



Ellen Harvey, *Arcade / Arcadia* (front outside view), 2011-2. Photo: Clay Center for the Arts and Science

## ART

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# Ellen Harvey's New Show is Solid Gold

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"There's a pervasive feeling that the past was somehow better and that our future is becoming increasingly dark." In her first New York show since 2012, Ellen Harvey explores the temptation to look back and the legacy of a great British painter.

**GARAGE:** You've titled your new exhibition at Danese Corey not after the largest work in the show—a walk-in installation—but after a small diptych. *Nostalgia* consists of two identical frames. One hosts an oval of mildewed paper, the other is covered in gold leaf. The arrangement resembles a locket, and seems to explore an interplay between decay and the sacred. Can you say a bit about this, and why you chose nostalgia as an overarching descriptor for the show?

**Ellen Harvey:** I didn't name the show after the work, although I do like the idea of having the most modest work being the breakout star—the shy bespectacled contestant who wins the reality TV contest. In truth, I've just found myself thinking a great deal about nostalgia of late. It's always been an interest of mine but the recent political situation has made me feel that it's increasingly important to reexamine our relationship to our past and future. There's a pervasive feeling that the past was somehow better and that our future is becoming increasingly dark. This is obviously a revisionist perspective, and it also represents a sad loss of hope for the future.

Because I haven't had a solo show in New York since 2012, I knew that I wanted to show a variety of works that hadn't been seen here, and nostalgia seemed to be a common theme among them. Nothing is from any one time and all are somehow unreliable narrators. There're lots of uncanny doppelgangers and time travelers.

Nostalgia, the eponymous artwork, was just an attempt to make literal that deceptive golden glow that the past has for some people. It was inspired by how disconcerting I find old statues when they are re-gilded, even though they look the way they did when they were first installed. I think we prefer our past to look mellowed rather than bright and shiny.

**There are lots of mirrors in your new work, including the large installation, *Arcade/Arcadia*, which you made in 2012 as a commission in Margate, a working-class seaside resort in England. Inside, you've installed 34 etched mirrors backed by lightboxes that reflect the interior space infinitely. It feels like a combination of funhouse and haunted house, and yet still more spiritual than secular.**

I'm obsessed with mirrors, but of course art is definitely not a reliable contemporary float-glass mirror. The mirrors that haunt me are the dark, broken, unreliable ones. The show has lots of those, from a broken rearview mirror, to an actual Claude glass—the convex black mirrors that were used for landscape appreciation in the 18th century. Our electronic devices are the Claude glasses of our day. There are several works that deal with the way in which technology separates us from experience and each other. They're rather explicitly contrasted with a shamelessly nostalgic celebration of television's old role of creating a shared reality.



Ellen Harvey, *Nostalgia*, 2017. Photograph: Ellen Harvey Studio

*Arcade/Arcadia* is covered with mirrors because I wanted viewers to be inside the work in more than one sense, to have to work mentally to remove themselves. The rear-lit mirrors inside the re-creation of J. M. W. Turner's gallery are sized and arranged to correspond to the paintings that were there at his death. I engraved them using a diamond point, and they show a 360-degree view of Margate as seen from the beach. Originally, the idea was that visitors to the new Turner Contemporary would enter my old Turner gallery and be back in Margate, but in a contemporary Margate inserted into the 18th-century aesthetic of Turner's engravings. Of course, the aesthetic of the work as a whole is more that of the traditional seaside amusement arcade.

**How was it working in Margate? Did you arrive with the idea of making *Arcade/Arcadia*?**

The piece arose very organically in response to being asked create a work for the opening of the new Turner Contemporary. When I first visited Margate, I was struck by how emotionally invested the inhabitants were in the town. The closest American parallel I can think of is Coney Island—both are somewhat mythical resorts that have a hold on people's hearts despite their current decrepitude. There's even a cryptic shout-out to Coney Island in the piece: the ARCADIA sign's typeface is based on the then-shuttered Dreamland amusement arcade (named after the Coney Island Dreamland) in Margate.

