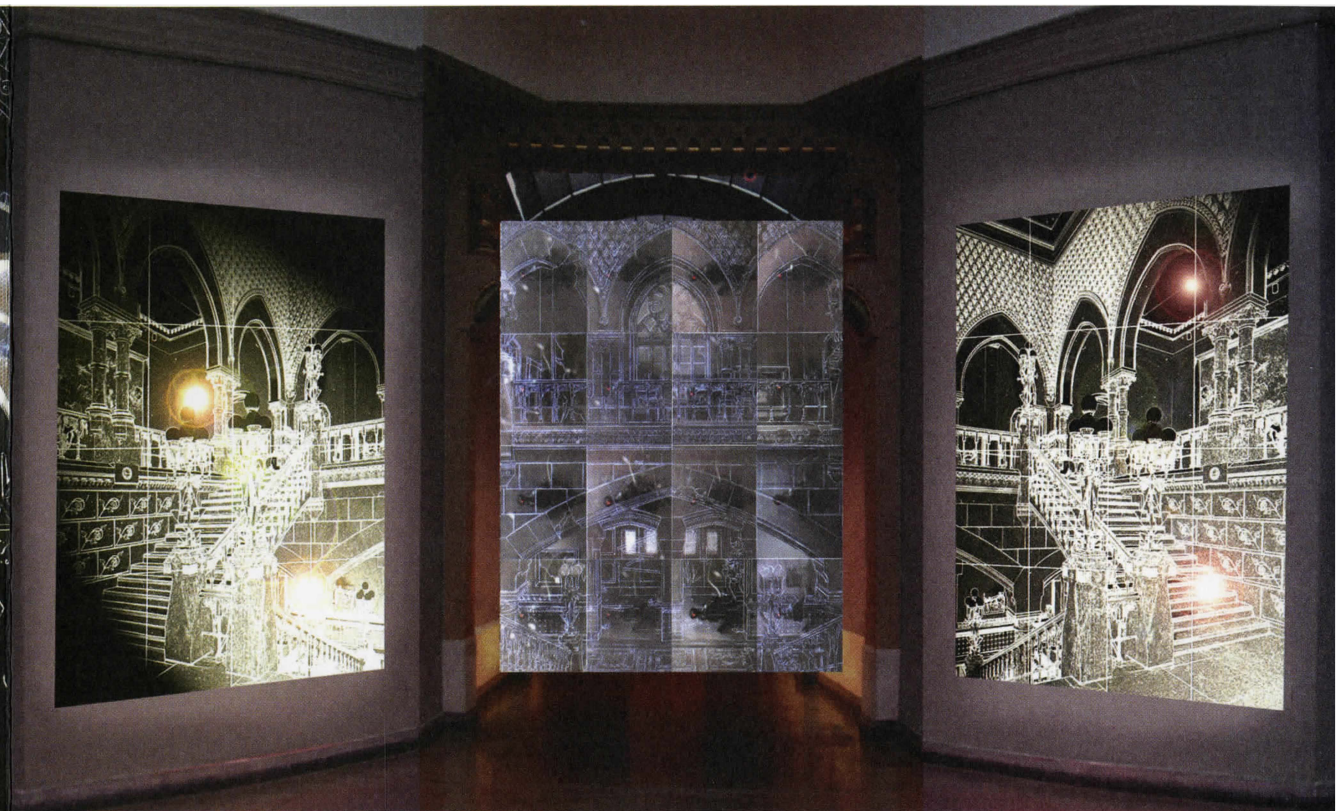
