



*Look Up Not Down*, 2005. Glass mosaic on 6 walls, overall: 1,548 sq. ft. Fabrication: Mosaicos Venecianos de México S.A. de C.V. Photo: Ellen Harvey Studio

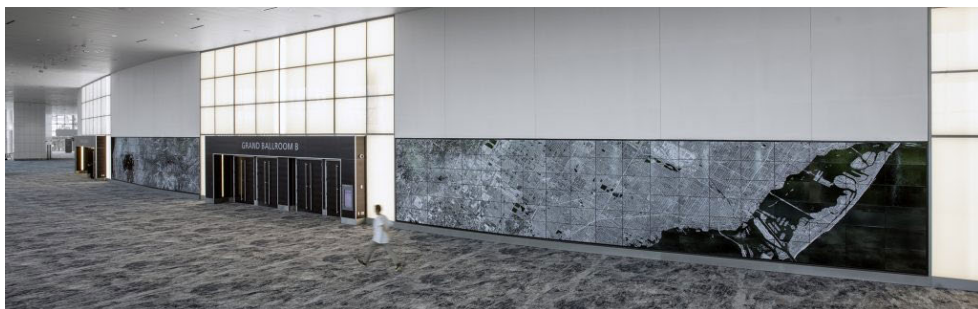
## Mirror Networks: A Conversation with Ellen Harvey

May 24, 2019 by [sculpturemag](#)

Born in Britain, Ellen Harvey lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. Her work has been included in the Whitney Biennial and exhibited at numerous institutions, including the Barnes Foundation, the Corcoran Museum of Art, and the Bass Museum. She won the Wivina Demeester Prize for Commissioned Public Art in 2016, the same year she was awarded a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship in the Visual Arts.

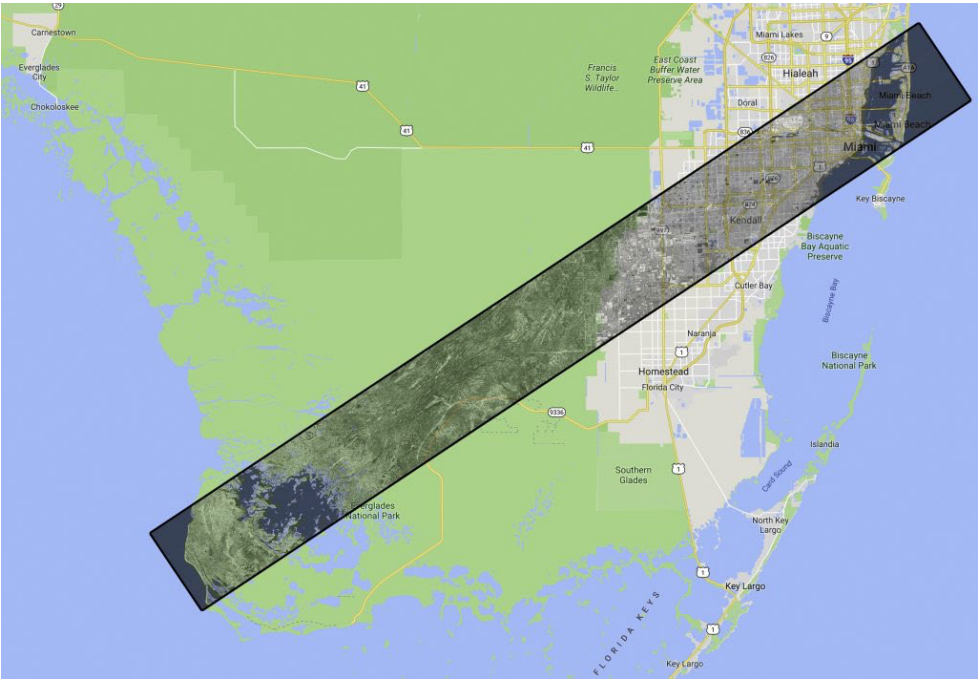
***Sculpture* magazine: Let's start with the work that's in the Miami Beach Convention Center. (A little more, perhaps, about the ideas behind it: the environment; the interaction of the wild spaces with urban spaces, of water and land.)**

**Ellen Harvey:** *Atlantis* attempts to connect Miami Beach and its renovated Convention Center to the larger Florida ecosystem. Visitors see themselves reflected in a dark 10-by-100-foot, mouth-blown glass mirror engraved with a white painting of a diagonal satellite view of Florida reaching from the Gulf of Mexico through the great watershed of the Everglades to Miami Beach and the Atlantic Ocean. As the light changes throughout the day, the image appears to float above and then be submerged below the reflections, literally mirroring Florida's intimate and fraught relationship with its water table. Sea level rise is the defining drama of Miami Beach and the rest of Florida, and I wanted to make it visible.



