

Generation 1.5



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QUEENS MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK

Does the Breath Change As It Crosses the Divide?

ELLEN HARVEY AND MATTHEA HARVEY IN CONVERSATION

Talking with the other artists in *Generation 1.5*, I was struck by the sheer variety of our responses to the experience of emigration. Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised. Even within my own family, reactions to moving to the United States were far from uniform. This conversation between my sister—the poet Matthea Harvey—and me is an attempt to compare those reactions and how they've influenced our creative work. Strangely enough, it's the first time we've ever really discussed it.

Some useful background information: our mother is German and did her best to make sure that we grew up bilingual in English and German. We moved to Marnhull, a rural Dorset village in England of about a thousand people, in 1975, as a result of my father's work. Before that, our family had moved between England, Germany, and Switzerland, never staying more than two years in any one place. So Marnhull was the first place that we lived for a significant period of time (seven years). We moved from Marnhull to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1981 when I was fourteen and my younger sisters, Celia and Matthea, were twelve and eight, respectively. After we moved to Milwaukee, my mother and sisters spent summers back in Marnhull. As the eldest, I spent most of that time traveling elsewhere. Now our entire nuclear family lives in the U.S. while all of our relatives remain in England and Germany.—Ellen Harvey

Matthea Harvey: Do you have a good and/or reliable memory?

Ellen Harvey: I have a very erratic memory. Some moments from my past feel almost distressingly vivid while large stretches are strangely vague. In general I dislike thinking about the past because the things and people it contains seem so inaccessible. To think about the past is to think about loss—either the physical loss of the person or the place or the loss even of the memory itself. One of the great pleasures of becoming an adult is that you start to have some control, albeit imperfect, over what you get to keep in your life, though my memory sadly appears to be the exception to that rule. I find it very hard to remember people in particular. Maybe it's because my childhood taught me that most people are only transient features in our lives, or maybe it's just laziness. What about you—do you see your past as a coherent narrative?

MH: No, definitely not, which is sad because I adore reading long sweeping stories, like *Anna Karenina*. Sometimes I buy novels solely based on girth. I wonder, if I had a photographic or at least more comprehensive memory, would I be more likely to write fiction or nonfiction instead of poetry? I was relieved when I read an article claiming that every time you access a memory your brain modifies it in some way. That feels true to me, because my memories are often distant or blurred, or entirely imaginary, as if I'm trying to see some original image through a number of different scrims.

In my poetry, I have a complicated relation to narrative. I love its arcs and through lines, but I distrust that as a way of representing my own life. I think that short, broken lyrics are the closest I come to conveying what it is like to be me, whereas my prose poems tend to be more in the realm of the imaginary. My second book, *Sad Little Breathing Machine*, was invested in alternately battling and embracing narrative.

EH: So for you the experience of emigration was that of a disrupted narrative?

MH: Moving divides your life in such a literal way. There was suddenly an ocean between my past and me, and I battled that for a while. When we moved to Milwaukee I learned how to finger knit, and I started a long, army-green rope, which I hoped would span the ocean so my best friend in England and I in Wisconsin could communicate by tugging on either end. The logistics of how I was going to get this rope from here to there

eventually made me give up. In my memories, there is a dividing line at the age of eight, when we moved to Milwaukee. I still feel like my whole childhood in Marnhull may be a lie because so many of the memories I have can't be real—like chasing fairies in the hedges, or a daddy longlegs spider who waited outside school for me and would float alongside me on the way home. When I write children's stories, they tend to be directed toward my eight-year-old self. What are your childhood memories like?

EH: When we moved to Marnhull I had just turned eight, about the same age as you when we moved to Milwaukee. I remember being struck by the physical beauty of the place—the surrounding countryside and our house, a sandstone Edwardian, which was by far the largest we'd ever lived in. You have to remember that previously we'd lived in a variety of commuter suburbs—by comparison this seemed incredibly romantic to me, like something out of a book. I don't remember missing where we'd been living in Kent before, perhaps because we'd only been there for about a year. I'd been much more attached to our previous house near Frankfurt in Germany. I actually carved my name into the front door when we left, which I remember getting me in terrible trouble with our parents as the house was rented and they had to replace the door.

Since I never really managed to make any friends in the village during the first three years I went to the village school, my attachment to Marnhull remained to the physical place itself rather than to the people there. I particularly loved the water meadows down by the mill, which is ironic as they were bulldozed away while we still lived there. I remember seeing the destruction and then vowing that I would never look at them again. For years I drove past them with my eyes shut tight, remembering what had been. I think I was probably in my early twenties before I revisited them with my eyes open.

