

Ellen Harvey in conversation with Adam Budak

Adam Budak I'm struck by your extensive consideration of a mirror as a "vehicle" of an image. In his essay "Special Being," Giorgio Agamben touches on medieval philosophers' fascination with mirrors and, in particular, with the nature of images that appear in them: "The image is not a substance but an accident that is found in the mirror, not as in a place but as in a subject (*quod est in speculo ut in subiecto*)," he explains, and adds, "the image is a being whose essence is to be a species, a visibility or an appearance. A being is special if its essence coincides with its being given to be seen, with its aspect." He emphasizes the mirror as the place where we simultaneously discover that we have an image and that this image can be separate from us. Agamben concludes, "Between the perception of the image and the recognition of oneself in it, there is a gap, which the medieval poets called love. In this sense, Narcissus's mirror is the source of love, the fierce and shocking realization that the image is and is not our image." Michel Foucault, the philosopher of representation, situates the mirror between utopia (a placeless place) and a heterotopia (the "other" space, suspended between the real and the unreal). Your obsessive use of mirrors goes beyond the mirror's obvious qualities as a device of repetition and reflection; for you the mirror is also an ambiguous producer of images, an agent of memory, a possible image archive, a Foucaultian reservoir of the virtual space where the spectator's sense of the temporal and spatial "now" is questioned. Can you define the relationship between an image and the mirror in your work?

Ellen Harvey I think the idea of the mirror haunts representation and representational painting in particular.

It's another flat view of the world, limited yet seductively infinite. Like a painting, it's an object hung on a wall—an utterly conventional piece of interior decoration—but it exerts a kind of fascination that most paintings would give their metaphorical eyeteeth to have. You can walk past a painting without looking; it's almost impossible to do that with a mirror. I want to steal that for my own work—I want to seduce people into stopping and thinking. I suppose that as an artist I'm also jealous of the mirror because it does so much with so little. It's the ultimate low-tech special effect. It's such an old technology, but, unlike painting, it's a technology of representation that still retains its original representational function.

By contrast, painting, my first great love, has lost almost all of its original uses, not just that of representation. If you unpack painting's traditional genres, as I did in many of my early projects, it becomes readily apparent that painting's great contemporary function is to be an art signifier and often, by extension, a status symbol. Painting used to do so much more. Take what used to be the most important genre of painting: the now much maligned history painting. No one looks at a painting to see a narrative of the past or the future anymore. We just go to the movies. It's impossible for us to imagine a world where people line up to pay to see the enormous apocalyptic scenes of John Martin that toured the United



fig. 1: John Martin (British, 1789–1854). *The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah*. 1852.

Kingdom in the nineteenth century (fig. 1). Painting no longer exists as a bearer of narrative by itself. It requires a context; it literally needs its frame. Painting's representative function is similarly obsolete: no one now looks to painting for an accurate representation of reality. The old technical skills are now entirely optional, just one aesthetic choice among many. We don't carry around miniature paintings of our loved ones. No trompe l'oeil painting can fool an eye educated by photography and video. Any authority that painting once had is long gone. My use of the mirror is also the logical extension of my fascination with the Polaroid, another technology of representation that has become obsolete in our own time and has, interestingly enough, become more "artistic" in its senescence. Most of my early paintings were of Polaroids, using the Polaroid to make painting's properties visible by contrast: immediate gratification versus lengthy production, indexical versus unreliable, machine-made versus handmade, ephemeral versus archival, cheap versus expensive, etcetera. A painting that claims to be of a Polaroid taken in a mirror serves to doubly highlight the unreliability/impossibility of painted "documentation."

Unlike painting, the mirror promises a kind of reality. There's a reason that the allegorical figure of Truth carries a mirror. Like the predigital camera, it offers a supposedly objective optical view of what is there, an apparently unbiased alternative to your own lying eyes. I think the old chestnut that art holds up a mirror to nature is actually fascinating when you think about it. What kind of mirror should art be? And what sort of nature should it be showing? And what about the fact that any mirror shows first and foremost the viewer? If art is a mirror, it's obviously a failed mirror. It cannot escape its own subjectivity. Perhaps



fig. 2: Thomas Gainsborough (British, 1727–1788). *Artist with a Claude Glass (Self-Portrait?)*. C. 1750.