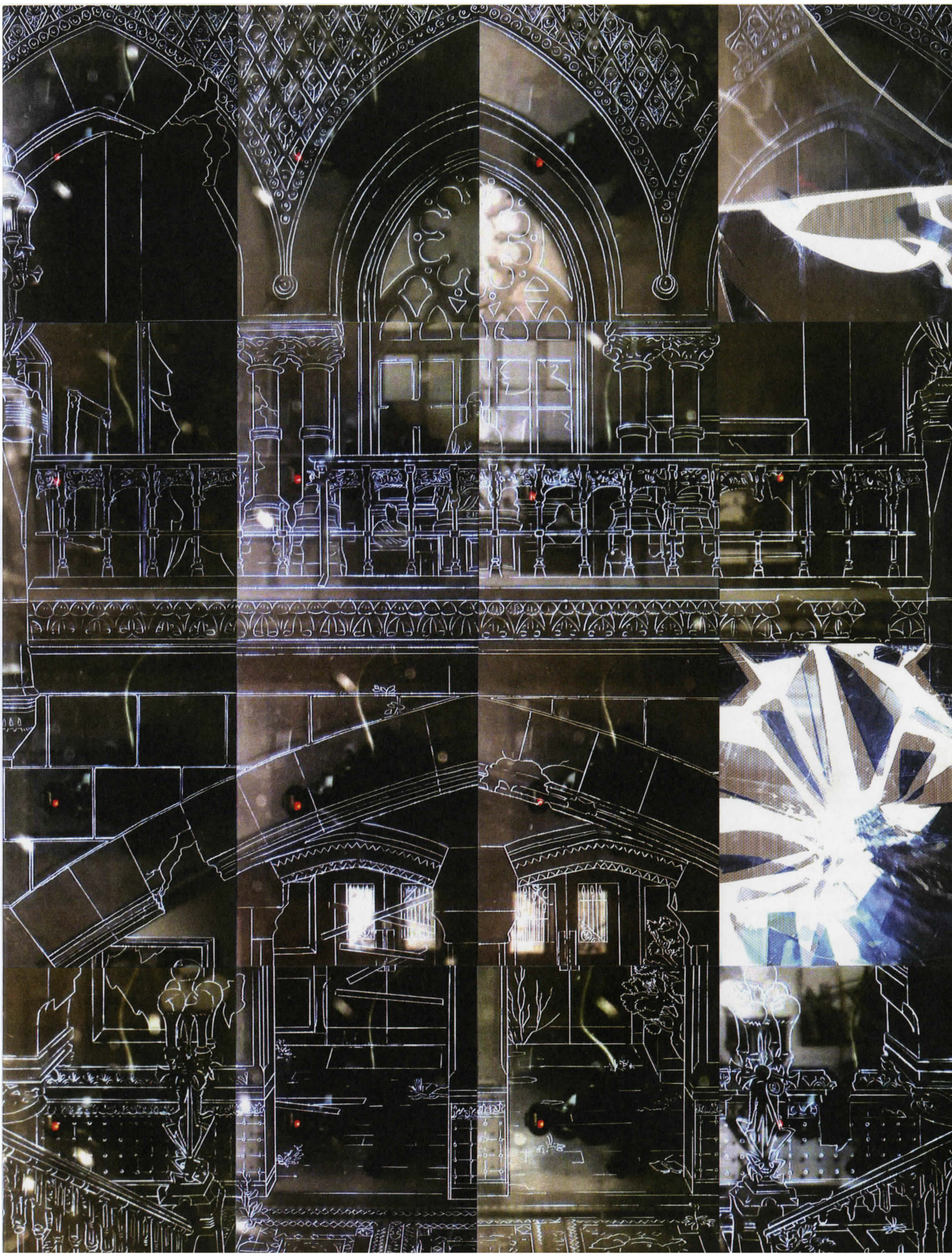


