

Generation 1.5



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QUEENS MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK



Ellen Harvey

VALERIE SMITH

Ellen Harvey's *ID Card Project*, 1998, is a series of twenty-five painted self-portraits based on the artist's identification card photos from 1981 to 1998. Set on five-by-seven-inch panels, they recall the miniature genre and read like a physiognomic résumé—an evolutionary chart of Harvey's face between the ages of fourteen and thirty-one. Where Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Untitled (Passport no. 3)*, 2006, which appears in *Generation 1.5*, investigates global bureaucracies, Harvey's *ID Card Project* is personal—a diaristic self-examination taking stock of her place in the world as she traveled through her academic career in the United States, with a brief stint in Germany. And so we see an adolescent girl looking deadpan or slightly annoyed, giggly, and finally self-assured, and an older Harvey alternating between aloof, defiant, and occasionally amused but mostly serious as her displaced British soul faced life in America. Subsequent works, such as *Monsters*, 1999–2000; *Girls with the Same Face*, 2000; *I See Myself in You*, 2000–2001; and *100 Free Portraits and Twins*, both 2001, exemplify how investigative processes intensify when the cultural references that are the compass by which we locate ourselves are removed. Likeness and difference, transformation and illusion persist in Harvey's determined study of what makes a person unique.

As people change, so do places. In the conversation with her sister Matthea, included in these pages, Harvey contrasts her memories of sylvan Dorset, England, with the Milwaukee sprawl she came to accept as home. She tells the story of a beloved landscape of water meadows in Dorset, recalling that when she found it bulldozed one day, she vowed never to look at the place again so as to always remember it as it had been. It is easy to associate this crushing moment with Harvey's *New York Beautification Project*, 1999–2001, since revisiting painful moments of change is one well-known

Ellen Harvey, *New York Beautification Project* (details), 1999–2001. Forty paintings in oil, painted without permission on graffiti sites throughout New York City. Photograph: Jan Barącz.



ABOVE: Ellen Harvey, *ID Card Project*, 1998. Twenty-five oil on board panels painted with details of all the artist's identity cards from 1981 to 1998 in chronological order. Courtesy the artist.

RIGHT: 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, Queens Museum of Art. Courtesy the artist and Luxe Gallery, New York. Photograph: Eileen Costa/ Pauline Shapiro.





way to ameliorate our memories as adults. The project seems to have brought the artist home again. Harvey painted forty small, oval-shaped landscapes—delicate, bucolic scenes—in public spaces throughout New York City, often on walls covered with ripped posters or graffiti. If graffiti is the mark of outsiders declaring their disaffection from society by reclaiming marginal territory, so too is Harvey's *Beautification Project* an act of defiance. Steeped in the idealized, painterly conventions of British landscape pictures, the project reads as this artist's effort to situate herself in radical relation to the venerable romantic traditions that are her heritage. Her deliberate high/low juxtapositions also call attention to the subjective criteria that allow us to make value judgments about what is acceptable as art.

While questions of belonging to a former culture emerge from her landscape paintings, *A Whitney for the Whitney at Philip Morris (Altria) / I Can Be an American Visionary Too!*, 2003, the piece Harvey chose for this exhibition, takes on membership in the new culture. On ten four-by-eight-foot panels, Harvey painted miniature versions of 394 artworks from the Whitney Museum of American Art's collection as illustrated in its *American Visionaries* catalogue, boldly inserting herself into, even taking possession of, the canon of American art. Despite having lived in the United States for many more years than in her native England, and for over a decade in New York, Harvey does not consider herself an American, but among that special breed of internationalists called New Yorkers. At home in the city ("there are so many national hybrids here that it's almost impossible to seem exotic or alien," she observes in her conversation with her sister), Harvey picks up on the Whitney Museum's continuing debate around what makes art American: nationality or residency? Targeting the parochial perception that one must be native born to be an integral part of a community, Harvey's project finds the Achilles heel in "American" museum missions.

While *I Can Be an American Visionary Too!* recalls the academic debates of the 1980s around Sherrie Levine's photographic reproductions of famous works of art, which challenged the idea of genius and the masterpiece via exact-copy appropriations, Harvey's project is clearly not about verisimilitude. Her copies are painterly, even sloppy. Their range and scope is the point: the project feeds the obsessive side of Harvey's production and shows that she has mastered the act of consuming



Ellen Harvey, *A Whitney for the Whitney at Philip Morris (Altria) / I Can Be an American Visionary Too!* (detail), 2003.

one's rival in order to appropriate its power, lest one be consumed by it. Remarkably, Harvey has decided to share her empowerment. Originally installed at the Whitney's Altria satellite space, there the piece included seven cutout windows through which the viewer could see seven original artworks. For all subsequent installations, including that at the Queens Museum, these openings are replaced with a mirror—an invitation to viewers to insert themselves into the canon too, and have their Warholian glimpse of fame. Giving the people a piece of the elitist pie is a democratic gesture (perhaps one with Anglo-Saxon socialist undertones) that sends a clear message: no art is too rarified for the community. Now that this mammoth installation has appeared at the Queens Museum, which boasts the most diverse audiences in the nation, Harvey has provided a model for immigrants just like her, encouraging them to take their place among the ranks of the already arrived.

Ellen Harvey, *A Whitney for the Whitney at Philip Morris (Altria) / I Can Be an American Visionary Too!*, 2003. Detail of catalogue. Courtesy the artist; Luxe Gallery, New York; Galerie Magnus Müller, Berlin; and Galerie Gebrüder Lehmann, Dresden. Photograph: Jan Baracz.