*Atlantis*, 2019. 240 glass panels set in aluminum frame, overall: 122.5625 in. x 104 ft. Glass: Mayer of Munich. Photo: Robin Hill

The original inspiration was a 2009 visit to the Everglades organized by Creative Time and the Everglades Foundation. I'm embarrassed to say that I hadn't really known much about the Everglades before then. The sheer scale of the park was incredibly impressive, and I was also fascinated to learn about the Everglades' role in filtering the water and protecting the land against storm surges. At the time, I swore to myself that one day I'd do a project based on the Everglades, so when I heard about the open call for the Convention Center, I immediately knew what I wanted to do. When you're in a fair at a convention center, you tend to forget where you really are. Convention centers are like casinos in that way—they're designed to make you forget the outside world. But in the case of Miami Beach, the location really is unique. There aren't many places in the world where you have a huge urban center directly abutting an equally huge national park—I think it's something that's easy to take for granted, but it's actually something very special.



Map of Florida (courtesy Google Maps) with *Atlantis* design superimposed.

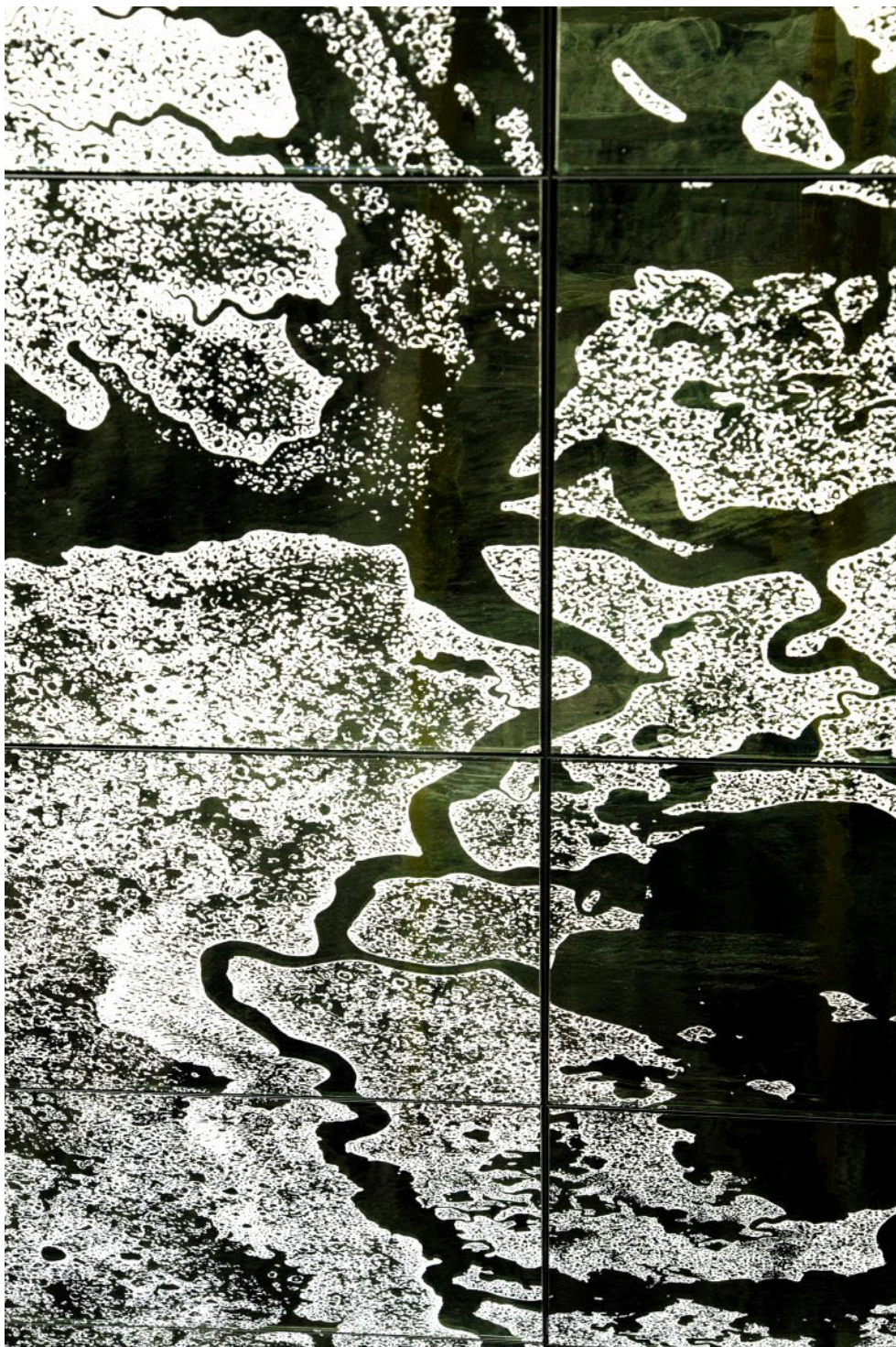
I chose to make the design for the glass by hand because I really wanted to convey the very human limitations on our ability to comprehend our impact on our environment. It was daunting. It took over a year because I painted it life-size. But it was also a labor of real love. I wanted people to be able to see the marks of my hand, to see another human being physically trying to describe something that is really too complex for one person to grasp. Almost a year later, I still sometimes dream that I am flying over Florida, trying to piece together the landscape below and feeling as though I am constantly failing. Both the human and the natural landscape are just so incredibly complex. An added benefit to making the design by hand is that I ended up with a 100-by-10-foot painting to play with. I'm still reworking the painting, which is called *The Mermaid: Two Incompatible Systems Intimately Joined*, because it is literally a half-human, half-natural hybrid. It's going to be shown for the first time at the Aldrich Museum's "Weather Report" in October.

