects which are a kind of remnant of this. And then other people can see it, and they'll connect with that thing. They may not connect in the same way, but they will start to feel that psychic opening."

Polly Burnell and Irene Lipton, in paintings that both celebrate and transform natural and human forms, have found this "thing."