

Ellen Harvey: Arcade/Arcadia

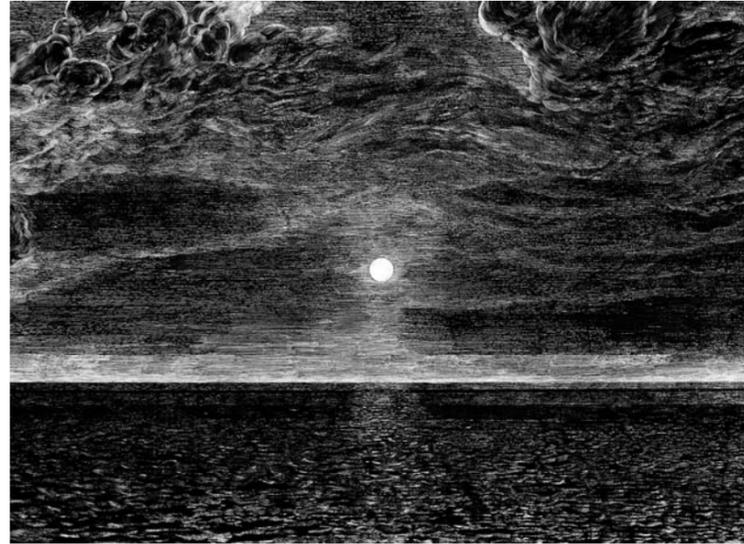
Ellen Harvey's mirrors never give an exact replica of their subject. Instead they function as oxymorons that bring together contradictory states of reality, just like Corneille's infamous line: "That obscure clarity that falls from the stars."¹ Whether the artist uses actual mirrors that she engraves, or paints a double reproduction of the same scene, the reflection is never accurate. More often than not, the point of the double images is to scrutinize discrepancy rather than observe similarity. The space between two stages of representation is due to time and destruction (as in *Derenovation*, 2004). Historical buildings may fall into decrepitude or undergo renovations, both processes being equally transformative. They can disappear in flames, or become ruins.

In *Ruins Are More Beautiful*, created in Poland in 2009, Harvey pays tribute to the Romantic aesthetics of the ruin. Celebrating the renovation of the Laboratorium—the only original portion of the 17th century Ujazdowski Castle—she ironically imagines the building in the future, as it returns to ruins again. She inverts the visitors' perceptions by blocking all the windows, doors and alcoves of the exhibition space that usually looks out on the castle and surrounding park with backlit hand-engraved Plexiglas mirrors showing the castle in ruins and the park returned to forest. The visitor sees his reflection walking into an empty room overlooking a night view of the surroundings, now offering a nostalgic illusion of decay and return to nature.

With *Arcade/Arcadia*, the visitor steps into another anachronistic environment. While paying tribute to the 18th century engraving and the legacy of Joseph Mallord William Turner, she bluntly pictures the current appearance of the coast that realty and industry altered forever. The panoramic view of J. M. W. Turner's iconic British seaside is once again engraved on a string of mirrors. The seascape breaks into as many frames as Turner had hanging in his personal gallery. Harvey sets today's reality against the turn of the 19th century's visual ideals, the Picturesque and the Sublime.

Another function of the mirror in Harvey's work is to lure the viewer into the scenery or the architecture that she depicts. *Welcome to My Home* (2005), her first engraved rear-illuminated piece, is an oval mirror in baroque-style frame, which could easily hang in someone's living room. Instead of merely reflecting the interior in which it is placed, the mirror bears a drawing of the artist's home, hence the strange impression of standing there, not here.

The artifice does not quite seek to achieve a trompe l'oeil effect (although the artist does use this ancient painting technique in other occurrences, like *Double Mirror*, 2002). Rather it is a "metaphorical" illusion—the kind of fairy vision that transports you half way between fakeness and reality, as in a fairground or on a theatre stage. Installations like *Arcade/Arcadia* engage the spectators who enter a room-size structure where



Detail, *Arcadia*, 2011. Panel 1, hand engraved Plexiglas mirror, light box, wooden slats, 48 x 90 inches

their bodies interact with the pictures through multiple reflections. The rear lighting of the dark panels further the analogy with theatre, where we are plunged into the dark, except that in Harvey's case, the audience is invited on stage and surrounded by the décor. The outside aspect of her constructions, an assemblage of rough plywood panels, like *The Room of Sublime Wallpaper* (2009), closely resembles the backstage of a theatre.