# ELLEN HARVEY | MIRROR

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Ellen Harvey has engaged the Pennsylvania Academy's 1876 historic landmark building by creating a site-specific installation in the heart of the museum. Occurring during the Pennsylvania Academy's 200th anniversary year, the exhibition addresses the Academy's Gothic Revival architecture and the time-honored realist tradition of copying works of art. Harvey has described her approach to art-making as "an often futile attempt to deconstruct clichés of art production in order to understand or reveal their continuing hold on the imagination despite their apparent obsolescence."<sup>1</sup> Copying works of art and creating works based on genre archetypes are two strategies employed in Harvey's oeuvre. In *New York Beautification Project* (1999–2001), for example, Harvey spent nearly two years painting exquisitely detailed oil reproductions of 19th-century landscape paintings throughout New York City in outdoor places already marked with graffiti. Having created several installations in the "museum interventionist" mode for institutions such as the Whitney Museum in New York, the Center for Contemporary Art in Warsaw, and the Secession in Vienna, Harvey is a perfect match to go up against the Pennsylvania Academy's 19th-century architecture and traditions.

In *Mirror*, Harvey literally holds a mirror up to Frank Furness and George Hewitt's Victorian Gothic masterpiece by re-creating—that is, copying—the dazzling interior stairhall space as a nearly life-size reverse engraving on mirror panels. The mirrors are assembled as



large units that are installed on aluminum armatures covering each wall in the Academy's four-walled rotunda gallery. Each twelve-by-nine-foot artwork is composed of sixteen mirror panels, engraved on the reverse, that when assembled as a grid form a portion of the interior view of the Academy stairhall. The reverse engravings are illuminated from behind, allowing the fine linework to glow. The resulting installation is a nearly 360-degree, all-encompassing drawn environment anchored by a video projection.

The video, projected in the same dimensions as the mirror panels, documents the process of Harvey engraving sixteen mirrors that represent one view of the stairhall interior. Visible in each

of the incremental drawings is a video camera in the act of recording the drawing coming to life. During each drawings' evolution on the video screen, the artist is visible only as a shadow that temporarily obstructs the glowing lines. At the end of an hour, when the drawings are complete, all sixteen mirrors featured in the video shatter simultaneously and the laborious process of engraving the mirrors starts again. The video projection is synchronized with two other videos playing on monitors in the neighboring transept galleries. These each show Harvey's hand drawing an image of one of the previous two Academy buildings on paper. At the same time the mirrors in the large projection shatter, the drawings of the historical buildings burst into flames—a reference to the fact that the Academy's first home burned. With safety and longevity in mind, Furness and Hewitt designed the 1876 building to be fireproof.

Upon closer inspection it becomes apparent that the Pennsylvania Academy interior depicted in the mirror engravings and the video projection is far from accurate. Instead of faithfully representing the Academy's carefully maintained stairhall, *Mirror* showcases a space that has become the kind of picturesque ruin from which Victorian Gothic architecture took its inspiration. In Harvey's version, plants have sprouted, arches crumble, plaster deteriorates, and boards cover the museum's entry doors. The Academy-as-ruin extends beyond the mirror drawings and video and onto the very walls of the museum itself. Using faux-finishing techniques, Harvey has aged

*New York Beautification Project*, 1999-2001 (details of four paintings). Oil on various surfaces in New York City, 5 x 7" each. (Photograph: Jan Baracz).

Harvey created forty highly detailed oil paintings in a 19th-century landscape style throughout New York in outdoor areas already painted with graffiti. Working adjacent to graffiti tags, she explored the notion of what constitutes "acceptable" illicit art, since her work looked nothing like traditional graffiti.



the walls of the rotunda gallery, complementing the video and mirror engravings hanging in the same space.

As Harvey has said, *Mirror* is the "ultimate representational piece."<sup>2</sup> Not only does it represent the defining space of the Academy, but it is literally a mirror that reflects anything before it. The impact is all the more profound since *Mirror* is displayed in one of the great temples of traditional realism, which the installation underscores and playfully subverts. Harvey's copy of the dominant interior space of the Pennsylvania Academy asks us to ruminate on the representational tradition of the institution, the relationship between traditional and modern architecture that the Academy building embodies, and the melancholic Gothic Revival foundations on which the Academy's architecture rests. The notion of copying works of art as an artistic exercise has always been an important element of the Academy's curriculum. To this day, students draw from plaster casts (replicas of antique masterworks), some of which date back to the Academy's inception in 1805. Harvey both underscores and subverts this traditional approach to artistic instruction by copying the Academy's most renowned masterpiece—the building itself.

