

Mar 1st, 2007

[Home](#) | [Banner This Week](#) | [Arts](#) | [Sports](#) | [Obituaries](#) |

ARTS



Photo Reva Blau

Polly Burnell, a multi-media artist, will be showing recent paintings with Irene Lipton in a mid-career show at PAAM.



Photo Reva Blau

Irene Lipton, like Burnell a former Fine Arts Work Center fellow, will be showing her abstract work at PAAM.

Lipton & Burnell: a shared passion for communication

By Reva Blau

Banner Correspondent

To get to Irene Lipton's studio, you walk down a series of steps lined on either side by very tall hedges reminiscent of a British garden with a full-time hedge trimmer. The slate blue sky of North Truro disappears and you are Alice down the rabbit hole, into a sunlit studio in which two accomplished Provincetown artists recently have been working.

Irene Lipton and Polly Burnell will be having a joint mid-career show at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, 460 Commercial St. in Provincetown. The show, curated by Donald Beal, a friend and fellow artist, opens from 6 to 8 p.m. Friday and continues through April 15.

Beal came up with the idea at the house of painter Paul Resika. Beal saw paintings by Lipton and Burnell hanging side by side. He didn't know at the time who had painted the smaller of the paintings (Burnell), but he felt as though they had enormous aesthetic chemistry together.

Talking to the artists, it becomes clear that they share a work ethic and a mandate to communicate visually, to do what some might call the work of the soul. "Sometimes you are driven to create images, sometimes the image coaxes you along because you are tapping into something that's not conscious," Burnell says. "It's a cause of a lot of anxiety," she says, then pauses and adds, "a lot of anxiety and a lot of bliss."

Burnell moved to Provincetown in 1986 and was a visual fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center in 1993. Her paintings

synthesize modern forms with narrative objects to form allegorical stories that invoke the strange tapestry of the subconscious. Her ceramics render animals as ordinary as poodles with a chivalric, idealized purpose. Her work shares a sensibility with the surrealist George de Chirico whose paintings employ familiar images rendered strange through their heroic proportions in a world of vertiginous perspective.

Yet Burnell is equally attuned to the physical fragility of the animal and natural world and the role of humans within it. She is frank about how the events of Sept. 11 made her question the meaning of art and why she does it. Yet, she is protective of her role as visual artist and, like Lipton, gets exasperated by people who ask her what her paintings mean.

“If I knew what it meant, I’d write it,” she says, emphasizing the role of art to offer images that will communicate to someone else’s unconscious or dreamscape. Painting for her investigates “what it means to mine oneself ... the product is a byproduct of a process of what it means to be a human, which is much bigger than sitting here in this body.”

Burnell’s work is often small and, like altar pieces, offers its secrets slowly. She brings her paintings to her friend’s studio, as she puts it, “kind of like people bring their knitting in a basket.”

Like new mothers who knit together, one gets the feeling that they are sharing a studio because preparing for a big show can be as lonely and as grueling, and as adverse to a good night’s sleep, as caring for a newborn. As is fitting for a friendship forged with the chisel of work, each fell in love with the other’s work before they met.

Lipton, originally from New York, where she worked as a graphic designer, moved to Provincetown in 1997. She was a fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center in 1988. FAWC rewarded her talent with a second fellowship. She then stopped working for 10 years, “a dormant period” as she describes it, which ended when Lipton made the move to the Cape.

The show at PAAM is the culmination of the next 10 years in which Lipton reclaimed herself as a working artist. “A huge part of starting to paint again was coming up to live here. People who knew my work from earlier quietly reminded me that I should get back to it. My friends nudged me. You were one of those friends,” Lipton says, indicating Burnell. Talking with the two of them, it’s easy to be reminded of the importance of artistic friends.

In Lipton’s work, bold ovals intersect trapezoids suggesting letters of the alphabet or the curve of a body. The outlines of these shapes then form new relationships and new landscapes when meeting another field of color. Lipton employs the techniques of layering, scraping and drawing with graphite that were innovated by the modern painters of the ’40s and ’50s, with whom she says she has a very strong and close connection. Yet the youthful energy of her lines, and the surprising use of colors such as blush pink in a sea of black, humorously suggests that the taut, interloping forms are engaged in a more domestic coupling.

Hanging near the door of the studio is a lone exhibition postcard. It publicizes a show for the artist Elizabeth Murray, a favorite painter of both Lipton and Burnell and whose playful expressionist composition functions as a mysterious skein of connection between the two very different artists.

Answering the question of what art is for her, Murray once said, “Art is epiphany in a coffee cup.” And for Lipton and Burnell, this coffee break full of talk about work is over. It’s time to stop talking about art and get back to making it.