

ELLEN HARVEY: The Alien's Guide to
the Ruins of Washington, D.C.



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ELLEN HARVEY

The Alien's Guide to the Ruins of Washington, D.C.

remains of the classical and neoclassical buildings that seem to have taken root in every corner of the globe. Attempting to make sense of what they find, Harvey's aliens mine the potential of Washington—one of the greatest neoclassical cities—as a tourist destination. *The Alien's Guide to the Ruins of Washington, D.C.*, a tour of the capital's landmarks, is the result.

We have seen America's capital city in ruins before. We have watched the White House scorched by an energy ray from an alien ship; we have witnessed the Washington Monument reduced to rubble by a massive earthquake; we have looked on as the noble head of Abraham Lincoln is cleaved from the body of his marble memorial. So it is not a surprise to see D.C. demolished again, this time by causes unknown, sometime in the distant future.

In Ellen Harvey's new project for the Corcoran, she imagines an Earth populated by ruins, human civilization having long since come to an end. Visitors from another planet have descended, colonized, and set themselves to work interpreting the architectural legacy of the Earth's former inhabitants. In particular, they are in thrall to the

Although mindful that details of human civilization may elude them, the alien visitors have absolute clarity about the central role that classical architecture played in earthly society. The future historians observe the seemingly unstoppable, virus-like propagation of columns, pediments, and porticos throughout the world and over millennia. Enamored of the style themselves, the aliens approach it with an objectivity granted by time and distance, homing in on what made the style so successful. Classicism, they perceive, is at once rigid and mutable: stable enough to be recognized instantly and flexible enough to carry its authority from its roots as a symbol of democracy in ancient Greece to its subsequent use in the service of empire builders, fascists, Stalinists, museums, banks, and post offices.

ⁱ To give a brief sampling, the White House was obliterated by an alien energy beam in the movie *Independence Day* (1996), and has also been destroyed in *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004) and 2012 (2009). The Washington Monument was a target in such films as *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* (1956), *Mars Attacks* (1996), and *Olympus Has Fallen* (2013). In *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (2011), the robots decapitate the Lincoln Memorial.