***Sculpture: Why is it called Atlantis?***

**EH:** Miami Beach feels like such a beautiful, fragile confection, suspended between the sea and the sky. Like all liminal places, it has a certain mirage-like quality, as if it might just disappear. It's always made me think of Atlantis, the magical city that disappears beneath the waves—hence the title of the work. Hopefully, *Atlantis* will make visitors appreciate not only the beauty of Miami Beach's situation but also its vulnerability. Miami Beach can seem like a very artificial place, but it depends on the larger natural world both for its beauty and for its very existence. We need to take care of that natural world or Miami Beach will disappear beneath the waves, just like the mythical Atlantis.

***Sculpture: Where in the Miami Convention Center is Atlantis?***

**EH:** *Atlantis* is located on the top floor. The mirror is divided into two sections so that visitors enter the new Grand Ballroom B at the intersection between the manmade and the natural landscape—at the border between the Everglades National Park and the outskirts of greater Miami. In a more metaphysical sense, *Atlantis* is literally located where it's located: it shows you where you are.



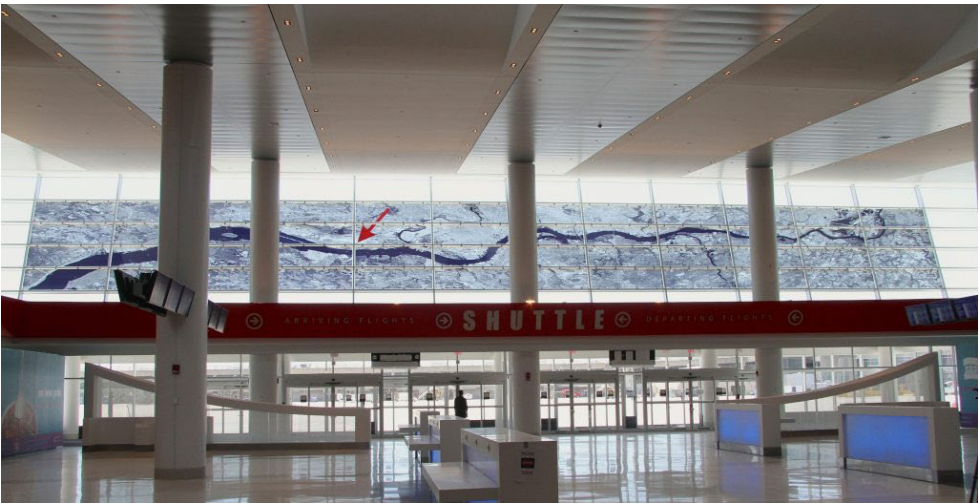
*Atlantis* (detail), 2019. 240 glass panels set in aluminum frame, overall: 122.5625 in. x 104 ft. Glass: Mayer of Munich. Photo: Robin Hill