Frank Furness scholar Michael J. Lewis makes the argument that the pragmatic and scientific traditions of Philadelphia intellectual history that informed the curriculum of the Pennsylvania Academy also permeated the design of the building itself.<sup>3</sup> There were several technologically advanced building strategies employed in the construction that belie the Old World melange of

*A Whitney for the Whitney at Altria*, 2003. Exterior installation view. Gilded frame, twenty 120 x 48" panels with oil painted copies of Whitney-owned works, dropped ceiling, seven recent Whitney Museum of America Art acquisitions, appropriated catalog.

Harvey painted freehand copies of the 394 images illustrated in the Whitney's 2001 collections catalog in an attempt to give visitors what they wanted, "a Whitney Museum at the Whitney at Altria." Many visitors to the Whitney Museum branch, expecting to see a museum collection, are dismayed to discover instead a contemporary project space devoted to solo-artist exhibitions, so Harvey re-created a miniature Whitney based on the museum's latest permanent collection catalog.

architectural history. Iron girders studded with large rivets are boldly exposed to view, the first time structural iron was made visible for aesthetic effect in a public building.<sup>4</sup> Mass production was employed to make detail patterns, especially pronounced in the stairhall space that Harvey replicates. The gold patterned reliefs on earthy red walls in the stairhall, designed by George Hewitt in the style of a North African mosque, for example, were actually stamped from a mold. Similarly, the leaf-and-flower motif of the sandstone panels below these Moorish walls were sandblasted—another architectural first. The stairhall's brass railings, resembling crankshafts and turbines, seemingly pay homage to industrial Philadelphia and the engineers and manufacturers—pragmatists and empiricists—who sat on the Academy's building committee.<sup>5</sup>





Just as Furness and Hewitt's Academy combined craftsmanship with the latest building technologies, Harvey's copy of the Academy stairhall employs painstaking labor in tandem with modern materials and technologies, including video projection, digital editing, and photography. The video that documents the evolution of one of the engraved views of the Academy required the construction of an elaborate workstation that kept each glass panel firmly in place and the video camera static while Harvey engraved the panels. Unlike



A Whitney for the Whitney at Altria, 2003. Panel detail.

the larger plexiglass mirror panels on view, the panels seen in the video were glass, since Harvey was to shatter each one upon completing it. Behind the video camera, Harvey placed a photographic image of the Academy stairhall to create a reflected backdrop for each of the

mirror engravings. Many hours' worth of intensive work were destroyed, and the only trace that remains is the processual video drawing, edited so each drawing evolves in one hour's time—essentially a form of video animation made possible by new digital technologies.

Harvey's reverse engravings also evoke the hand- and machine-made, the traditional and the modern, that hang in balance in the design and construction of the Academy building. Her hand-engraved renditions of the building's signature space on mirrors anchored to aluminum armatures synthesizes the Victorian Gothic with the metal-and-glass skin of modern architecture. Harvey thereby obliquely comments on the central role that architecture continues to play in creating a museum's identity. In 1876, the pinnacle of high design was Furness and Hewitt's Victorian Gothic Pennsylvania Academy. Today, museum architecture tends toward a neo-Modernism—glass, poured concrete, titanium, and other high-tech metals. Just as *Mirror* addresses seemingly oppositional tendencies in museum architecture, the installation also reconciles art-historical extremes. Simultaneously minimal and representational, the mirror panel lightboxes bring together aspects of 1960s Minimalism—the machine-fabricated sculpture and the grid—with the traditional notion that art's ultimate goal is to represent a subject as accurately as possible through careful attention to detail and adroit craftsmanship.

In her re-creation of the stairhall, Harvey has subtly altered the Academy, conceiving it as a ruin, and thereby revealing the origins of its Victorian Gothic architecture. Despite the modern technologies and new building techniques that were employed in the construction of the Academy, its aesthetic ancestry lies in Romantic England, where melancholic longing and medieval ruins intersected to create an architectural movement international in scope.