as a result, I'm particularly interested in the idea of the mirror that lies—in the dark untruthful mirror that converts life into art. I've long been obsessed with the Claude glass, the small, black, convex handheld mirrors used for eighteenth-century landscape appreciation, so named because it was thought to produce images reminiscent of the paintings of Claude Lorrain (fig. 2). Like some camera lenses, the Claude glass's optical qualities both compress and expand the image, creating a theatrical distance between the planes and allowing for a much wider field of vision than the eye itself. It also produces a startlingly sharper and more contrast-rich view because it is a direct and not a silvered mirror: the image is produced on the surface of the black glass itself. In a world where so much of our reality is produced in the screens of our various devices, the Claude glass now seems oddly prescient—an early presentation of reality that is both theatrically heightened and portable. Of course it's also important to remember that the black mirror is traditionally used for magic, in particular for seeing the future.

That dark future is one that drives much of my work. There's a reason that the first painting I ever fell in love with was Rogier Van der Weyden's *Last Judgment* (c. 1445–50). That red-hot sword is coming for us all.

AB The mirror implicates a kind of self-ethic, too. It confronts you with a Face; it constitutes the Other; it is an altar of confession. You remind me of a main character in Clarice Lispector's 1973 novel *The Stream of Life*, a painter obsessed by the task of painting a mirror. Hers is an inner monologue, a journey toward the self: "In painting it, I needed all my own delicacy not to cross it with my image, since in the mirror in which I see myself I already am, only an empty mirror is a living mirror. . . . You have to understand a mirror's violent absence of color to be able to re-create it, just as if one were to re-create water's violent absence of taste. No, I haven't described a mirror—I've been one."

EH I always edit myself out when I walk past mirrors. You mentioned earlier that the space between the viewer and reflection can be called love—I think hatred or self-loathing has a place there, too. Our fascination with the mirror is the function of our own self-obsession. Who has not wished to glimpse some lovelier version of themselves in the mirror and been repulsed by the reality? In most of my mirrored works, viewers have to fight against their desire for or revulsion at their own image and shift their focus in order to actually experience the work. We literally cannot see the world for our selves. We are the inevitable final context of any artwork. Including a mirror in an artwork makes visible both the degree to which the experience of the work is produced by the viewer and the way in which the viewer's desires inform that experience. The viewer's

embarrassment mimics my own as the producer of the mirror-containing artwork. It's always the moment at which I find a work appalling that I know that it is done. I suppose I want the viewer to feel similarly vulnerable and compromised as the producer of the work in his or her turn.

Mirrors aside, I think this interest in the subjective viewpoint and the centrality of the viewer has also been a driving force in the creation of many of my panoramic pieces. I like works that force you to situate yourself. I'm obsessed with the circular walk-in painted panoramas of the nineteenth century—precinematic spectacles that attempted to re-create three-dimensional experience in a two-dimensional medium (fig. 3). I really like the fact that the viewer has to move. Unlike in the cinema, where the viewer is passive, the panorama requires action; unlike a movie, which is out of the financial reach of almost any one individual, a panorama is a spectacle that anyone can make. It just requires some skill and a lot of patience. The work makes a claim for the importance of the maker's viewpoint but in a generous way—it essentially says, I saw this and found it so interesting that I spent an age re-creating it for you, the viewer, to experience in your turn. Of course, it's also a doomed Sisyphean attempt—which just makes me love it more.

AB Many of your works—subtle interventions in public space, conventional portraiture, architectural installations—function as if situated in a passage between sheets of a reflective surface, acting as echoes of reality, avatars of their immediate surroundings, creating a composition of a “conversation piece.” They challenge authorship. Who is the author? Who is speaking?

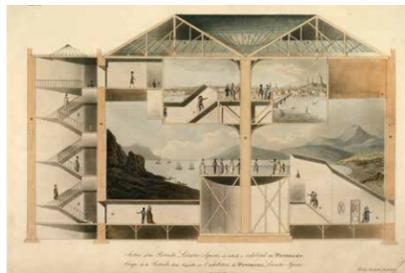


fig. 3: Robert Mitchell (British, 1782-1835). *Section of the Rotunda, Leicester Square, in which is Exhibited the Panorama.* 1801.