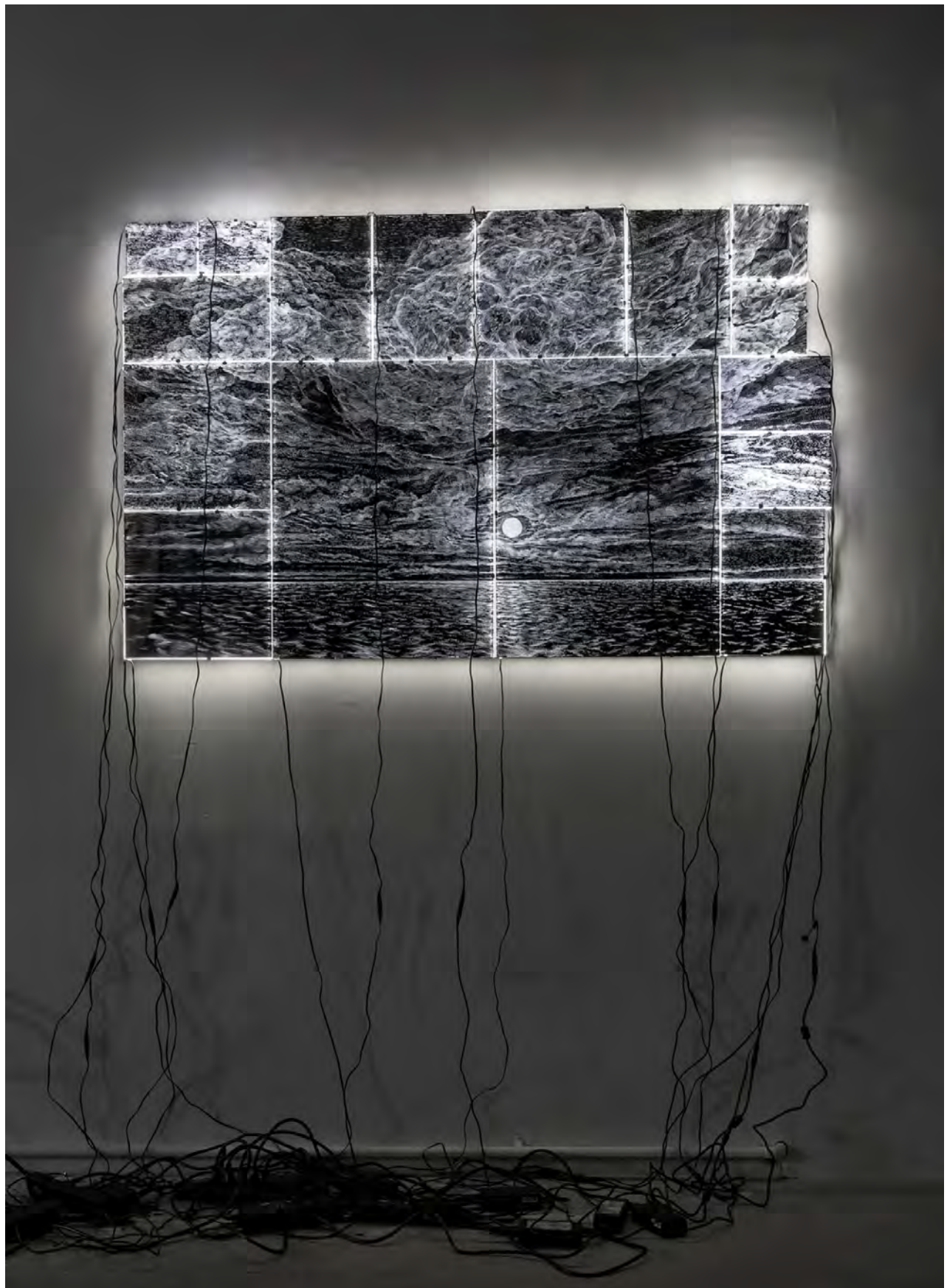




Ellen Harvey, *Arcade / Arcadia* (inside view), 2011-2. Photograph: Locks Gallery.