The clichés of art production are one of Harvey's favorite points of departure. In the installation that she created for the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (*Mirror*, 2005), a gigantic video projection shows the artist's hand at work, engraving the outlines of the building's Gothic-revival stair-hall² on mirror. The video concludes with the completed panels shattering. All around the hall, other backlit panels render a panoramic view of the architecture in ruins, cast against the backdrop of the real stone walls and arches. The artist holds up a mirror to the museum institution—only to disrupt its historic majesty.

On a symbolic level, the mirror stands for the reflection of the self, a theme that Harvey tackled in *Twins* (2001). The installation sets two video-projections of the same face. One is the artist's face while drawing a self-portrait, and the other is the drawing itself. The two flat screens simultaneously document the original model and its "trans-



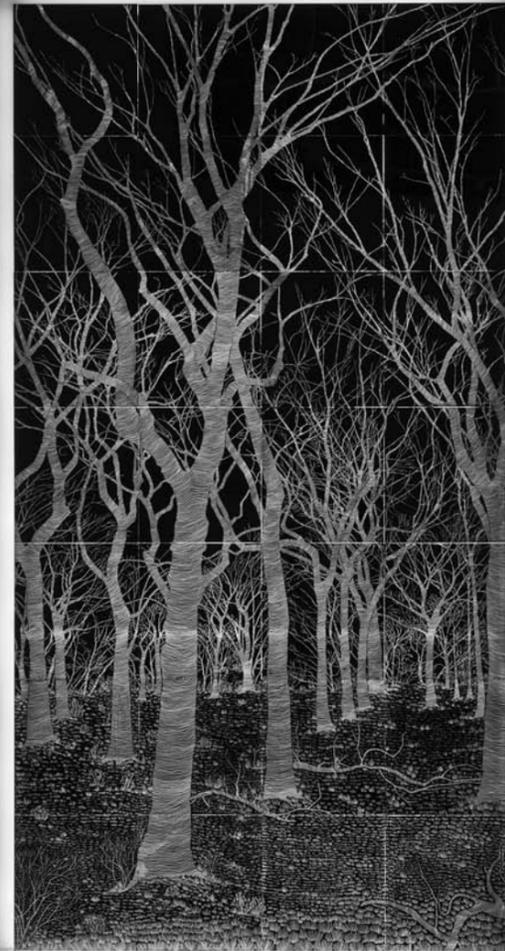
Detail, *Arcadia*, 2011. Panel 23, hand engraved Plexiglas mirror, light box, wooden slats, 47 x 66 inches

lation" into a drawing. To a greater extent, Harvey's work shows how the filter of art history affects our perception of the art as seen in museums. Her ongoing project *Museum of Failure*, which started in 2008 as part of the Whitney Biennial, is an impertinent reflection on the institutional validation of art and visual culture in Western countries. It "consists of an ongoing series of rooms that contain different kinds of artistic failure. There's a room of *Invisible Self-Portraits*, which are self-portraits in which I can't be seen because the paintings are based on photographs taken by me of myself in a mirror so that the camera flash obscures my face. There's a *Collection of Impossible Subjects* which consists of a mirrored wall rear-engraved and rear-illuminated to show a collection of empty frames hung salon-style. It's the ultimate victory of context over content. The viewer sees only him or herself in the frames"³

Ultimately, the mirror shows the art's alter ego, its other self and soul. In Harvey's work, the mirroring image is all at once a representational deceit, an instrument to look through time, a shimmering illusion of space, and a critic of the art establishment—a perfect medium to carry Harvey's impetuous discourse about art.



