

# HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

## An Artist's Light-Filled Tribute to J.M.W. Turner

In Ellen Harvey's *Nostalgia*, the spiritual and the secular converge into a beatific, nature-based sublime.

Gregory Volk      November 18, 2017



Ellen Harvey, "Arcade/Arcadia (2011-2012), wood frame, aluminum letters, light bulbs, and 34 hand- engraved Plexiglass mirrors over Lumisheets, 9 x 15 x 33 feet (exterior view, all images courtesy Danese / Corey)

For its inaugural exhibition in 2011, the gleaming new Turner Contemporary in Margate on England's southeast coast — built on the site of a former guesthouse frequented by renowned British landscape painter J.M.W. Turner, who had a long relationship with his landlady, Sophia Caroline Booth —invited six artists to respond to Turner and Margate.

Among them was Brooklyn-based British artist Ellen Harvey, who contributed “Arcadia” (2011), a three-quarter-scale wood and distressed plywood version of Turner's private London gallery, where he housed many of his most important works (in his will he bequeathed them to the nation).

Outside was a video of the ocean at Coney Island. Inside were mirrors, printouts of Turner engravings, and Harvey's unorthodox engravings (more on this in a bit), showing current views of Margate, a once idyllic seaside resort that has faded over the years as tourists, lured by inexpensive flights, departed for sunnier climes and more fashionable beaches.

The sizes of Harvey's engravings and their positions on the walls corresponded to the works on Turner's gallery walls when he died, as recorded in an 1851 painting by George Jones. Through the medium of engraving — a prime technique for Turner throughout his career —Harvey brought Turner's old gallery back to life, so to speak, as a bare bones structure and gave it a startling new purpose: displaying not images of Margate in its halcyon days but in its current frayed state.

For Nostalgia at Danese/Corey, her first New York exhibition in five years, Harvey presents a reprised version titled “Arcade/Arcadia” (2011-12). While it has been exhibited elsewhere — at Philadelphia's Locks Gallery (2012), the Clay Center for the Arts and Sciences in Charleston, West Virginia (2014), and Museum Kurhaus Kleve in Germany (2015) —this is its first New York appearance and it really should not be missed; it's a bedazzling and entrancing showstopper.

Unlike the Turner Contemporary work, which was a closed structure with plywood walls and a ceiling, this skeletal structure is open, transparent, and even more bare bones. You can look right through it and, while stout, it feels flimsy and airy, half-apparitional.

Leaning against one facade is a large illuminated aluminum sign with exposed lightbulbs, reading “ARCADIA.” While it advertises a peaceful and blissful arcadia, which Margate certainly was for Turner, aficionado of ocean, expansive sky, and coastal light, its garishness evokes Margate's subsequent, decidedly non-sublime incarnation as a seedy home to boardwalk arcades and weathered amusement park attractions. The spiritual and the secular, a beatific nature-based sublime and raucous pop culture enticements, converge.



Ellen Harvey, "Arcade/Arcadia (2011-2012), wood frame, aluminum letters, light bulbs, and 34 hand- engraved Plexiglass mirrors over Lumisheets, 9 x 15 x 33 feet (interior view)

Walk inside Harvey's structure and her peculiar magic takes over. Her intricate engravings, which together present a panoramic view of Margate, were made by incising the protective material on the reverse sides of Plexiglas mirrors with a diamond point etching tool. Displayed on LumiSheet panels (ultra-thin LCD lightboxes), the incisions allow the light to shine through. Harvey has essentially invented a way to draw with pure light.

These black-and-white works are gorgeous, — attached to the skeletal structure, they seem to hover and glow in the space — but they are eerie and unsettling too. They also have a loosely daguerreotype look; made in 2011 and 2012, they seem to come from the 1830s or 40s: prime Turner time. And the mirrored surfaces of Harvey's engravings naturally reflect everything in their vicinity: viewers, other works, lights, the surrounding architecture. It's as if you are surrounded by funhouse mirrors, turning a facsimile rendition of Turner's gallery into a de facto amusement park or boardwalk attraction.

One engraving shows the undulating ocean, roiling clouds overhead, and the round white sun (or maybe it's the moon) in the middle. It's Harvey's rendition of the kind of nature scene favored by Turner (who made many works set in and around Margate) and other romantic painters, including Turner's sworn enemy John Constable; although lovely, it also seems edgy and ominous.