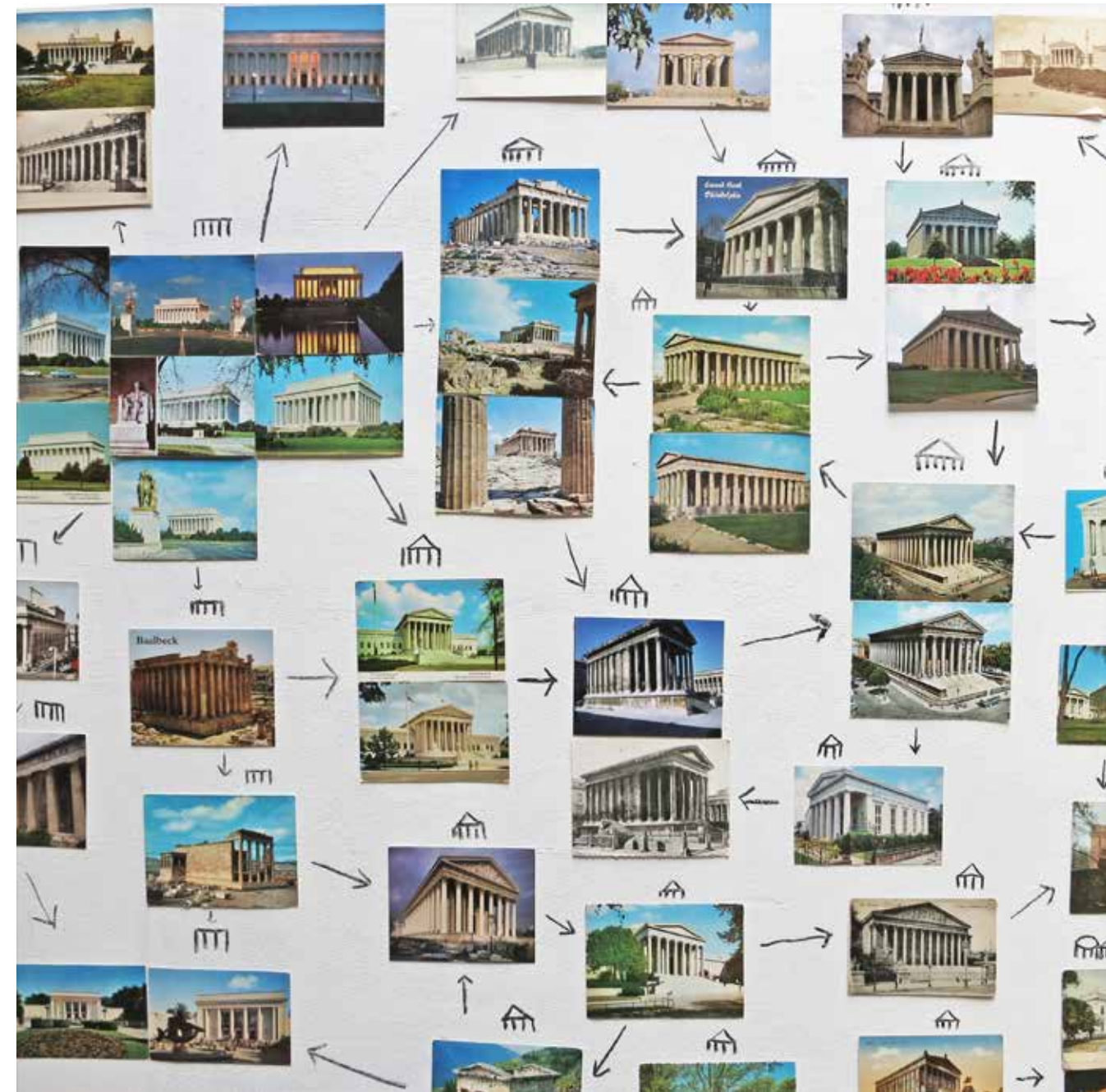
Like her alien creations, Ellen Harvey is similarly beguiled by classicism's hold on the popular imagination. Her subject is the built world itself: why it looks the way it looks, and how we come to know it. Harvey explores an architectural language so common that we have become nearly blind to it. In the exhibition, this phenomenon is explored in an installation that the aliens refer to as the "The Pillar-Builder Archive," a vast trove of postcards that documents humanity's love affair with the style (fig. 2). The assembled collection reveals a world where it is easy to mistake one major city for another. From the Parthenon in Athens to the Catholic Cathedral in Vilnius, Lithuania, to the Allentown High School in Allentown, PA, the aliens' archive is a bird's-eye view onto our cultural obsessions and *idées fixes*.

The centerpiece of her investigation and of the exhibition is the *Alien's Guide*: a carefully researched and deeply incorrect explanatory map of the remains of a great city (fig. 5). Distributed from a souvenir stand in the Corcoran's Atrium and at hotels and tourist bureaus around D.C., the guide provides alien tourists—and present-day visitors—with a self-guided tour of Washington's neoclassical buildings. Not unlike earthly

archaeologists puzzling over the mysteries of Stonehenge, the alien historians suggest that the sober columns of the World War II Memorial were used to delineate a tidal pool that nurtured larval humans. Confronted with the long, formal space of the Supreme Court, they posit a communal dining room in which people feasted on books before returning to their ocean dwellings.

Harvey based the souvenir stand itself on the mobile trucks, ubiquitous in D.C. circa 2013, selling hot dogs and sodas along with White House T-shirts and snow-globes (fig. 3 and 4). In place of the images of pretzels and pizza that typically adorn today's carts, Harvey has substituted her own finely worked paintings of neoclassical ruins. In one painting, the National Mall is reduced to rubble and ash, with the top of the downed Washington Monument intruding awkwardly (fig. 1); in another, the fractured façade of the Capitol building glows lacey and white against a black sky; in others, the close-up capitals of columns—Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian—are proudly displayed like the trophy heads of vanquished rivals (fig. 1 and cover). Although these scenes are rendered in black and white (the aliens don't see color), in most other regards Harvey takes her cue from the souvenir carts' old-

Fig. 2. *Pillar-Builder Archive* (detail), 2013. Over 3,000 postcards, tape, watercolor on wall. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Locks Gallery, Philadelphia. Photo: Ellen Harvey





fashioned aesthetic, in which the pictures of french fries and corn dogs appear to be lovingly painted by hand.

