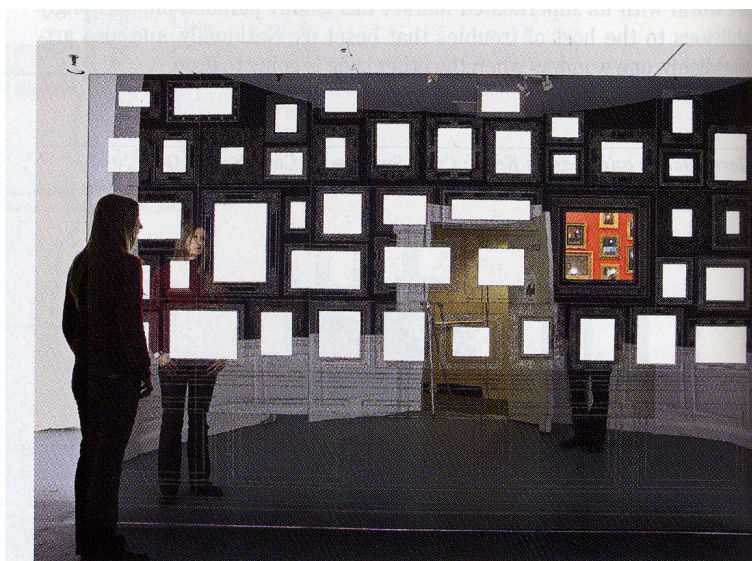


Spring in Dystopia

Lean on visual pleasure but limned with thoughtful commentary on the state of the world, the current Whitney Biennial gives a quieter than usual voice to a general malaise.

BY GREGORY VOLK



Ellen Harvey: *Museum of Failure: Collection of Impossible Subjects & Invisible Self-Portraits, 2007, Plexiglas-and-aluminum frame, oil paintings, mixed mediums.*

Ellen Harvey sticks very close to home—or, more precisely, to her painting studio, where she spends a great deal of time—in her two-part “Museum of Failure” (2007-ongoing), which is one of the wonders of the Biennial. On a freestanding illuminated Plexiglas wall, ornate hand-engraved frames surround glowing sanded-out rectangles and squares, which essentially function as absent or blank paintings. Titled *Collection of Impossible Subjects*, it evokes all the million things that you can’t see and that you don’t understand, as well as things that aren’t represented and that don’t make it into famous museums. Looking through an opening in this structure, you see *Invisible Self-Portrait in My Studio*, a large painting comprising dozens of small, exquisite paintings, once again in ornate frames. These paintings within a painting disclose snippets and slices of Harvey’s studio, including furniture and art tools, along with self-portraits based on photographs of the artist’s reflection in a mirror; in the paintings, her face is obscured by the camera’s bright flash. The whole work turns the basic action of composing a painting then exhibiting it in a museum into a complex investigation of slippery realities, elusive knowledge, absence and presence, and into an unstable whole that breaks down into multiple fragments. It is also visually stunning.