Other works show a gritty and often empty (in terms of people), yet still atmospheric and enticing Margate framed by ocean and sky: shuttered shops, a Domino's Pizza, amusement emporiums, half-constructed buildings, once grand but now shabby seaside houses, the vacant beach and boardwalk, and the impressive, angular Turner Contemporary, which appears as a total anomaly. Often, the ocean seems like an encroaching, mysterious, even threatening force, advancing on a beach with no bathers, pressing against the city. With global warming, rising sea levels, and coastal areas under threat, the ocean is very different these days than in Turner's era. There is a big sea wall in front of Turner Contemporary, which you see in one of Harvey's engravings. Over the next few decades it will no doubt get much use.



Ellen Harvey, "New Forest" (2013-14),  
acrylic, oil and varnish on 20 wooden  
panels, overall: 92 x 160 inches

As you move through Harvey's structure, the images and snippets of Margate shift and combine with the reflections in the Plexiglas mirror, including your own. The experience is exhilarating; this work deals in wonderment and sheer visual pleasure. But as you take everything in, the seaside town with its storied past also feels vulnerable and entropic, subject to history's wear and tear — it's a resort in eclipse, a faltering paradise stubbornly making do.

In the infamous June 2016 referendum on the European Union, almost two-thirds of Margate voters were pro-Brexit. This is exactly the kind of provincial city in decline that enthusiastically heeded chief Brexit proponent, and now foreign secretary, Boris Johnson's simplistic rants that leaving the EU will most definitely restore British identity —whatever that means — and national greatness. Almost a year and a half later things aren't looking so rosy, with a sputtering Tory government and Johnson—like his adoring counterparts in the beleaguered Trump administration —increasingly linked to Russian subterfuge and meddling.

Sometimes really excellent artworks can be riveting and dynamic while offering profound and meaningful sustenance; this is one of those times. Although rooted in Margate, "Arcade/Arcadia" far transcends that particular city to become relevant and urgent right now.

In this fraught, anxious era when so much seems amiss, when thoughts of the future tend toward trepidation, not hopefulness, we find ourselves grappling with a nagging sense of loss. Economic malaise, dwindling ambitions, an uneasy relationship with nature, a sense of impending dread, the pressure of time...all of these are in Harvey's work. So too are the capacity for amazement, aspirations for the marvelous, and a sensitive — even tender — approach to both nature and urban scenes.

While "Arcade/Arcadia," at the front of the gallery, is indeed a showstopper, the rest of Harvey's innovative, eclectic, and refreshingly large-minded show is altogether engrossing. One of the smallest works harbors large implications: "Nostalgia" (2017) features two small, identical found gold frames abutted together like a diptych, each with an oval opening perfect for displaying, say, a 19th-century portrait photograph. The frame on the left contains a sheet of dark, mildewed paper that looks cloudy and smoky, damaged and stained. The resplendent frame on the right looks newly gilded, redecorated with shining gold leaf, a juxtaposition of decay and renewal.



Ellen Harvey, "Nostalgia" (2017), two identical gold frames, mildewed paper, gold leaf, 8.25 x 21 inches

In 1961 the power brokers of New York City made one of the most idiotic urban renewal decisions ever, to level the original Pennsylvania Station — an architectural treasure— and replace it with the present-day ignoble and soulless Penn Station, which may well be the worst major city train station in the world. In Harvey's oil on wood panel painting "Ghost of Penn Station" (2017), an exquisitely rendered, yet lifeless, free-floating version of the original Penn Station is encircled by milky, dripping whites. It's a phantom version of a vanished landmark, almost painfully longing for a better place and time that won't come again.