EH Who is speaking, indeed? Authorship has always been problematic for me. There is a reason why I am generally invisible in my self-portraits. I'm profoundly uncomfortable claiming my own voice. I think this discomfort has to do not so much with a fear of authorship as with an acute awareness of the degree to which even my own personal authorship is a fictional construct. I am perfectly capable of sincerely holding several utterly contradictory opinions at once. I change my mind all the time. I'm not the same person today that I was yesterday. The idea of inhabiting a single coherent persona seems neither realistic nor desirable. Organizing the images in this book is a good example of what I mean: the images are divided into sections in order to provide the viewer with five concurrent narratives that unfold over time, but in reality many of the works belong in more than one narrative, and it would be child's play to imagine an entirely different and equally valid set of organizing principles. Like any narrative structure, it is also highly dependent on when it was constructed; hindsight lends experience a spurious coherence. The reality of making work is always far messier.

The popular persona of the artist in particular is one that I find challenging. It's not an easy fit for me. It may look like I'm wearing a traditional painter's smock in *The*

Museum of Failure, but it's actually an old nightgown. I dislike the way this persona excludes people who want to be artists but who for some reason haven't made it inside the charmed circle of the art world's approval. Perhaps as a result of this discomfort, I often inhabit different artistic personae. Since I can't be myself, trying to be J. M. W. Turner for *Arcade/Arcadia* or William Gilpin for *Observations Concerning the Picturesque* doesn't feel like much of a stretch. It's probably also why I make so many copies of things. I feel more comfortable seeing myself as a perpetual art student. There's also something very comforting about the self-negation implied by a copy. Somehow the self that inadvertently inevitably creeps into a copy feels more honest to me than intentional self-expression. I particularly like the way that making doubles or copies of my own work (excruciating though it is) repositions the much-fetishized marks of the artist's hand as failure. Much as the uncanny doppelgänger of legend presages its victim's death, doubled images undermine and question the value of the original. So it's not surprising that coming up with a personal graffiti tag for the *New York Beautification Project* was excruciating. I ended up choosing small oval landscapes, much like Gilpin's illustrations of the picturesque, precisely because they seemed like the aesthetic opposite of the regular graffiti tag: an utterly inoffensive art signifier that would also resonate with the idea of urban beautification (fig. 4). Since I wanted the piece to create a conversation about who is allowed to make public art in our society and the roles that demographics and aesthetics play in how the law against graffiti is enforced, it was important for me to find something that could function as the aesthetic equivalent of my less-than-cool white female self.

My authorial relationship aside, I try to make work that incorporates multiple points of view. We live in a world that prizes narrative coherence, but I think that an artwork should actively resist or mock any single interpretation. In *The Unloved*, the viewer walks through competing representations of Bruges's connection to the sea: the technological sublime (my painting of the satellite view of the ancient city's new connection to its modern port) and the picturesque (the seldom-shown paintings of the same locations, from the museum's storage depot). In a similar fashion *The Alien's Guide to the Ruins of Washington D.C.* superimposes an absurd conceit—postapocalyptic alien aficionados of classical ruins—on the contemporary tourist experience of Washington, D.C. In both cases, competing narratives disrupt and undermine more conventional dominant narratives, forcing viewers to either situate themselves within a spiraling mess of alternatives or accept the mess for what it is. They're also just fun. My love of conflicting viewpoints is also probably one of the reasons why I've made so many museums and been drawn to artists who make museums, most especially to Marcel Broodthaers's deliciously mad *Department of Eagles* (1968). I've always loved the idea of the museum



fig. 4: William Gilpin (British, 1724-1804). *Picturesque Views with Ruins.* 1770.

as repository of many voices, a cacophony made all the more poignant by the inevitable inadequacy of attempts at ordering and of course by the fact that so many of those voices have already been forgotten. I think it's important to remember for whom and by whom museums were originally made; there's a great deal of narrative violence that coexists with the idealism that we associate with the museum. If you look at Johann Zoffany's Uffizi, all those masterpieces, all that glamour, exist primarily to provide a fancy background for wealthy Englishmen on holiday (fig. 5). For me, the museum exists as an aspirational space, continually collapsing under the weight of its hopes and dreams, much like my own projects. In some ways, I see all of my work as forming a kind of personal expanded museum of failure.

AB You depict a collapsed, sometimes mystical landscape in a state of physical and psychological unrest (a memory disorder, a world of contradictions, a ruin or a possible disaster, the universe's afterlife), which brings to mind the cinematic imagery of Andrei Tarkovsky's films, especially *Solaris*, *Stalker*, and *Mirror*. The world's gestalt has been dispersed into fragments, and the artist's impossible utopian task is to strive for completeness and meaning. As a visual anthropologist and an ethnographer of the everyday, you often speak of the idea of incoherence as a foundational driver and a method for your work. Can you unfold that, please?