Later, when we moved to Milwaukee, I did miss my friends from the all-girl convent school that I attended as a day pupil from age eleven onwards. Unlike at the village school, where my accent, the intricacies of the English class system, and my general foreignness and lack of appropriate social skills meant that I inevitably ended up as the school pariah, the convent had a wider variety of students, most of whom boarded and had parents living overseas, and it was suddenly possible for

me to transform oddity into eccentricity, for which I was deeply grateful at the time. This made me especially reluctant to move. My acceptance seemed like a fluke that I'd never be able to replicate, and I dreaded yet another experience of social ostracism—with reason, as it turned out.

MH: What was your impression of Milwaukee?

EH: My first memory of Milwaukee is of driving from the airport and being depressed by its ugliness and by the incredible heat. I found the flatness of the landscape oppressive and I disliked the architecture. The city was at once too big, compared to Marnhull, and too small, compared to London, the only other city with which I was familiar. Because I was so obsessed with history at that age, its relative newness also told against it for me. All of which is really quite unfair to Milwaukee. Lake Michigan is beautiful and the city has its own particular architectural charm as well as a great civic spirit that I really admire, but I never fell in love with it when I lived there. I feel very positively about it now, when I return to visit our parents. But at the time I remember painting some scenery green for a school play shortly after we moved and bursting into tears at the memory of how green Dorset had been. I suspect it was in the middle of the interminable Midwest winter when I hadn't seen green for a long, long time. The whole concept of seasons, so radically varied as to require entirely separate wardrobes, was a shock. The only thing I could compare it to was a description of Siberia I had read in a book; I had been very surprised that Siberia could be hot as well as cold.

I also initially found the Midwestern social landscape difficult to navigate. After living in a village with a large variety of social classes, I found the homogeneity of the suburbs disconcerting. I also found it impossible to replicate the kind of saccharine affect that seemed to be expected from girls in particular. Suddenly almost all my friends were boys. After living in a culture that valued sarcasm, the incredible niceness and relentless positivism of the other students was very difficult to understand. On the one hand, people seemed so friendly, and yet their friendliness didn't seem to imply any actual emotional connection. It took me a long time to understand that their friendliness was perhaps more accurately understood as a form of politeness. At the time, my angst-ridden teenage self saw it as rank hypocrisy—all those meaningless

compliments about sweaters! Again, something that I see very differently now. You spent several years going to school in both places. How did you feel about moving between Marnhull and Milwaukee at the time?

MH: I don't think I really understood what it would mean to move. My ideas about America were completely misguided—I remember my English classmates saying that I would have to choose to become a cowboy or an Indian, and part of me believed that. When we left Marnhull I missed it not generally, but specifically. I missed the apple tree I liked to read books in. I missed Danny and Percy, the horses who lived in the field next door. I missed pussy willows and cow parsley and the ceiling in the living room, which I liked to pretend was the floor.

Initially I found Milwaukee very bewildering. I couldn't understand people's accents in the airport when we arrived. Then—you must remember this—when we first visited our new house, it was nighttime and the floors had just been sanded. We took off our shoes and socks and tiptoed around. The next day we got a call at the hotel where we were staying saying that a gang of thieves had broken into the house—the carpenters had seen our footprints. That feels metaphorical to me: we were intruders in this new place.

EH: Actually I don't remember that at all. I do remember that we all felt faint from the heat the next day and had to take turns lying down.

MH: I pretended to be sick for the first week of school, and when I did finally go I got lost on the way home. I always hated arriving anywhere, because the transition moment was awkward. I remember hesitating before making that first phone call to my friends when we went back to England for the summers. I would spend a month in my old school there, since their school year went later. Now that I look back on it, it seems like a strange thing to have done but it was also pretty great: I could see all of my friends and didn't have to do any homework. But you can't ever be a puzzle piece that fits in two puzzles. As I started to fit in in America, I became exotic to my old friends in England. My English friends were always monitoring whether my accent was changing, examining my turquoise alarm-clock earrings and purple Esprit pants.

I think because I was younger when we moved, Milwaukee became home for me more quickly than for anyone else in the family. I already

played the flute when we moved so in the U.S. I joined the school band and later a youth orchestra; I still think about what an amazing sense of belonging you can feel when playing a symphony with sixty other musicians. You're literally inside the music together. What did you think about my childhood in Milwaukee?