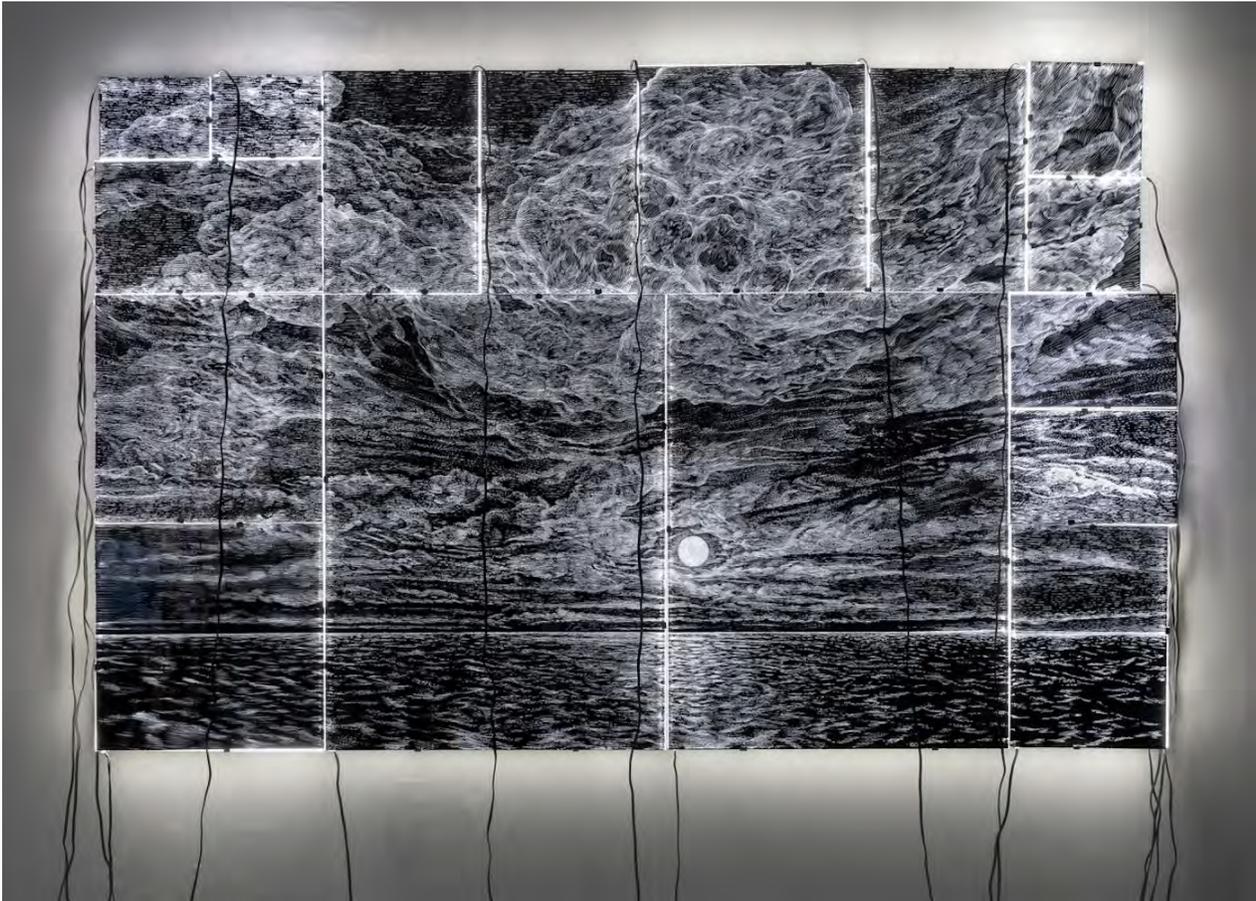
Time, often on a large scale, is an essential theme in Harvey's show. In black gesso and white paint on 20 wooden panels, the large (92 by 160 inches) "New Forest" (2013-14) depicts an expansive office environment inexplicably overwhelmed by burgeoning foliage. Rendered in white, the trees and plants look spectral, almost supernatural, making for a remarkable nature-culture conflation while also hinting, perhaps, at amok fecundity in a global warming future.



Ellen Harvey, "Nostalgia" (2017), two identical gold frames, mildewed paper, gold leaf, 8.25 x 21 inches

"On the Impossibility of Capturing a Sunset" (2017) is another showstopper. Sixteen of Harvey's engravings (using the same methodology as "Arcade/Arcadia") in a somewhat choppy, irregular grid form a composite, black-and-white sunset picture. Nestling among clouds over the ocean, the small, bright white sun is just a bit above the horizon. White light shimmers on the waves and night is coming on. The whole scene is dominated by eventful clouds which must have taken quite some time to engrave—swirls and billows (made of thousands of tiny incisions) that also hint at brain matter and cytoplasm in a cell as well as nebulae and galaxy clusters.

The edges of the panels glow from the lightboxes behind and multiple black electrical cords dangle down. Even though you can see precisely how this work was made, and all its constituent components, it still seems wondrous, even magical: call it an engineered sublime, a sublimity contraption. Again, however, it is considerably unsettling. The dangling wires are unruly; the several engravings form a fragmented and ungainly whole. The peaceful sunset scene presented is also suffused with crackling tension. There is a storm inside the calm.



Ellen Harvey, "On the Impossibility of Capturing a Sunset" (2017), sixteen hand-engraved Plexiglas mirrors, sixteen Lumisheets, plywood, 37 x 58 x 1 inches

This anxious and fraught era is also a shrill one, full of loud pronouncements and heated certainties coming from every which way. Harvey is just the opposite. She does not make whopping statements or address this or that pressing issue. Her art is way too complex and multilayered for that, and in any event, she gravitates toward questions, not answers. Juxtaposing things old and fresh, mundane and transcendent, in artworks that often utilize labor intensive (bordering on obsessive) techniques, Harvey's exhibition is a thoughtful marvel, one of the top shows I've encountered, so far, this new art year.

Ellen Harvey: Nostalgia continues at Danese/Corey (511 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through December 23.