***Sculpture:* How did the commission come about?**

**EH:** Miami Beach Art in Public Places had an open call in 2015. Over 600 artists applied, and they then asked 21 finalists to make proposals. They ended up commissioning Franz Ackermann, Joseph Kosuth, Elmgreen & Dragset, Sarah Morris, Joep van Lieshout, and myself. It's a very varied group of artists and all the projects that I've seen so far have been fascinating takes on the social and physical site of Miami Beach. I particularly love

Kosuth's neons that specify the distances to various locations from Miami Beach, perhaps because it also tries to link Miami Beach to the outside world. It's been a great experience to work there because the Art in Public Places team has been so supportive in dealing with all the inevitable challenges of making an artwork for a place that is literally being built as you are working.

Paradoxically, the hardest part of the project for me was coming up with a proposal. Not because I didn't know what to propose. I knew what I thought the site needed, but I wasn't sure I wanted to make it. At the time I'd just finished painting an 800-square-foot map as part of *The Unloved*, an installation for the Groeninge Museum in Bruges which contrasted a painted satellite view of Bruges with the picturesque paintings of Bruges from the museum's collection, and I'd sworn that I'd never undertake such a large painting again. I'd also made a glass map called *You Are Here*, in collaboration with Jan Baracz, for the Philadelphia International Airport the year before in an attempt to make a ludicrously site-specific artwork—it literally consists of a large red arrow showing where the airport is on a satellite view—and I felt that maybe I was done with maps and the technological sublime's relationship to the picturesque for a while. I wanted to spend some time exploring the political meaning of ornament instead. In the end, however, I felt that the two central stories of Miami Beach were its vulnerability to sea level rise and the disconnect between the natural and manmade landscape, and I couldn't think of a way to address it without making the piece I ultimately made. Ironically, I've ended up making two more public works that involve maps since then, and I'm also making a series of paintings with molten tin of the waterways of all the cities that call themselves the "Venices of the North." So, there are more maps to come.



Jan Baracz and Ellen Harvey, *You are Here*, 2013. Forty-eight industrial float glass panels, airbrushing, ceramic melting colors, and steel clips, each panel: 33.5 x 116.3125 in., overall: 12 ft. 10 in. x 120 ft. 6.5 in.  
Glass: Mayer of Munich. Photo: Ellen Harvey Studio

### ***Sculpture:* What do you like about working with mirrors?**

**EH:** For *Atlantis*, I used mirrors for the very practical reason that I wanted the piece to look like a drawing on water. I have always been struck by how very flat Florida is—it seems to hover between the sea and the sky, and I wanted my painted landscape to look as though it was perpetually emerging from and retreating back under the waves. The dark, mouth-blown glass—someone literally blows a big bubble of glass and then lays it on a table and cuts it open to make the glass panel—really looks liquid, especially when you

lamine it to a mirror so that the light reflects through the glass. The white “drawing” on the glass is actually ceramic melting color, which has been wiped into the glass after the design has been sandblasted in. The color sticks to the sandblasted areas and, once it’s fired, becomes chemically bonded to the glass. It’s a technique that I developed with Mayer of Munich when we were trying to come up with a low-maintenance, permanent version of the hand-engraved, rear-lit mirrors that I’ve used in a lot of my installations.

*Atlantis* aside, I do have a pretty serious mirror obsession. Most of my largest installations, like the *Museum of Failure*, *Arcade/Arcadia*, and *The Room of Sublime Wallpaper (I)* include mirrors. Even my paintings are generally of mirrors. I think the idea of the mirror haunts representation. It’s worth revisiting the old canard that art “holds up a mirror.” 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 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 18th-century landscape appreciation, so named because it was thought to produce images reminiscent of the paintings of Claude Lorrain. 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.



