

EMPIRE OF RUINS

AMERICAN CULTURE, PHOTOGRAPHY, AND THE SPECTACLE OF DESTRUCTION

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Walpole's trope of the "curious traveler" was in turn picked up in 1840 by Thomas Macaulay, who imagined a future in which "some traveller from New Zealand shall, in the midst of a vast solitude, take his stand on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St. Paul's."¹² The New Zealander became even more famous when Gustave Doré used him in the concluding illustration for his series of engravings, *London: A Pilgrimage* (1872), where he is pictured as an artist contemplating the future London as a city of ruins.¹³ And in the twenty-first century, reflecting present instability, the same trope of looking backward on the present as a state of ruin is the premise of artist Ellen Harvey's installation at the Corcoran Gallery, *The Alien's Guide to the Ruins of Washington, D.C.* (2013). But Harvey expands the perspective by positing an even greater incongruity than future time, imagining the exhibition from an extraterrestrial's point of view, ten thousand years into the future—as they try to understand the ruined buildings of the city, present-day Washington, D.C.¹⁴ In its previous iterations, the trope of looking backward always took the perspective of some future human being. The fact that Harvey looks ahead to a posthuman age of retrospection—despite the installation's comic tone—is decidedly sobering.

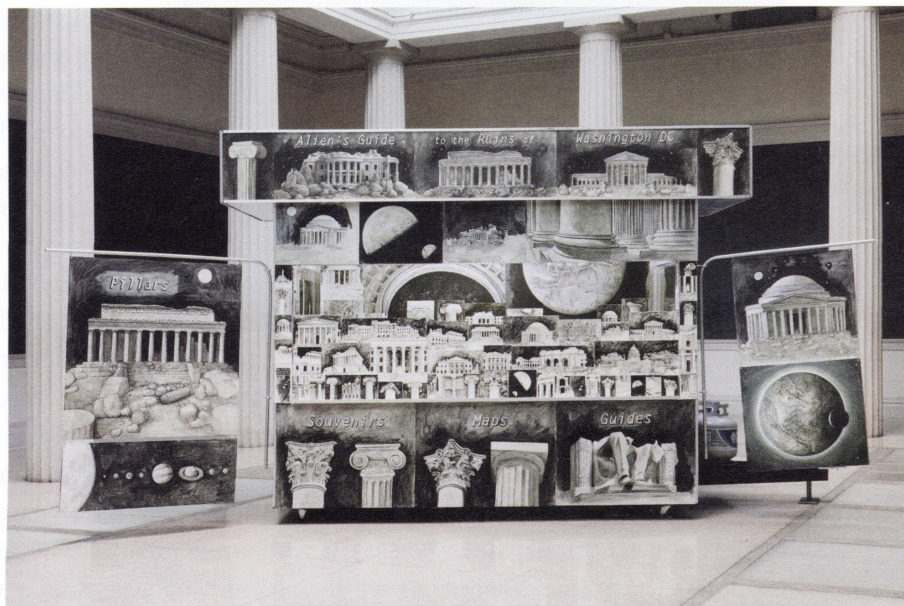


Fig. C.7 Ellen Harvey, artist. *Alien's Guide to the Ruins of Washington, D.C.* (installation view at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, 2013). Oil on aluminum, watercolor on Gessoboard, plywood, magnets, propane tanks, 10 ft. (3 m) × 17 ft. (5 m) × 5 ft. (1.5 m). Photograph by Paul Bothwell. Courtesy of Ellen Harvey.