I also found Turner's story fascinating. He loved Margate and maintained a second identity there for about 17 years, living as "Admiral Booth." Taking Turner veneration to a whole new level, the new Turner Contemporary is built directly on the site of that rooming house. Turner was a fantastically competitive artist. He was obsessed with his legacy, so I think he would have been thrilled. He built a gallery devoted entirely to himself at age 29. The one on which *Arcade/Arcadia* is based was built to his design in 1822, and he maintained it until his death in 1851, famously refusing to part with any of the masterpieces it contained. We know what it looked like because his friend George Jones painted two views of it (one with Turner in his coffin at his wake and one from memory of Turner showing his art to very some appreciative-looking ladies). Turner left everything (about 300 paintings and over 30,000 sketches and watercolors) in his gallery and studio to the nation with some very specific instructions that it took the somewhat overwhelmed nation 136 years to fulfill.

What's interesting is that although *Arcade/Arcadia* was very much a piece for a specific location, it now has an independent life traveling around. Outside of Margate, the piece for me is much more about how we ruin beautiful sites.



Ellen Harvey, *On the Impossibility of Capturing a Sunset*, 2017. Photograph: Etienne Frossard.

**I love how site-specific your work is, and I laughed out loud when I read that you'd demolished a "superfluous church" for your *Repeat* project in Bossuit, Belgium, in 2013.**

It wasn't my fault! People in Bossuit just stopped going to church! Like most churches in that part of Flanders, St. Amalberga was almost entirely destroyed in World War I and then built up again in 1920. By 2009, however, it had gone from being the focal point of this small village to just being empty. The mayor was thinking of pulling it down when he apparently went out drinking one night and met up with some people who suggested that he should see if there were any artists who might have a more interesting solution. He asked the Flemish National Architect to contact some artists and I was among them. Since they didn't have money to keep it up, it was obvious to me that it should be made into a ruin. Ruins are nice and cheap to maintain, and people love them.

Growing up in England, we were constantly being dragged off to admire just one more ruined monastery. And because the villagers said that what they most wanted was more public space, I tried to make it function as an outdoor square. I had them remove the roof, the interior pillars, and furnishings, and I made a new terrazzo floor, which shows all the elements that had been removed and the shadow of the ruins of the previous church so that it also exists as a memorial both to the war and to the life of the church itself. It's called *Repeat* in tribute to the essential circularity of human endeavor: we build a church, we bomb it, we build it again, we pull it down.

**Too bad you can't bring Repeat to New York.**

The shipping costs . . . also, I think the people of Bossuit would be upset. They're the ones who really make the piece happen. Apparently it's been very popular. Even the old priest likes it, and the village has embraced it. They've organized a concert series for it, a fair, light shows. It's even getting toilets—the real sign of success.

The show does have several other ruins in it. I've always been fascinated by the fact that ruins are somehow seen as more "artistic" than functional architecture. I also love the way ruins hover between the past, present, and future. The Crack/Craquelure paintings play with the idea that something as simple as cracked paint can be either a sign of value or of failure, the ludicrous difference between being old and being antique. New Forest is similarly ambiguous as to the value of a ruin. It appears to show a cubicle city that's been abandoned. In reality, it's based on a drawing of the recently renovated new IRS offices in Andover, MA, which were rebuilt when people started filing online, and the old warehouse where they moved paper tax forms around with forklifts became obsolete.





Ellen Harvey, Repeat (inside view), 2013. Partially demolished church with terrazzo floor. Photograph: Rita Pacquee



**With regard to this show, you wrote about how "longing and revisionism infect and inspire the present and future." For you, does this complicate the possibility of a "true" present?**

I think we all long for sense, for some kind of narrative coherence, and that means imagining a future and settling on a defined past. The problem is that these narratives are unique to ourselves, or they represent a tribal consensus that does violence both to individual experience or actual reality. I think one of the great things that art has to offer is incoherence. Going back to the idea of art as a mirror, I think the idea of a failed mirror can be seen a positive thing. It's only by accepting the essential messiness of reality and the endless variety of viewpoints that we can stumble towards creating some kind of generous consensus in which we can all feel at home.



Ellen Harvey. Photo: Ellen Harvey Studio

**[Ellen Harvey: Nostalgia](#)** is on view at Danese Corey, New York, through December 23, 2017.

**GARAGE**