With an eye toward our earthly brand of snow-globe tourism, Harvey gives her aliens the same sense of whimsical sentimentality in their encounters with greatness. In doing so, she opens up fundamental questions about our relationship to the objects and ideas we hold most sacred. In their sensationalized, fetishized, and commodified representations of neoclassical buildings, the aliens echo our very human combination of cultural reverence with something else—something both tawdry and vital. Harvey talks about loving “the in-between space inhabited by things that are either art or not art depending on context and the eye of the beholder: graffiti, street portraiture, chalk pavement

drawings, Sunday painters, hand-painted signs on a hot dog cart.” To her, these objects “speak strongly of the human desire to create something new and remarkable, to have an impact—a desire made all the more impressive by the fact that they face the world directly, outside of the protective cocoon that envelops ‘real’ art and without the resources of the mass media.”ⁱⁱ

Harvey’s alien souvenir stand and guide follow in the finest human tradition of entangling the sacred and the vulgar, of approaching the sublime via kitsch. We may balk at the aliens’ cavalier interpretations of our most hallowed institutions, but their methods parallel those of countless others who pay homage to the monuments of D.C. as well as the ruins of Athens, Rome, and Great Britain through souvenir keychains and teddy bears. Our personal and cultural memory is in large part formed by such objects. Harvey notes that “the embarrassment that these productions sometimes elicit is the strongest sign that they are meaningful—that they matter. It’s impossible to be embarrassed by something that you don’t care about.”ⁱⁱⁱ Although the ruins add a veneer of historical respectability to the pursuit, Harvey argues that the timeless is always already tawdry and

ii Ellen Harvey, interview with the author, April, 2013.

iii Ibid

Fig. 3 Photo: Ellen Harvey, 2012.

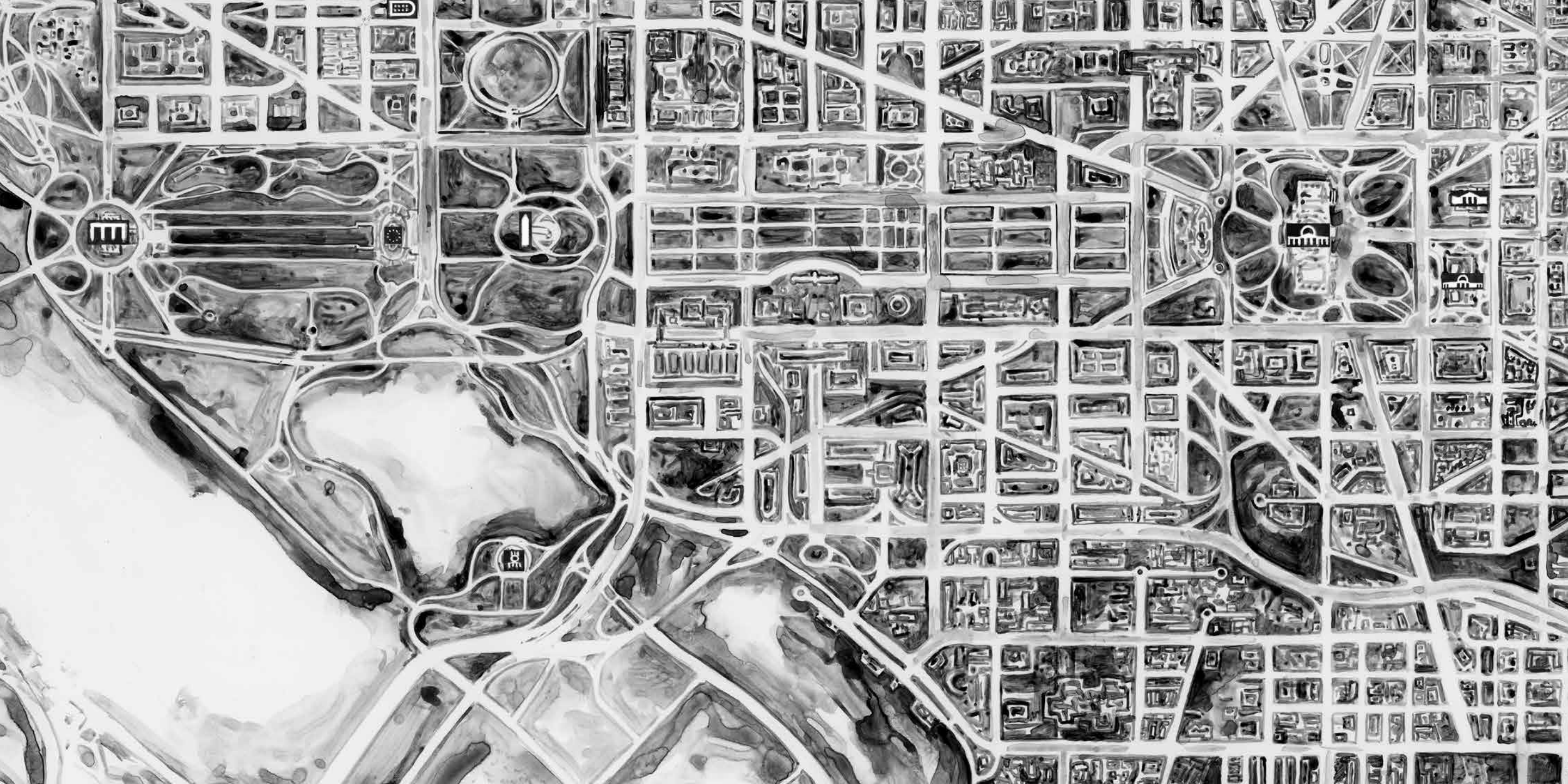
Fig. 4 *Alien Souvenir Stand*, 2013. Oil on aluminum, watercolor on clayboard, wood, aluminum, propane tanks. 9 ft. (h) x 17 ft. (w) x 5 ft. (d).