EH I like the idea of unfolding incoherence—I suppose it would look like a very large, very messy napkin. The truth is that I love narrative. I especially love inventing alternative narratives or making nondominant narratives visible. But narrative is a cruel lover, always slipping away,



fig. 5: Johann Zoffany (German, 1733-1810). *The Tribuna of the Uffizi.* 1772-78.

always inadequate. Like all desires, the desire for narrative coherence is doomed to remain unfulfilled. The more you want the story to work, the less it does. I try to make my work reflect that. I also feel that art is one of the few spaces left to incoherence and narrative collapse. So much of our social space is dominated by lies that pretend to make sense of what is senseless. Incoherence is necessary for the creation of new and better narratives. It makes space for new ideas, new orderings. It's also honest. There is no one narrative that can make sense of our lives, of the way we live. Utopias are particularly poignant examples of this. At best, one person's utopia is another's dystopia; more often, attempts at implementing utopia lead to unintended catastrophe. There is no public narrative that can solve our private narrative disasters.

This doesn't mean that I don't value and even prize attempts to create a collective narrative. Universality is a beautiful and important dream. We would be the poorer if we didn't aspire to it. But the truth is that much that is presented as universal is often painfully specific to a society, class, race, gender, or ideology. Just as history is written by the winner, “universal” values are all too often just the values of whoever's on top. I think this is why I'm so interested in classical and Neoclassical architecture.

This is the one architectural form for which a host of wildly different and even ideologically opposed societies have claimed universality, and it's been going strong for more than two thousand years. At the same time, it's really the physical expression of power: its distribution follows the amplifying effects of the Roman and European colonial empires—there's a reason John Ruskin referred to it as the architecture of slaves. Its form echoes the nature of its production—it's a very top-down form of architecture. It's not surprising that it was beloved of Joseph Stalin and the Fascist movements. But it's also been seen by many as the ultimate aesthetic expression of democracy and the humanist ideals of the Enlightenment. Just as it's impossible to look at a classical building without seeing the ruin implicit within, it's impossible not to see the contradiction of the Jeffersonian slave-holding pillared plantation (fig. 6).

My interest in the dream of the universal is also one of the reasons I find myself drawn to the relationship between art and nature, in particular to the landscape. Much of our troubled relationship to our habitat seems rooted in the problematic assumptions that underlie the apparently anodyne categories of the picturesque and the sublime. In the instance of the picturesque, where our surroundings are appreciated based on the degree to which they approach a particular Western pictorial ideal, the aesthetic trumps the practical. It presupposes a viewer who has no actual need or use for the landscape, who exists independently of nature. This is taken a degree further in the case of the sublime, which values a particular emotional response to an aesthetic experience. As such, it presupposes a very particular kind of viewer—one with the leisure and education necessary to examine and appreciate the feeling

of awe or terror. This is not a response that is available to someone actually dealing with something genuinely threatening. For a supposedly universal category, it requires a removal from reality that is available only to a small and privileged subsection of humanity.

AB On the other hand, failure—the master narrative of your work (perhaps along with nostalgia and the desire to belong)—is perceived as a constructive force, marshaled toward creating hope rather than pessimism or fear. As such, it constitutes a powerful heroic force characterized by the tensions between distinct quixotic (real/fictive), Sisyphean (possible/impossible), and Bartelbian (authentic/false) features. Your embrace of frictions and incongruities (high and low, skilled and presumably amateur, marginal and mainstream) feels urgent. To what extent is your fixation on perceiving your artistic endeavor through the prism of a doomed attempt influenced by your understanding of the world of today?

EH I often feel a sort of rage at the visual and moral poverty of our lives—a poverty in which I share and am deeply implicated. In the cheapness, the shoddiness of so much of what we build and inhabit, I see the physical expression of our larger lack of care for our environment and for



fig. 6: Joseph Michael Gandy (British, 1771–1843). *A Bird's Eye View of the Bank of England (Soane's Bank of England as a Ruin)*. 1830.