The Gothic Revival was a literary movement before it was an architectural one. In early-18th-century England, a literary appetite for melancholy, horror, gloom, and decay developed. Such sensibilities resonated with the crumbling medieval structures that dotted the English landscape. These derelict abbeys and

monasteries became choice places on which aristocrats built their estates. The estates would soon boast gardens punctuated by altered ruins or entirely new buildings made to look like ruins constructed in a medieval style. But before the Gothic Revival could be fully embraced, a radical aesthetic shift needed to occur. Since the Renaissance, classical architecture stood for everything that was beautiful. If one was to embrace the art of the so-called Dark Ages, a new way of appreciating art needed to be developed, and associationism or the picturesque were born in order to confront artistic challenges. According to this doctrine, a work of art does not have to be judged by intrinsic qualities like form or proportion, which were classical ideals, but by the mental pictures that are conjured in the viewer's mind when encountering a work of art. The ultimate site for indulging picturesque associations became the landscaped English garden, which appropriated melancholy ruins from the repertoire of 17th-century painters such as Claude Lorrain and Salvator Rosa. However, English ruins in the landscape, whether real or artificial, were decidedly medieval as opposed to Claude and Rosa's classical creations.<sup>6</sup>

Summarizing mercilessly, the artificial ruin made of flimsy materials soon led to more permanent structures that were not just theatrical set pieces in garden environments (such as Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill, built 1750–77). Estates, churches, and public buildings were created in a Gothic style whose lineage could be traced in the English landscape. Then, what began as an English architectural movement that announced a brand of nationalism distinct from the Roman Catholic Baroque that predominated in France, spread internationally, serving the needs of countries such as Germany and America. The eclecticism that is evident in the Victorian Gothic of the Pennsylvania Academy—motifs appropriated from ancient Greece, medieval Europe, Morocco—can be seen in 18th-century



Bad Boy Klimt, 2002. Exterior installation view, Secession, Vienna. Oil on wall, variable dimensions.

Harvey was invited by the Secession's contemporary program (the Austrian institution that houses Gustav Klimt's Beethoven frieze) to create a work in the spirit of her *New York Beautification Project*. The artist returned again to playing with public expectations about graffiti by painting in bubble letters "Bad Boy Klimt Leb!" ("Bad Boy Klimt Lives!") on the façade and in the hallways of the museum. Within the letterforms she painted images appropriated from the Klimt frieze.

English Gothic gardens, where Hindu, Chinese, and Moorish pavilions sprouted amongst authentic and artificial medieval ruins.

While there is a degree of homage paid to the Academy's realist tradition and Victorian Gothic architecture in *Mirror*, like all of Harvey's museum interventions, there is also a transgressive element at work. Sparring with the time-honored Academy pedagogy, which she distills as an injunction that art hold up a





*Bad Boy Klimt*, 2002 (interior detail). Oil on wall, 24 x 30."

mirror to nature, in the end, Harvey ruins the Academy in her reverse-engraved mirrors and then smashes them, destroying the Academy in the video projection. And she draws the previous Academy buildings on paper only to burn them. On one hand, this comments on the fact that the first Academy was partially destroyed in a fire (the second, rebuilt Academy building actually never burned) and, as a result, Furness and Hewitt carefully designed the 1876 building

to be fireproof. On the other hand, the burning drawings can also be read as a metaphorical attack on the Academy's perceived artistic conservatism. Exploring the contradictions of homage and critique is a guiding principle of Ellen Harvey's artistic philosophy.

Alex Baker  
Curator of Contemporary Art

<sup>1</sup> Harvey quoted in Shamim M. Momin, *A Whitney for the Whitney at Altria* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2003), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Conversation with Ellen Harvey and the author, July 8, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Michael J. Lewis, *Frank Furness: Architecture and the Violent Mind* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 8.

<sup>4</sup> Michael J. Lewis, "The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts as Building and Idea," in *Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts: 200 Years of Excellence* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 2005), 66.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis, "The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts as Building and Idea," 70-71; and Lewis, *Frank Furness*, 101-3.

<sup>6</sup> Michael J. Lewis, *The Gothic Revival* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2002), 13-20.

All images are courtesy of the artist. For dimensions, height precedes width.

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Front:  
*Mirror*, 2005. Video still.

Back:  
*Mirror*, 2005. Work in progress. Reverse engraving on plexiglass mirrors, aluminum, fluorescent lights. Total dimensions of panel: 12 x 9.' This section: 6 x 4.5'