Interior installation view, *Arcadia*, 2011, mixed media installation



Polish Forest, 2010, rear illuminated hand engraved Plexiglas mirror, 93 x 53 x 1 inches

ARCADE/ARCADIA

In *Arcade/Arcadia* (2011–12), an amusement arcade collides with a gallery to create an unsettling embodiment of how easily the desire for the sublime can collapse into an acceptance of commercial spectacle. From the outside, the viewer sees an old-fashioned aluminum fairground sign spelling out the word “ARCADIA” in six foot high lights leaning against an open framework wood shack. The inside of the structure is filled with the artist’s characteristic hand-engraved mirrors mounted on light boxes, offering a 360-degree view of a derelict seaside resort. The engravings appear as lines of light floating on the mirrored surfaces and viewers see themselves inside an endlessly mirrored drawing in light.

The town portrayed is Margate, a once famous English seaside destination, now fallen into disrepair, where the 18th Century painter J. M. W. Turner, famous for his dramatic light-filled canvases, lived with his lover Mrs. Booth for many years. The painter was maintaining a gallery in London dedicated solely to exhibiting his work, on which Harvey based the dimensions for the structure of *Arcade/Arcadia*. The size and arrangement of the mirrors recreate those of the paintings shown in George Jones’ two paintings of Turner laid out in his gallery after his death.

The sign on the outside of the structure references not only Turner’s view of Margate as an Arcadian site but also the amusement arcade aesthetic that has come to dominate the seaside experience. The typeface of the sign is based on that of Margate’s currently shuttered Dreamland Amusement Park. Similarly, the endlessly mirroring mirrors inside reference the fun-house mirror in which reality is bent. The mirrored panorama reinserts present-day Margate into the aesthetics of its more picturesque past at the same time that it stakes a claim for the melancholy beauty of the degraded present.

Notes

- 1 Pierre Corneille, *Le Cid* (1636), Act IV, Scene 3.
- 2 The PAFA building was designed by the Philadelphia firm of Frank Furness and George Hewitt, and completed in 1876.
- 3 Conversation between Ellen Harvey and her sister, the poet Matthea Harvey, May 25 – June 7, 2007.

Ellen Harvey

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2012 *The Nudist Museum Gift Shop*, Dodge Gallery, New York, NY*
- 2011 *Museum Show*, Arnolfini, Bristol, UK
Belvedere, Arp Museum, Remagen, Germany
Revealed, Turner Contemporary, Margate, UK
- 2010 *The Nudist Museum*, Bass Museum, Miami, FL*
Picturesque Pictures, Galerie Gebr. Lehmann, Berlin, Germany*
The Doppleganger Collections, Magnus Müller, Berlin, Germany*
The Room of Sublime Wallpaper, Art Production Fund Lab, New York, NY*
- 2009 *Ruins are More Beautiful*, Center for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, Poland*
Empty Collections, Meessen De Clerq, Brussels, Belgium*
- 2008 *Private Collections*, Locks Gallery, Philadelphia, PA *
2008 *Biennial*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY
Something From Nothing, Contemporary Art Center, New Orleans, LA
- 2007 *The Museum of Failure*, Luxe Gallery, New York, NY*
Generation 1.5, Queens Museum, Queens, NY
- 2006 *Beautiful/Ugly*, Magnus Müller, Berlin, Germany*
Broken Mirror, Galerie Gebr. Lehmann, Dresden, Germany*
Florida, Schmidt Gallery, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL*
- 2005 *Mirror*, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA*
759 Running Feet, Gwangju Art Museum, Gwangju, Korea
- 2003 *New Is Old*, Center for Contemporary Art, Warsaw, Poland*
Context is Everything, Müllerdechiara Gallery, Berlin, Germany*
A Whitney for the Whitney at Philip Morris, Whitney Museum at Phillip Morris, New York, NY*
- 2002 *Shuffling the Deck*, Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton, NJ
After Matisse/Picasso, PS.1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, NY
Painting as Paradox, Artists Space, New York, NY
- 2001 *I See Myself in You*, De Chiara Gallery, New York, NY*
Low Tech Special Effects, Marella Arte Contemporanea, Milan, Italy*
Against the Wall, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, PA
Strangers/Etrangers, The Clocktower Gallery, New York, NY
- 2000 *Painting is a Low Tech Special Effect*, De Chiara/Stewart Gallery, New York, NY*
North America, Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju, Korea

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Arcade/Arcadia

June 1 – July 13, 2012

Artist’s reception:
Friday, June 1, 5:30–7:30pm