each other. I would like to tear down and reforest much of what we have done to our planet. Since I can't do that in real life (except very occasionally), I do it in art, where it has little or no effect. Any artistic action can at best be only a symbolic action. So in some sense, measured by my desires, all I do is a failure. I think the two parts of *The Museum of Failure* express this the most directly: the front consists of an "exhibition" in which all subject matter is obliterated by context; the back consists of an utterly untruthful self-portrait. All my attempts to deal truthfully with either my private self or my public concerns collapse into aestheticized triviality. It's the bleakest possible vision of my role as an artist. That doesn't mean that I see this or any failure as necessarily bad. In fact, I'm not sure I believe in the existence of success. There is a worm at the heart of every rose. Failure is the common experience of humanity and the glue that binds humanity to art. We all dream, and we all fall short. I think my obsession with ruins is related to this positive view of failure. It's not just that I sometimes think it's good to destroy things, but in a perverse way I do find things more beautiful when they are somehow ruined or wounded. I find myself moved by the beauty of broken things. They seem more sympathetic, more accessible. I am also fascinated by the way a thing becomes more "artistic" as it becomes less useful. I suspect this is due not only to the traditional hierarchy of the fine versus the applied arts, but also because it's easier to appreciate something on a purely aesthetic level once its functionality is no longer at issue. Sometimes it seems to me that art is most defined by the fact that it has no real function other than to be art, its pretensions to social engagement notwithstanding. This celebration of uselessness is both deeply troubling and utterly

seductive to me. I find myself trapped in a liminal space between repulsion and desire, between nostalgia and hatred, and my work reflects that tension. I want art to be useful in some way, but I am forced to accept that its function is often decorative at best. I've always felt for William Morris, wanting to change the world and ending up designing wallpaper for the rich. On the bright side, there's a refreshing honesty to just admitting that a thing's only reason for existence is to make the world more beautiful. The world can use more beauty, and more things that don't take themselves too seriously.

AB Last but not least: generosity. It defines your relationship with the viewer and shapes the politics of affect of a large number of your participatory, viewer- and community-oriented performative and site-specific works. It also promises a belief in the transformative power of art and a role for the artist in civic society. As such, it counterbalances or complements your discourse on failure. How would you describe this energy?

EH Although I would like to think of myself as generous, I fear that the truth is that I am a lamentably selfish person. I am also deeply fortunate to be able to more or less choose the work that I do and to have a public platform, no matter how limited. That is far more than most people have. Perhaps as a result, when I work in the public sphere I am interested in making my work accessible. I would hate for someone to just walk away from something I've made. I want people to feel enticed and safe enough to risk a new experience. I am deeply grateful to anyone who is willing to engage with my work. For me, art functions as a conversation. It's not something I can or want to do just by or for myself.

I don't see why public spaces should not be beautiful and useful. I try very hard to think of what might be a supportive as well as provocative addition to the situation in question. Often the simplicity of the resulting solutions is a reflection of the reality that these works will be experienced fleetingly, in the middle of competing stimuli. Public art is a humbling field in which to work. There are inevitable compromises because you don't always have total control. It's also hard to perfectly anticipate how a piece will be used or received, no matter how much research or outreach you do. I was deeply touched when the village of Bossuit in Belgium enthusiastically embraced *Repeat*, the repurposed ruin of their village church, and started putting it to all sorts of very imaginative and interesting uses. It could so easily have gone horribly wrong. They made it happen; I just provided a platform.

Working with the public is also a great way to solve the eternal dilemma of what to do as an artist. I actually hate making decisions, so I find it very relaxing to be told what to do. I'm also truly interested in understanding people's expectations and desires for what art and, by extension, an artist should be. It's something that I find sufficiently difficult to define that I welcome all suggestions. I enjoy the feeling of making things that people actually want. When I gave away paintings to people who had lost what they considered to be irreplaceable things to Hurricane Katrina, it was obvious, as the title of the piece implied, that *The Irreplaceable Cannot Be Replaced*. However, that symbolic restitution was not meaningless, either. There's something hopeful in that for me. The caveat to all this is that in the end, I'm not so selfless. I only do what I want to do. I set the rules of the game. If I am a mirror of my audience, I am a highly selective one.

It's important to remember that a gift is a double-edged thing. It can be unwanted. Or maybe the giver is unwelcome. A gift implies a relationship, a possible obligation. And many people are hesitant to engage with a stranger, for obvious reasons. Often, I think the generosity of interactive pieces is actually not on my side at all—it's on the side of people who are willing to risk entering into a relationship with me, to risk a new experience. When I made *Ex/Change Your Luck* at the Cosmopolitan casino in Las Vegas, it was remarkable how many people refused to believe that they could actually get a bronze charm for free. Everyone thought that there had to be a catch somewhere. Perhaps surprisingly, it's not that easy to just give art away. Unfulfilled desires are always the most seductive.