EH: I remember feeling very worried about you. You have to remember that I was a horrible cultural snob at the time. I wanted you to grow up to be English. I also wanted you not to be so different from me. Remember how strictly I monitored your reading? All that Jane Austen! What a walking cliché I was. I suppose I was worried that I'd end up with a sister much like the girls at high school to whom I had such difficulty relating. What about you? Did you feel cut off from my past as well as your own?

MH: I had your past in the form of you! You've always been a great storyteller. I think I romanticized your old life in England. Once I got to the age where you went to school at the convent I would think about what it would have been like to study Latin with nuns, to learn italic handwriting, to wear that brown uniform with beige knee socks. Part of me was relieved to have been spared the nuns and part of me thought I was getting an inferior education.

Also, I still had a connection to England. Because of those summer trips, I didn't really feel cut off. Starting in high school though it began to feel like those summers in Europe were taking me away from my real life. After my freshman year in college, I remember deciding to spend my summers in the U.S., so I did internships in New York and Berkeley. Everyone in our family thought this was very boring of me but I think I was truly exhausted by the idea of going to new countries and wanted to put down more roots here. Now I'm firmly settled in New York—the place I say I'm from when I'm abroad. What about you? How do you answer the question “Where are you from?”

EH: The short answer is that I'm originally from England but I've lived in the U.S. for over twenty years and my accent is a historical relic. I try not to get into the details because they're a bit boring to me. It's like having to tell the story of how you met your husband for the millionth time. Now that I spend a lot of time in Germany, I find myself having to explain why I speak such good German. In fact, I sometimes find myself

making mistakes intentionally so that people won't just assume that I'm German. And yet, in some way, our grandparents' and now our uncle's farm in Germany has remained the one fixed social and geographical point in my life. I spent so many summers there as a child. It's such a small place—about sixty inhabitants—and it's the only place from my childhood that's still accessible to me. It will always be a special place for me. So maybe I feel as German as I do English or American—which is to say not very.

What about you? You're the only member of our family with an American passport and an American accent. Do you describe yourself as an American? And if so, when did you start thinking of yourself as American? Was it a conscious choice?

MH: I finally became a U.S. citizen last year, but people always assume I'm American so I rarely get asked where I'm from. I think of myself as "american" now, in lower case not capitals. I probably felt more divided about that as a teenager. What's strange for me now is that my accent separates me from my nuclear family. I remember once we were all out at a restaurant and the waitress asked me who my guests were. People are always surprised when they first meet my family because I rarely remember to tell them beforehand that we all have different accents. I notice that when people do ask me where I'm from originally, I hesitate. The easy answer is Wisconsin, but that feels like it leaves out a lot while the other answer seems like too much information.

I remember my classmates in third grade always wanted me to say their names in my English accent, which they loved and I hated. On the plus side, it did mean that I was the automatic choice for Mary Poppins in the school play. I started practicing having an American accent early on, probably around fourth grade. I have a vivid memory of going into my closet and working on saying my nickname, "Matty," with an American accent. I remember wishing my name didn't have any "t's" in it, because a name like Louisa wouldn't have been a problem accent-wise, whereas making those "t's" sound like "d's" was difficult, and I didn't like the way it sounded. That's why I go by Matthea now.

EH: So tell me about changing your accent. Was it hard? I remember that you had an accent coach after you won that essay competition and had

to read your essay on television and they decided that no one would be able to understand you.

MH: That's true—that was right when we moved. I hadn't decided to change my accent yet at that point, so I was pretty frustrating for that accent coach. We spent an inordinate amount of time on the word "clock." She would say what sounded to my English ear like "clawwk" and I would try to say it her way and end up saying "clack." But once I decided to change my accent, I didn't find it that hard—I think I have a pretty good ear. And since we spoke German with half our relatives, I think my brain just accepted American English as another language. What was hard was that I would speak in an English accent at home and an American one at school, so when friends called me at home I was embarrassed to have my parents hear me talking in another accent. I finally committed to my American accent when I went to college. It's very nice to have some more Americans in the family—both of our husbands—because now my accent doesn't stand out. I may need to write a poem celebrating that fact—I'd call it "Our American Husbands."

EH: That's funny because I'm pretty tone deaf when it comes to American accents—in our husbands or anyone. I can't imitate them and I don't really hear them. But when I listen to myself on an answering machine, I'm always faintly surprised not to hear an American accent, because I don't think of myself as having an "accent." Of course, now I hear the American accent as "neutral." I do slightly change my accent sometimes in response to other British accents and German regional accents. I have no idea why.

MH: Everyone in our family has a different accent. How did you end up with yours?