*The Room of Sublime Wallpaper (I)*, 2008. Oil on 12 wood panels, 33 Plexiglas mirrors mounted on swivels, newspaper, and tape, each panel: 48 x 48 in. Photo: Simon Vogel/Galerie Gebr. Lehmann

As an artist, I’m also jealous of the mirror because it does so much with so little. It’s impossible to walk past a mirror without looking. 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. 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 19th century—like the one in Salzburg painted by J.M. Sattler. Unlike in the cinema, where the viewer is passive, the panorama requires movement; unlike a movie, which is prohibitively expensive to make, a panorama just requires some skill and a lot of patience. The panorama 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 recreating 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.



*Arcade/Arcadia*, 2011–12. Thirty-four hand-engraved Plexiglas mirrors over Lumisheets, wood frame, aluminum letters, and light bulbs, overall: 9 x 15 x 33 ft. Photo: Locks Gallery

***Sculpture:* You have another public art project that is currently being installed.**

**EH:** I'm currently installing a mosaic in one of the headhouse entrances to Boston's South Station. The piece is called *Network*, and it's unusual in that it was commissioned as a gift to the city of Boston by the Boston Chapter of WTS (a networking group, founded as the Women's Transportation Seminar in 1977) to highlight women's contributions to Boston's transportation infrastructure. It's the first artwork they've ever commissioned.

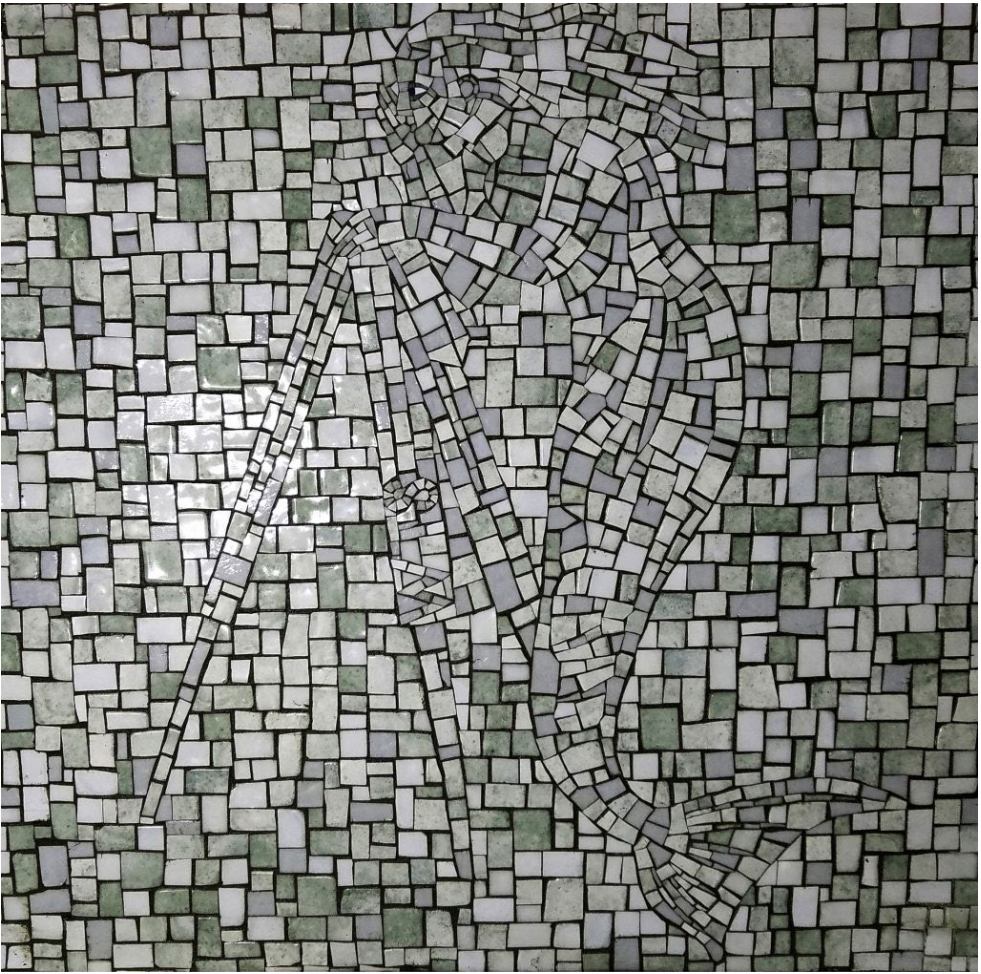
*Network* celebrates the social network that is provided by WTS at the same time that it makes visible the very real transportation network that WTS's members serve. An intricate, handmade glass mosaic map allows travelers to locate themselves within the larger transportation network of which South Station is a major hub. The lines on the map's white background are color-coded: blue/green (water), light grey (road), medium grey (railroads), and dark grey (subways). A gold dot marks the location of South Station. The dominance of the ocean is a reminder of a not-so-distant past where Boston Harbor

and its rivers were the primary means of transportation. We take this transformation from natural to artificial networks for granted, but it is the result of human action and human decision-making. We all travel within a hidden history of engineers, architects, surveyors, builders, and politicians—many of whom were women, as WTS reminds us and as we too often forget.