Photo: Etienne Frossard

Fig. 5 (Next pages) *The Alien’s Guide to the Ruins of Washington, D.C. (map)*. 12,000 folded 18 x 24 in. prints. Courtesy of the artist.

Photo: Ellen Harvey







that enchantment and cliché easily slide into one another.

Harvey's work over the past several years has explored this tension between modes of representation and the often poignant commodification of art and experience. In *The Nudist Museum*, installed at the Bass Museum in Miami in 2010, Harvey made the case that context is all and that the meaning of pictures is determined by their setting (fig. 7). Taking the "nude in art" as her subject, she carefully reproduced every work of art in the Bass Museum containing a nude figure, outfitted her copies in thrift-store frames, and installed them together in a tight, salon-style display over contemporary images of the naked body taken from pornography, fitness, and fashion magazines.

The resulting collection of naked Christs and voluptuous odalisques erased historical and situational specificity, creating a prurient jumble of limbs and flesh. For *The Nudist Museum Gift Shop*, presented at Dodge Gallery in 2012, she made paintings based on images she found by typing the word "nude" on eBay and rejecting everything that was "art" (fig. 6). The result was a gallery of discarded breast mugs and torso candlesticks—objects that had been made "nude" to make them desirable, and which had apparently failed in that purpose. Taken together, the two installations mused on the slippery relationship between erotic and consumer desire, and beauty and baseness.

In *Arcadia*, an installation commissioned by the Turner Contemporary in Margate, England, in 2011, Harvey created a full-scale replica of J. M. W. Turner's gallery, which was devoted exclusively to selling his own work and filled with his romantic seascape paintings (fig. 8). She pointed up the contrast between the Margate of the nineteenth century—a place renowned for its natural beauty—and the present-day, down-on-its-luck seaside resort, by replacing Turner's paintings with a hand-engraved, rear-illuminated mirror panorama of the contemporary



Fig. 6 *Nudist Museum Gift Shop* (detail), 2012. Left to right: Female Nude Torso Shot Glass, 9 in (23 cm) x 12 in (31 cm), Mug Shaped Like Nude Bearded Man, 10 in (25 cm) x 10 in (25 cm), Nude Torso Mug from Rear, 10 in (25 cm) x 10 in (25 cm), Pregnant Nude Mug, 10 in (25 cm) x 10 in (25 cm), Nude Titty Mugs, 14 in (36 cm) x 18 in (46 cm), oil on wood panel. Photo: Etienne Frossard