EH: I think accents in our family are much like musical chairs: the music stops and whatever accent you have at that time is what you're stuck with. It's an imperfect analogy because you can modify what you end up with—to some extent. In my case, my basic accent reflects my time at St. Mary's, the convent school—a moment of content social conformism. It's not the local Dorset accent, our father's modified Birmingham accent, or our mother's faint German one. I remember being deeply impressed when I first arrived in the U.S. by how much less socially

loaded accents were here by comparison. It was a relief really—I don't miss all that nonsense about class. I think the very fact that we're spending so much time talking about accents betrays our national origins. *Why are we talking so much about accents?*

I did try to change my accent about ten years ago. I got really tired of having to explain where I was from and I worried that an English accent just wasn't "authentic" to me anymore. But after thirty years of not pronouncing your "r's," it's very hard to change. Also, there's no denying that there aren't exactly any social liabilities associated with having an English accent in the U.S. And an artificially grown American accent seemed equally problematic. At the linguistic level, I'm doomed to inauthenticity.

MH: Accents aside, when have you felt English and when have you felt American?

EH: I felt very English when I first arrived in the U.S. and for a long time after. I was quite ridiculously adamant on the subject. At the same time, I remember going back to England as an increasingly fraught experience, with people challenging my "Englishness" almost immediately. That has only increased over the years. It's as though being English is such a fragile social construct that any contamination would immediately ruin it and you. I spent a lot of time defending my Englishness before I decided to give it up. Which was particularly ironic in my case as being English was in many ways always a deliberate rather than an inevitable choice. I could have just as easily been German if I'd made that choice—German law then required children of German mothers either to accept or renounce German citizenship at the age of seven. My attachment to being English just reflected a desperate desire to belong. I look back and wince to think of my fifteen-year-old self madly cheering on the troops in the Falklands. It's interesting how seductive nationalism can be. Interesting and terrifying.

It took me until my late twenties before I relinquished the idea of myself as English. Now I feel more American in some ways, especially when I'm in Europe. I smile too much and I'm friendly in that American way that I used to despise. I've even become quite sentimental about the American Constitution. Interestingly enough, I find myself becoming increasingly outraged by American actions on the world stage. I think

that the more I care about the U.S., the more upset I become. I'm much more emotionally invested in the U.S. now.

In some ways I feel more like a New Yorker than any actual nationality. This is the place I've lived longest in my life and it's also the first place I've ever lived where I feel that I belong. There's something incredibly relaxing about living in a place where national origin isn't as important as it is almost everywhere else in the world. There are so many national hybrids here that it's almost impossible to seem exotic or alien. Anyone can be a New Yorker—that's what I love about it.

MH: I feel the same way you do about New York. It's my home and I never want to leave. I'm passionate about it, down to the hot flying trash that signals the start of summer. I don't feel English anymore. In fact when I go back to England now I tend to feel a bit uneasy. But there is a tiny English child trapped on my tongue. My favorite foods are still English children's food: aniseed balls, sausages, prawn cocktail crisps—see, I can't call them chips, even though that's what they're called here. I also don't feel German but since German was my first language, I do have a strange tug on the heartstrings whenever I hear German spoken out of context. There was definitely some imprinting that went on with that language.

So do you think your relationship to nationality has had an influence on your experience as an artist?

EH: In an art world context, I'm very flexible. I don't really care what nationality I get labeled with but it's always interesting to watch people struggle to decide which is more important, residency or nationality. Does the passport trump the artistic context in which I live and work and where I've now spent the majority of my life? If I had my way, it would just say, "born in U.K., lives and works in New York." After all, New York is where I built my career as an artist and I did it in a way that I'm not so sure would have worked equally well anywhere else. It was all very informal in a way that depended on the fact that New York is full of openly ambitious people networking madly. I just met other artists and started showing. Of course, actually connecting is just as hard here as anywhere—it's only the first step that's easier. I'm always amazed that in Europe you can stand next to someone for hours at an opening and they'll almost never introduce you to the person that they're talking to. It's as

though it's just too risky. New York by contrast takes social connection very lightly, which is both good and bad. It's all about weak social ties—quantity trumping quality, some might say. And yet it does provide access.

One of the things that really struck me listening to the other artists in the *Generation 1.5* exhibition is how difficult it was for many of them to bear the burden of representation—the idea that they were inevitably seen as cultural ambassadors of a kind and that there was a lens of exoticism through which they and their work was perceived whether they wanted it or not. That's not a burden that I've had to contend with. In a culture where, for all its diversity, white Anglo-Saxon is still seen as the physical norm, I'm not even recognizable as a foreigner until I open my mouth. And even then being English is not seen as being that exotic—it's part of the center, not the periphery. There are also so many European artists dominating the international art market that the idea of being obliged to represent my culture seems utterly ludicrous—to say nothing of what a terrible representative I would be. This is obviously a very different situation from that of an artist who comes from an underrepresented country whose cultural traditions are not part of the Western art canon.

