

ARTFORUM

MAY 2012 INTERNATIONAL

May 2012

Ellen Harvey DODGEGALLERY

Ellen Harvey's "The Nudist Museum Gift Shop" included installations evoking both a museum and a gift shop, as well as works situated in a bathroom and a stairwell. This is all to the point: Harvey's practice engages not just with art history, but with the spaces in which we experience art. For *New York Beautification Project*, 1999–2001, she painted small, classical landscapes on buildings and Dumpsters, allowing for unexpected encounters at public sites already claimed by graffiti. *Arcadia*, 2011, created for the inaugural show at Turner Contemporary, in Margate, UK, furnished a scale model of J. M. W. Turner's private gallery with the landscape etchings that were found there after the artist's death in 1851 (in Harvey's version, these were etched onto mirrors and backlit). With these works, as in the photographs of Thomas Struth (and Johan Zoffany's *The Tribuna of the Uffizi*, 1772–78), Harvey reminds us that perception is at least in part a social and historical act.

The Nudist Museum, 2010, is a wall crammed with reproductions of paintings from the collection of the Bass Museum of Art, Miami, which Harvey has cropped to more prominently feature the nude bodies they contain. There are nude baby Jesuses, nude adult Jesuses on the cross, fleshy Madonnas, nymphs, and satyrs. The bodies are rendered in a variety of flesh tints, with everything else painted in grisaille that often overflows onto the frames, rather humorously suggesting the way in which interest might trail off once one tires of the flesh. Pasted on the wall behind the framed paintings is a patchwork of pornographic and near-pornographic magazine images, in loud full color.



Ellen Harvey,
*The Nudist Museum
Gift Shop* (detail),
2012, oil on wood
panel, dimensions
variable.

The Nudist Museum Gift Shop, 2012, installed in the upstairs gallery, is also made up of paintings, each of them depicting flea market-type objects: three nude Graces forming the base for a lamp, a nude caryatid holding up a glass coffee table, mugs and flasks featuring disembodied torsos, breasts, and buttocks. As in the museum, the high-low contrast is obvious but pointed, here because so many of the objects are domestic—utilitarian containers, furniture, dolls. Nevertheless, Harvey accords these objects, despite their lowliness, a good deal of dignity, perhaps a shade more so than the reproductions in the museum.

Here ideas of desire and ownership, the way they flow into each other and fail to satisfy each other, are given full play. The most obvious kind of desire, of course, is sexual, but in *The Nudist Museum* it is utterly thwarted by the sheer number of bodies. The effect, not unexpected, of encountering so much nudity is to drain idealized, unclothed flesh of any power to shock or arouse, with nakedness becoming as common as leaves on a tree. But it is the gift-shop paintings that make matters more complex. A gift shop is a kind of outlet for the desire, so powerfully kindled in a museum, to own, to have more—it transmutes libidinal energy, channeling erotic desire into acquisitive desire, which in the end is entirely insufficient to the cause. One wonders, in fact, if we convince ourselves that objects are useful because the act of consumption exposes an embarrassing truth: There is erotic satisfaction in purchasing things.

In the bathroom, where Harvey had scribbled over an array of mirrors to make them virtually unusable, one could not see any bodies, including one's own. In the context of this exhibition, the work brought to mind the feminist argument that the history of art—male artists mastering the female body, then abstracting and obliterating it—encompasses a kind of violence. But here, the obliteration came, after so much flesh, as something of a relief.

—Emily Hall