*Network*, 2019. Hand-cut glass mosaic, 634 sq. ft. Mosaic: Miotto Mosaic Art Studios with Trivisanutto Giovanni SRL. Photo: Stephen Miotto





*Network* (detail of mermaid), 2019. Hand-cut glass mosaic, 634 sq. ft. Mosaic: Miotto Mosaic Art Studios with Trivisanutto Giovanni SRL. Photo: Stephen Miotto

If you look closely at the ocean portion of *Network*'s map, you can also see three almost-invisible mermaids holding surveying equipment. They function as a whimsical reminder of the dangers of gender stereotyping, and more importantly, of ignoring the sea in a time of climate change. *Network* imagines a world in which the mermaids escape their conventional destinies and instead decide to take on the land, just as perhaps now we need nature to lead our transportation decisions, rather than to be subject to them. Of course, they're also just there for fun—I wanted to have something to inspire little girl engineers.

***Sculpture:* Did you have to learn about making mosaics for *Network*? Did you look at any for inspiration?**

**EH:** I don't think I would ever have thought of making a mosaic if I hadn't been selected by the New York MTA Arts & Design to do a mosaic for the Queens Plaza Subway Station in 2001. The piece was called *Look Up Not Down*, and it consisted of covering the walls of the mezzanine with the view that you would have seen (in 2002) if you had been above rather than underground. It was a steep learning curve at the time, but I really just fell in love with the medium. *Network* is now my fourth mosaic and I'm currently working on a fifth for the San Francisco airport Hyatt Hotel, called *Greenmap*, which is another

mapping project, this time showing just the protected “natural” spaces in the Bay area—the inverse of a traditional map which prioritizes all the human interventions in the landscape.

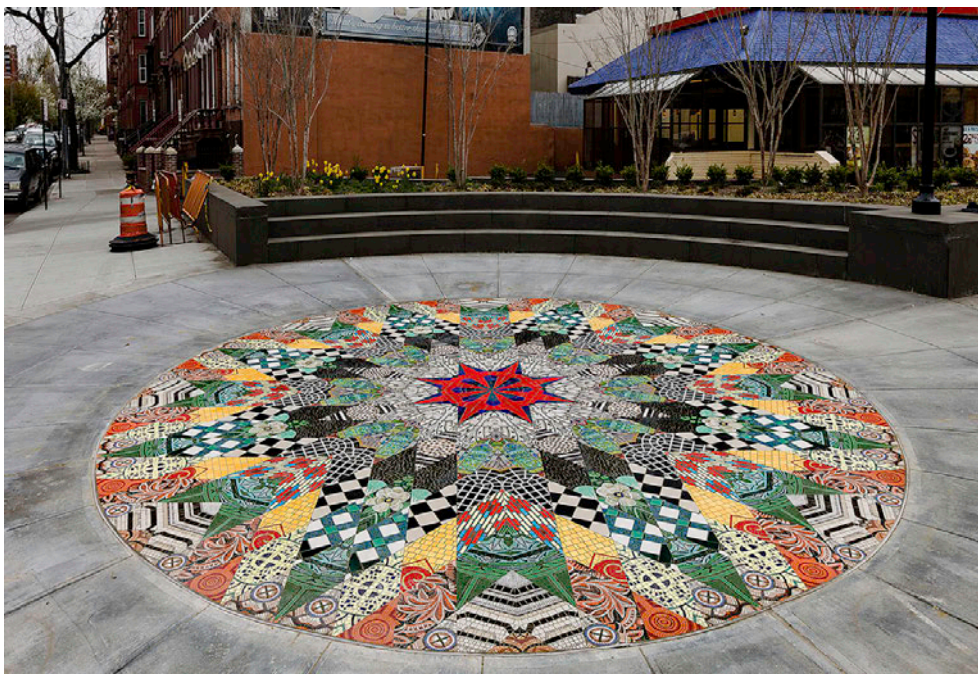


*Greenmap* (studio view), 2019. Hand-cut glass mosaic, 784 sq. ft. Mosaic: Miotto Mosaic Art Studios with Trivanutto Giovanni SRL. Photo: Fabrizio Trivanutto