MH: So your sense of nationality hadn't been a source of inspiration for your work?

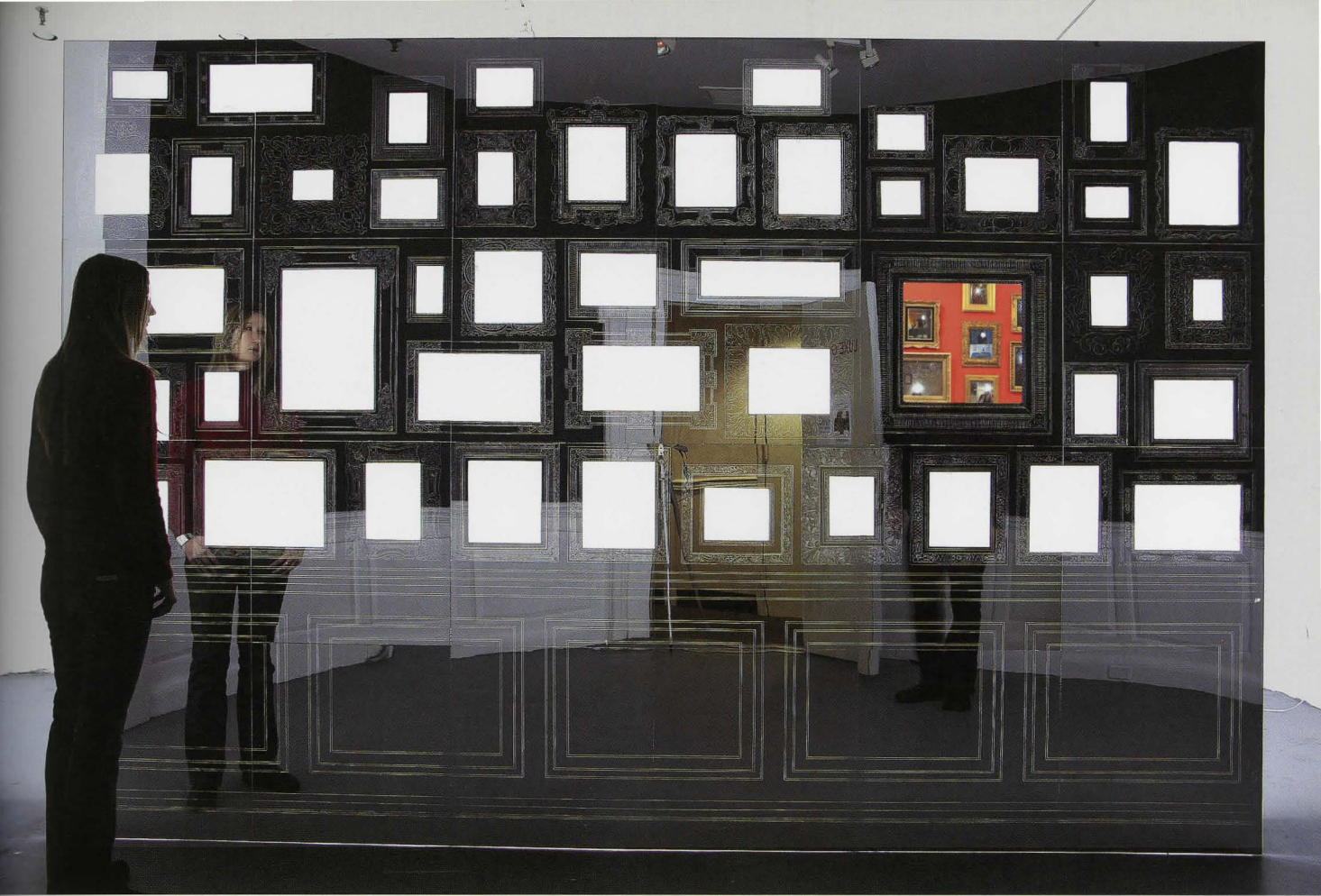
EH: Not directly, although a lot of my work has been about the impossibility of creating a coherent artistic persona—not just because I work on a project-by-project basis and so have entirely failed to come up with a “brandable” style, but also on a larger theoretical level. In general, I think failure is much more interesting than success. Art is so much about dreaming the impossible, unrealizable dream. The constant experience of failure is what connects art emotionally to the larger human condition. My current project, *The Museum of Failure*, consists of an ongoing series of rooms that contain different kinds of artistic failure. There's a room of *Invisible Self-Portraits*, for instance—self-portraits in which I can't be seen because the paintings are based on photographs taken in a mirror so that the camera flash obscures my face. There's also a *Collection of Impossible Subjects*, which consists of a mirrored wall rear-engraved and rear-illuminated to show a collection of empty frames hung salon style.

