

PAINTERS ON PAINTING

Ellen Harvey on the Disappointed Tourist | Art in Isolation



Ellen Harvey in Studio with *The Disappointed Tourist*, 2020. Photograph: Etienne Frossard.

Getting out of bed after a month with Covid-19 and my studio seems both magical and somehow utterly strange. It's as though the life I was leading when the world stopped is suddenly very far away. I had been rushing about, trying to finish a two-person exhibition for Turner Contemporary with J.M.W. Turner about the relationship between art and tourism. Now all the crates are sitting in storage just waiting. I've no idea what's going to happen next.

My home studio is as I left it, filled with over 150 paintings from the now rather prophetically named *The Disappointed Tourist*, an on-going series of paintings of lost sites from all over the world, crowd-sourced in response to the question: *Is there a place that you would like to visit or revisit that doesn't exist anymore?* It was intended as an exploration of nostalgia, to create a conversation across many different types of loss. Sites range from the intensely personal to larger cultural losses, from happy childhood memories to places of trauma, from victims of gentrification and technological change to places ravaged by climate change and war, from recent losses to the fabulous lost sites of antiquity. Looking at them now, I find myself particularly struck by how many people yearned for *social* sites: cinemas, amusement parks, bars, religious institutions, etc. Even before, people missed the kind of places that are now particularly out of reach. The project has taken on a completely different meaning. None of us can go anywhere right now. We're all Disappointed Tourists.



Ellen Harvey, *Monument for Ms. V*, 2020. Oil and acrylic on Gessoboard, 18 x 8 in. Photograph: Ellen Harvey.

This last month, I thought a lot about the Plague Column in Vienna, a rather fabulous baroque excrescence that I've always loved for its sheer mad strangeness. It was erected by a veritable team of artists in fulfillment of Holy Roman Emperor Leopold I's vow, made as he fled Vienna during the Plague of 1670, to set up a "mercy column" if God would deliver the city. When I got up, the first thing I did was to make a small painting of it. I dedicated the painting to Sandra Santos-Vizcaino, who died at the end of March; she was only 54 years old. She was the first public-school teacher in New York City to die of Covid-19 and years ago she had been my son's beloved second-grade teacher. She was a religious woman so I thought she might have appreciated the Plague Column. I hope so. I wonder if we will erect artworks once this is over. And if so, who or what will we choose to glorify?

I'm back now to painting *The Disappointed Tourist*. People keep on sending in sites and I'm feeling grateful for the human connection it provides. I used to feel keenly the inadequacy of symbolic restitution, of trying to repair in art what I cannot repair in life. Now, when I am otherwise largely doomed to inaction, I see it differently. Trying to create a conversation, no matter how limited, about what we miss is not the worst place to start thinking about building a world we can all love after this is over. This crisis has cast so many inequities into ever sharper relief that I can only hope it galvanizes us all into action.

If you'd like to submit a lost site just visit www.DisappointedTourist.org for instructions. It can be anywhere. All that matters is that you loved it and it's gone and you wish it weren't.