Mosaic is a great medium. The glass is so beautiful—I always love picking out the colors of the mix. It’s nerve-wracking too because you are so dependent on the interpretive work done by the mosaic artisan. Each piece is cut and placed by hand, so the final work is always a collaboration. You do have to be ok with giving up some control. I’m currently working with Miotto Mosaic Art Studio in collaboration with Trivanutto Giovanni SRL, who are based just north of Venice in Spilimbergo near the famous mosaic school. Each time I go there, I get new ideas for how the medium can be used. It’s fun to be part of a centuries-old tradition.

***Sculpture:* What are your thoughts on transportation networks as vehicles of social networking?**

**EH:** The idea of networking is central to *Network*, which was directly inspired by the social networking group that commissioned it. It’s literally in the title. It was also funded through outreach to the WTS network. That project aside, I tend to think more about how public artworks can function as nodes within the infrastructure network that we all inhabit. I like to think of artworks as little packages of information that then get transmitted through the social space that they inhabit. I’m also interested in seeing our collective interventions to our planet as a huge meta-artwork—literally a drawing on the skin of the world. I think we need to work to make a better drawing.

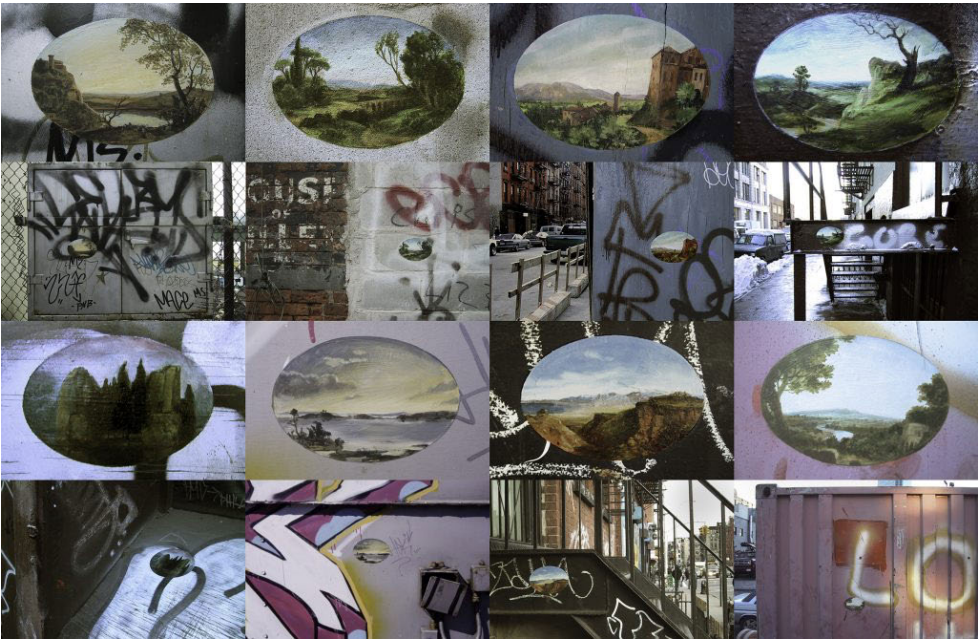


*Mathematical Star*, 2013. Ceramic and glass mosaic, 20 ft. diameter. Fabrication: Miotto Mosaic Art Studios. Photo: Etienne Frossard

***Sculpture:* You were in the public realm early on, with the graffiti works.**

**EH:** Although I don't think of myself as someone who works primarily in the public sphere, I have been doing public works fairly consistently since I finished the *New York Beautification Project* in 2001. That project, which involved illegally tagging New York graffiti sites with small oval oil landscapes, was really intended to provoke a conversation about who is allowed to "speak" as an artist in our public spaces. Working on the streets of New York, having conversations with random people about their views on art and artists, was a transformative experience for me.