It's the ultimate victory of context over content. The viewer sees only him or herself in the frames.

I'm also really interested in how the art world is organized—who gets to be an artist and what makes something art—which may be related to remaining a bit of an outsider. *The New York Beautification Project*, where I spent a year painting small oval classical landscapes in oils directly onto graffiti sites throughout New York City without permission, is really an exploration of what makes people understand one piece of pigment as art and another as vandalism. Is it the demographic of the artist? That's something that I think plays a very large role. Is it the aesthetics of the work, so that if you make something conservative enough you can get away with murder?

The piece in the 1.5 show, *A Whitney for the Whitney at Philip Morris (Altria) / I Can Be an American Visionary Too!*, also reflects this interest. Among other things it's a bit of a joke about institutional validation and my frustrated desire to belong to both a canon and a nationality. I made it originally for the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, the Museum's Midtown site, whose name changed during the exhibition to the Whitney at Altria. I copied all 394 images in the Whitney's 2001 collection catalogue, *American Visionaries*, freehand in oils and installed the panels to form a walk-in painting. In part it was a gift to Philip Morris; I thought that they might like to finally get the Whitney itself, instead of all the slightly less well-known artists like myself that they'd got for the last twenty-five years. I also kept encountering bewildered tourists wandering over from Grand Central Station who misunderstood the sign outside to mean that this was the Whitney Museum. I like giving people what they want. But mainly the piece was a mad one-woman attempt to take on the entire American canon, as represented by the Whitney's catalogue. It was my attempt to say, "See, I can be an American visionary, despite not being an American. In fact, I can be *all* of the American visionaries."

Of course, it's also a ridiculous version of the canon—it's all painting, and not photo-realistic painting at that. Each image is painted just to the point where it should be recognizable to a viewer who's seen the original. It's a bit of an homage to those great old paintings of painting collections, like Zoffany's painting of the Uffizi gallery, when painting