Fig. 7 *The Nudist Museum*, 2010. Oil on gesso board with wood shop frames and contemporary magazines, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Carly Gaebe. Photo: Carly Gaebe



city, complete with seedy hotels and convenience stores. Vividly displaying “what happens when people flock to a beautiful place and then completely wreck it,” the work explores the underside of loving a thing too much, of longing for an experience that is destroyed as it is pursued.^{iv}

In essence, *Arcadia's* modern-day Margate and *The Nudist Museum Gift Shop's* discarded erotic objects exemplify the failure of any art to capture the fullness of experience. But for Harvey, this inability is no excuse not to try. Instead, her work celebrates the very human desire to dream big in the face of limitations.

Such admirable and often comically misguided ambition finds grand form in Harvey's *Alien Rocket-ship*, installed in the Corcoran's Rotunda. Here, Harvey's aliens follow in the footsteps of countless other cultures who have succumbed to the spell of classicism: they have made it their own. Yet instead of a church or a bank, the aliens put the vocabulary in the service of a project close to their own hearts, constructing an eighteen-foot high vessel in which to travel the universe. “Showcasing the very latest in neoclassical spaceship design,” the alien ship is an upturned Corinthian column, curls of smoke forming its capitol and its pointed shaft reaching for the sky.

^{iv} Ellen Harvey, quoted in interview with Meaghan Kent, *Site95*, April, 2012.

Fig. 8 *Arcade/Arcadia* (detail), 2012. Mixed media installation, dimensions variable. Installation view: Ellen Harvey: *Arcade/Arcadia*, 2012. Locks Gallery, Philadelphia. Photo: Joseph Hu

This gesture encapsulates the aspirations and strange twists and turns of our own encounters with history and greatness. It also speaks to the notion that ultimately, any attempt at representation may say more about the maker than what is being portrayed. Like the viewers of so many paintings, movies, and video games before them, Harvey and her aliens delight in seeing our great cities in ruins—and relish turning them into art.

Sarah Newman
Curator of Contemporary Art



ABOUT THE ARTIST: Ellen Harvey was born in the United Kingdom and lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. She is a graduate of the Whitney Independent Study Program, Yale Law School, and took part in the P.S.1 National Studio Program. She has exhibited extensively in the U.S. and internationally and was included in the 2008 Whitney Biennial. Recent solo exhibitions include *The Nudist Museum* at the Bass Museum, Miami Beach, FL; *Ruins Are More Beautiful* at the Center for Contemporary Art, Warsaw, Poland; *Mirror* at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts; and *A Whitney for the Whitney* at the Whitney Museum at Philip Morris. She has completed projects for both the New York and Chicago Transit Authorities, as well as commissions for the U.S. government's Art in Architecture program, New York's Percent for Art and the Philadelphia International Airport (in collaboration with Jan Baracz). Her book, *The New York Beautification Project*, was published by Gregory Miller in 2005 and *Ellen Harvey: Mirror* was published by the Pennsylvania Academy in 2006. A monograph, *Ellen Harvey: The Museum of Failure* will be published by Gregory Miller in 2013.

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JULY 3-OCTOBER 6, 2013
Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

The Pillar-Builder Archive, 2013
postcards, tape, paint

Alien Souvenir Stand, 2013
wood, oil on aluminum, watercolor on
clayboard, empty propane tanks, aluminum,
and lights

*Alien Rocket-Ship: The Latest in Pillar-Builder
Space Travel*, 2013
aluminum pillar

NOW at the Corcoran is funded in part
by Altria Group and the Corcoran Gallery
of Art's 1869 Society.



Fig. 9 Design for a Neo-Classical Alien Rocket-Ship for the Corcoran, 2013. Digitally manipulated watercolor, 16 x 20 in. Photo: Ellen Harvey
Cover *The Alien's Guide to the Ruins of Washington, D.C.* (detail). 12,000 folded 18" x 24" prints. Photo: Ellen Harvey



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