Since then, I've tended to dip in and out of public art (both permanent and ephemeral) and I've had some incredible experiences as a result. On a very pragmatic level, public art allows you to work with materials and budgets that would otherwise be completely outside of the realm of possibility. It's also immensely gratifying to have your work be a part of the urban fabric, particularly when it's where you live. But most of all, what I have loved about public art is its collaborative aspect and its ability to be a catalyst for real-world change. I really appreciated the experience of working with the Community Board in Bedford-Stuyvesant to pick a selection of historic sites to include in *Mathematical Star*. We hoped to produce a seductive secret history of Bed-Stuy, so we were all thrilled when Children of Promise (a not-for-profit that supports children of incarcerated parents) put on an incredible event where the children presented their research about those sites. Similarly, *Repeat* (a work that involved making a church into a ruin that functions as a new public space for the village of Bossuit in Belgium) would have been nothing if the village hadn't started using it. Now it's a very popular open site that gets used for all sorts of things—light shows, fairs, concerts, and even as a site for new art interventions. For me, the most successful public art projects are ones where the public really ends up taking ownership of the work and using it in new and often unexpected ways. I think of art as a conversation, so I love it when people talk back. I always learn something new.



*New York Beautification Project (details), 1998–2001. Gesso and oil on 40 graffiti sites in New York City, photographic edition. Photo: Ellen Harvey Studio*

***Sculpture: Do you like the challenge of having to negotiate the low expectations people have for public art?***

**EH:** I'm not sure why people have such low expectations. I think the expectations should be high for something that's intended to be a permanent part of the physical fabric of our public space. I suppose it's because public art is so difficult to do well. There are a lot of practical challenges. You very seldom have total control over the site. You have to enjoy collaborating with other people. The logistics of budgeting, fabrication, and working with stakeholders can be quite daunting. It's also impossible to anticipate how a piece will be used or received, no matter how much research or outreach you do.

I also think public art is difficult because it presents such a different set of challenges from those presented by exhibiting in a dedicated art space. When you show in a museum or gallery, viewers have come with the express intention of interacting with your work. In the case of public art, people are seeing it in the midst of lots of competing stimuli. Your artwork is not generally the reason for their presence and their experience of it is going to be fleeting. A public artwork has to grab viewers' attention and also be fairly easy to understand. That doesn't mean it has to be simplistic. But finding that perfect simple intervention is never easy.



*Repeat*, 2013. Partially demolished church with new terrazzo floor, 112 ft. 2.375 in. x 53 ft. 9.5625 in. View of interior at St. Amalberga, Bossuit, Belgium. Commissioned by the Municipality of Avelgem in collaboration with the Vlaams Bouwmeester (Flemish National Architect). Photo: Rita Pacque

I feel very fortunate to have a public platform, no matter how limited. I'm aware that most people never get that. Perhaps as a result, when I work in the public sphere, I am interested in making my work accessible. I want people to feel enticed and safe enough to risk a new experience. Public art is a humbling field in which to work, but for me it's fun to work in this big, punchy way, and then to retreat back to the studio.

***Sculpture: What's next for you?***

**EH:** I'm working on another kind of mapping for my next big project. It's called *The Disappointed Tourist*, and it's going to be the central piece of my show of the same name at the Turner Contemporary in the UK next year. I'm also going to show a portion of it at

Michelle Grabner's *Suburban* in Milwaukee in December. It's really the inverse of the project that I did for the Corcoran in 2013, where I imagined the ruins of Washington, DC, as a tourist site for aliens.



*Alien Souvenir Stand*, 2013. Oil on aluminum, watercolor on gesso board, propane tanks, plywood, aluminum siding and poles, aluminum diamond plate, and magnets, 10 x 17 x 5 ft. Photo: Locks Gallery

*The Disappointed Tourist* is going to be a collection of paintings of sites throughout the world that have been lost to the forces of war, time, ideology, greed, and natural disaster. The sites depicted are a combination of famous lost sites and sites that are currently being crowd-sourced in response to the question, "What place do you miss that has been destroyed? Please pick a site that you would have recommended to a visitor (prior to its destruction)." I'm trying to make symbolic restitution, literally remaking lost sites, but I'm all too aware of the bathetic inadequacy of such restitution. However, I'm hoping that by honoring the trauma of our personal and larger cultural losses I can work to replace some of the resulting toxic nostalgia with a more nuanced conversation about collective love for our environment. It's going to be interesting to see what results.