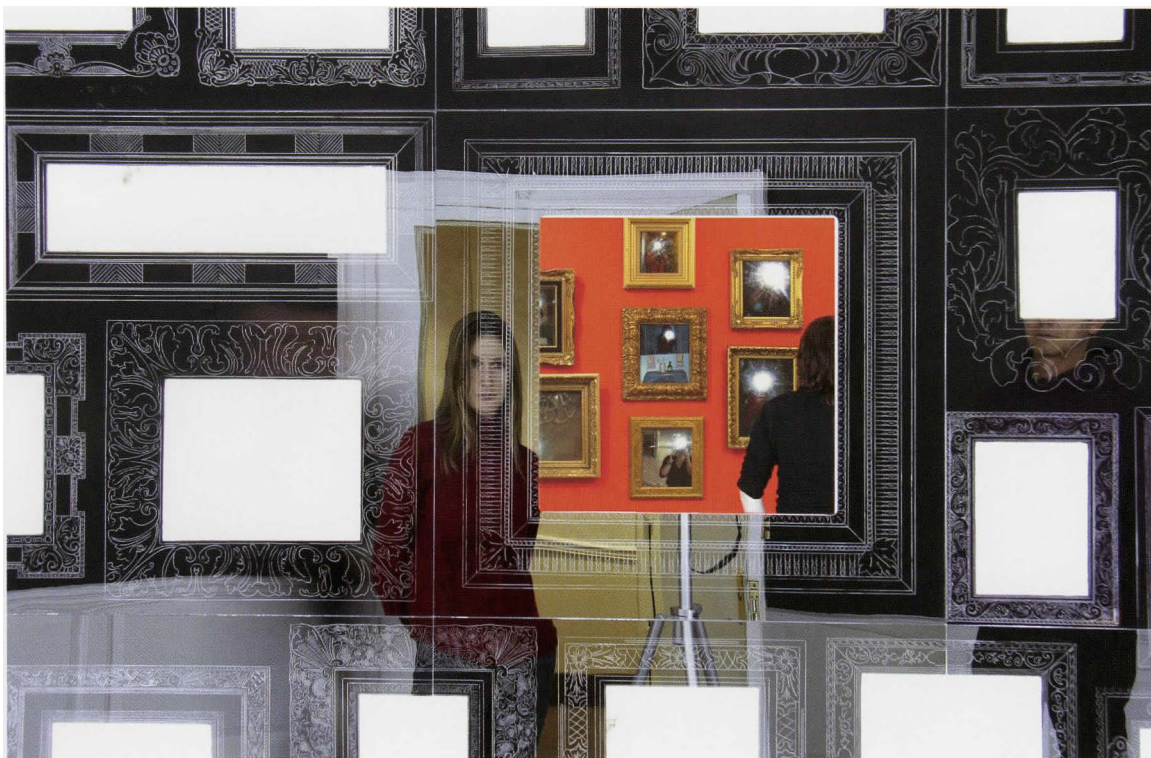


was the only way you could document a collection. It's been interesting to install it at the Queens Museum. Originally the viewer walked through a gold frame into a room made up of the painted panels. The seven artworks that the Whitney had bought immediately after publishing their catalogue were installed behind the openings in my painted panels—to compensate the artists who'd just missed their chance to be in the catalogue. This time those openings are filled with mirrors, so the viewer can be the next subject of the Whitney's attentions. It's a bit more inclusive that way.

What about you—do you think immigrating to the U.S. has influenced your work as a writer?

MH: It's hard to know. I'd love to be able to see what my life would have been like if we had stayed in England—like in the movie *Sliding Doors*, where Gwyneth Paltrow catches the train in one instance and misses

Ellen Harvey, *Museum of Failure (Collection of Impossible Subjects & Invisible Self-Portraits)*, 2007. Rear-illuminated, hand-engraved, and hand-sanded Plexiglas mirror, aluminum frame, fluorescent lights, latex paint and pencil on wall, and twelve paintings in oil in second-hand frames. Installation view, Luxe Gallery, New York. Courtesy the artist and Luxe Gallery, New York. Photograph: Jan Baracz.



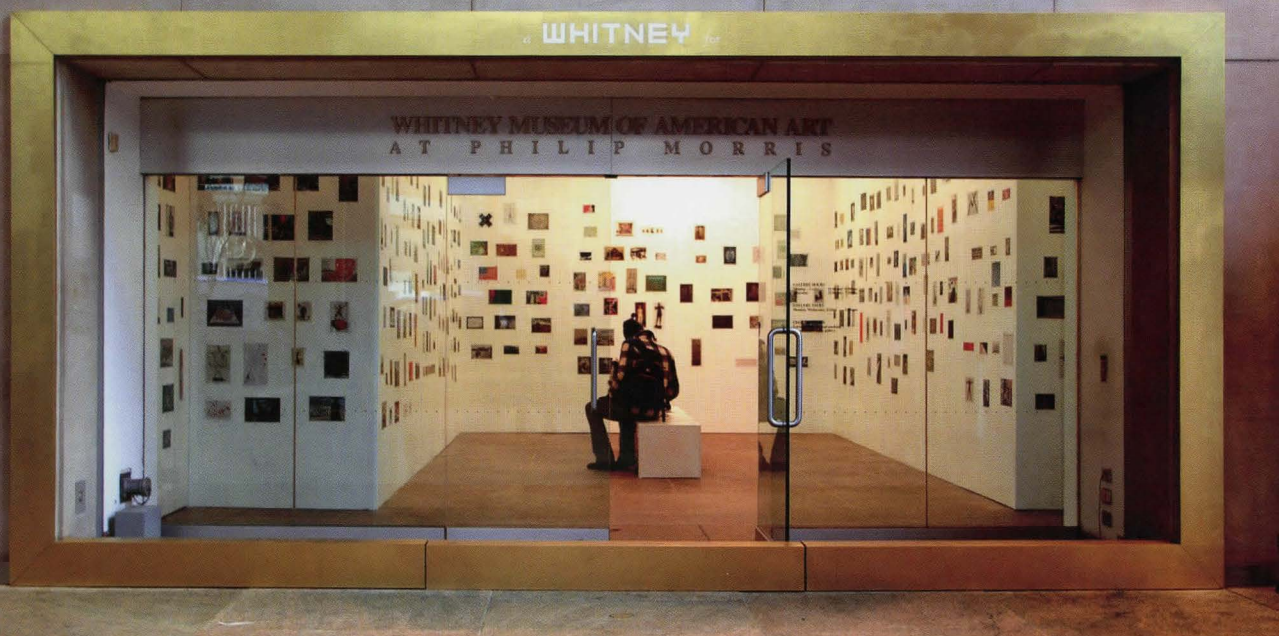
ABOVE AND OPPOSITE: Ellen Harvey, *Museum of Failure* (*Collection of Impossible Subjects & Invisible Self-Portraits*), 2007. Rear-illuminated, hand-engraved, and hand-sanded Plexiglas mirror, aluminum frame, fluorescent lights, latex paint and pencil on wall, and twelve paintings in oil in second-hand frames. Installation views, Luxe Gallery, New York. Courtesy the artist and Luxe Gallery, New York. Photographs: Jan Baracz.

