



Ellen Harvey
Mirror
 (detail)
 2006
 Mixed media
 366×274×18 cm

*Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts,
 Philadelphia, USA*

Stepping out of Philadelphia's vast Neo-Classical railway station, the visitor is greeted by an equally imposing but quite different architectural Goliath – the Cira Center, a huge, 28-storey office building coated in reflective glass. Even by the city's already high levels of structural incongruity the two buildings make a peculiar, disorienting couple. The air of duality does not stop there. Walking to the show, it is hard to ignore the many advertisements for the Mexican resort of Cozumel that decorate the city's bus shelters. One side of the board is mirrored, while the other half shows a picture of the resort's tropical splendour. 'Would you rather be here?' the mirrored side inquires, reflecting the freezing viewer back at himself, 'or here?' asks the beach side, with a hint of haughtiness in its tone.

Arriving at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, America's oldest museum and art school, you could be forgiven for thinking that all this was planned. For at the heart of the academy's overblown Victorian Gothic edifice – replete with columns, friezes and Moorish flourishes

– Ellen Harvey has come up with a focal point to this city of discordant pairings and strange reflections. On the walls of the academy's darkened rotunda gallery are four large re-creations of the building's grand hall staircase engraved onto mirror panelling. As a result visitors are instantly greeted by a glistening, razor-sharp architectural rendering of the stone stairs they have just walked up, with themselves reflected, once again, in them.

The sight of this is disconcerting, especially when you notice that the hall Harvey has depicted is not quite an exact copy. Weeds sprout from between her academy's floorboards, arches crumble overhead, and the doors to the institution have clearly been boarded shut. Anchoring the mirrored pieces is an equally grand video projection documenting Harvey engraving another view of the stair-hall, although the artist herself appears only as an insubstantial shadow, magically solidifying her subject into place on the glass surface. Synchronized with this main projection are two other videos, each of the artist's hand, drawing an image of the academy's previous buildings. As the sketches reach their completion, and the main video becomes thick with bright lines, the paper drawings

burst into flame and the engraving in the central projection is simultaneously shattered. All is destroyed.

The Academy of the Fine Arts is renowned for fostering works of traditional realism, and Harvey's work, which she describes as the 'ultimate representational piece', initially seems to posit not only the ruin of representational art but also the ultimate futility of its precepts. Nevertheless *Mirror* (2006) is about a lot more than mere institutional critique. Harvey's reproduction of the academy's interior space as a ruin is actually something of a multiple duplicate. Just as the Gothic Revival of the academy's architecture was a rarefied duplication of medieval Gothic, so Harvey's installation subverts the reality of the actual staircase and transforms it into a mysterious ruin, that quixotic structure beloved of the Victorians who built it. Reflected in the mirrors, the viewer seems unstuck in time, and although the academy is destroyed, the videos are looped and the etching and drawing begin once again. Is Harvey showing us the past or the future, or both at once in an endless cycle?

In *Mirror* Harvey obliterates almost all traces of herself – her ability to 'reframe' the viewer appears to be the overwhelming conceit of her work. She is perhaps best known for her *New York Beautification Project* (1999–2001), in which she illegally painted 40 tiny oval landscapes on the walls of gritty, out-of-the-way spots across New York. This created not only some entrancing Romantic graffiti but also a profound situational dislocation for those lucky enough to stumble across one of the paintings. In fact, Harvey's wish to drive the viewer deeper and deeper into her work seems to have grown stronger. Her institutional interventions, of which *Mirror* is the latest, have included *A Whitney for the Whitney at Philip Morris (Altria)* (2003), which saw her paint the Whitney Museum's entire collection on the walls of one small room, which could only be entered by walking through what appeared to be a large, golden picture frame.

Occasionally this insistence on reframing the viewer seemed a trifle gimmicky. Harvey's piece *Walk-In* (2004), a painting so large that you could actually walk into it, is a case in point. But *Mirror's* existence as a replica of the present, critique of the past and, perhaps, prophecy of the future, feels a much greater work than this. The academy is shown its own reflection, yet a parallel world is also disclosed – a type of negative image – in which all cultural institutions are being shown the fallacy of their impermanent collections.

George Pendle