it in the other, and you see how her life plays out differently based on that one tiny incident. Logistically, the path to becoming a writer in the U.S. has clearer flagstones: you can take creative writing classes, go to an MFA program, and so on. I took that path but it's not the only one. I think there's something a bit useful about feeling like an outsider when it comes to writing. I love poems written in the voice of aliens, like May Swenson's "Southbound on the Freeway." I certainly don't think I'll ever feel part of a canon, though I've been classified as an American poet—I was in *Best American Poetry* before I was a citizen.

I recently went to Germany to do readings for an anthology of young American poets translated into German—*Schwerkraft: Junge Amerikanische Lyrik*, which is edited by Ron Winkler and translated by Uljana Wolf and Jan Wagner. It was an intense experience to read my own poems in German, because what frustrates me when I'm in Germany is my inability to talk about poetry, about abstractions. Having these translations was a bit like being given a key to my German adulthood, or to my German poet-self.



I think we can officially upgrade my interest in hybridity to an obsession. A favorite recent discovery is *The Book of Imaginary Beings* by Jorge Luis Borges, which describes creatures sighted in Wisconsin and Minnesota lumber camps—the Hide-Behind, the Axehandle Hound—alongside animals that appeared in the dreams of Kafka and C. S. Lewis. Before our interview, I never consciously thought about my interest in hybrids as being a correlative for being between cultures. But it's definitely one of the main subjects of my new book, *Modern Life*, which is populated by catgoats—my own invention—centaurs, a robot-boy, and ship figureheads trying to figure out if they're more head or ship. Halving in all of its forms has always been something I've been interested in. And isn't everyone a fraction or a hybrid from the simple fact of having two parents? I'm half narrative, half lyric; half melancholy, half mischievous; half head, half heart. And so on. I love the part in Plato's *Symposium* where Aristophanes talks about how "primeval man was round, his back and sides forming a circle" and how after they begin to attack the Gods,



Ellen Harvey, *A Whitney for the Whitney at Philip Morris (Altria) / I Can Be an American Visionary Too!*, 2003. Nineteen panels painted in oil and laminated and reconstituted Whitney acquisitions catalogue. Installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria, New York. Courtesy the artist and Luxe Gallery, New York. Photograph: Jan Baracz.

Zeus decides to “cut men in two, like a sorb-apple which is halved for pickling, or as you might divide an egg with a hair.” This then becomes an explanation for the fact that humans fall in love in pairs—we’re just searching for a lost wholeness.

Do you also feel this way? Do you love hybrids?

EH: Does really liking mermaids as a child count?

MH: Definitely.

EH: Actually I really don’t want to be a hybrid animal, maybe because I already am one. I would like to be a seal though—they seem to have a really good time living in two elements.

MH: That’s a good choice. I think it demonstrates being at peace with your own hybridity. I would like to experience being a hybrid animal so that I could feel what it was like right at the point where, in the case of the centaur, say, I changed from human to horse. Does the breath change as it crosses that divide? Does the head have ideas that the body won’t go along with? One of my favorite things is to stand in waist-high water and think about how that divides the body in two.

EH: And yet you’re still one person.

This conversation was conducted in person and via e-mail from May 25 to June 7, 2007.

“How We Learned to Hold Hands”

From *Modern Life*, by Matthea Harvey

We halved them because we could. It turned out anything with four legs could wobble along on two. Anything with two could hop along on one. Leopards. Horses. Kangaroos. Front, back, it didn't matter. Mostly it was teenagers with their parents' Christmas knives who did the cutting. No one knew where the Keepers came from, but they favored covered wagons with billowing sheets tucked in at the edges, puckering like a healing wound. They tied scarves tightly around their chins—men and women—as if to hold the hemispheres of their own heads together. At first they hid the hybrids from us. Their first, clumsiest attempts were the most marvelous—front ostrich, back deer, wind ruffling through first feathers then fur. And the catgoat, all front, who patrolled the shop windows. . . . When the sun hit at a certain angle, the battle would begin—cat wanting to see its cat reflection, goat wanting to see goat.