Crushed by Too Much Love. An interview with Ellen Harvey

— Nav Haq

Nav Haq: I've been interested in the way you consider historical traditions of representation in your practice, particularly of painting, but also in referencing the institutional "apparatus" of museums or galleries and their methods of displaying art. When did you first become interested in this?

Ellen Harvey: I've loved museums and paintings since I was a child. Possibly because they just seemed so much more dense and glamorous than everyday life. I also think that I responded very strongly to their attempt at ordering—in contrast to the messiness of real life. For me, the museum's necessarily inadequate narrative efforts provide an important counterpoint to what has been a central objective for me as an artist—of creating a non-narrative, incoherent experience that does not privilege any one viewpoint but seduces viewers into reexamining their own preconceptions. I'm interested in the museum as an aspirational space that is continually collapsing under the weight of its hopes and dreams, much like my own work. In some ways, I see all of my work as forming a kind of personal museum of failure.

I've made several works that are "museums": *A Whitney for the Whitney at Philip Morris* (ill. 8, p. 14), an enormous walk-in painting of all 394 images in the Whitney Museum's catalogue of its permanent collection; *The Museum of Failure's* various incarnations, all of which try to create the experience of a museum in which context overwhelms content; and *The Nudist Museum* (ills. 9–10, p. 15), where I copied every "nude" in the Bass Museum of Art's collection and hung the results on a wall papered with images of nudes from fashion, pornographic, and fitness magazines. *The Nudist Museum* even had a gift shop and a postcard display (ill. 1, p. 22). These museums play with ideas of the art museum's traditional roles as an educational resource where artists learn by copying, as the focus of the artist's desire for legitimacy and immortality, and of course as a socially acceptable place to look at pictures of naked people. However, apart from *My Venus Is Better than Your Venus* (ill. 2, p. 22), where I made a copy of a Cranach painting of Venus and then substituted mine for the original in the Princeton University Art Museum, or getting permission to paint graffiti on the Secession Building in Vienna (ill. 3), this is the first time I've really been allowed to intervene in a museum.

ill. 3 *Bad Boy Klimt Lebt!* (Bad), 2002

For *The Unloved* (pp. 36-73), the five rooms that the Groeninge-museum gave me to use largely determined the form of the piece. The rooms were arranged in an enfilade. Each room had a temporary wall on one side, behind which there was a storage space with hanging metal panels holding unexhibited artworks. I suspect that the expectation was that I would leave it all as it was and make an exhibition using the existing wall space. However, because the temporary walls were hung from the ceiling on the same track system as the storage racks, it was possible to see around them. Like all peep shows, these glimpses into the messy collection of the unexhibited were terribly seductive. I've always been fascinated by what is not shown as much as by what is shown in museums. I feel a tremendous sympathy for the artworks that don't quite make it—the anti-canon, the almost-rans, the sort of paintings you find being sold on the street (ill. 4, p. 24). So I knew immediately that I wanted to open up the storage space and give its occupants their moment in the sun.

It took some time to figure out how to open up the depot. I knew all along that I wanted to keep some of the desire-arousing frustration of not being able to see into the space properly. I also knew that I wanted to use the existing hanging system so that the whole piece would effectively be a part of the same system. Since an enfilade is such a theatrical experience—you move from one room to the next through the central connecting doors—I immediately thought of the experience as being like a movie, except that here it is the viewer who moves instead of the image. And as the visitors at the Groeninge are almost all tourists visiting Bruges as well as the museum, I thought that the most interesting subject would be Bruges itself—in particular, a view of Bruges that is not the one that most visitors come to see.

What draws tourists to Bruges is the fossilized carapace of an international mercantile juggernaut that collapsed after Bruges' access to the sea, the Zwin, started silting up in the late fifteenth

ill. 4 *Public Collection*, 2008

century. What few tourists realize, though, is that Bruges is still a port city and has been ever since the construction of the port of Zeebrugge (or "Sea Bruges") in 1907. This connection to the sea is almost invisible from inside the city, even though the port is actually part of the city of Bruges and quite economically important.

Once I decided to use Bruges' connection to the ocean as the organizing principle, everything fell into place. Jan Baracz and I had used the Delaware River as the dominant visual element for *You Are Here*, a glass piece that we made for Philadelphia International Airport (ill. 5, p. 25) that shows the airport's location relative to the local flight path and we had both been struck by the sheer formal beauty of the interaction between the river's natural and man-made elements. By comparison in Bruges, the waterways are almost all man-made and create a sort of collective physical expression of the community's centuries-old desire for a connection to the sea, for mastery over the natural element. I wanted viewers to follow the canals, starting in Bruges, in the first room, progress through the canal system in the next two rooms, arrive at the port in the fourth room and reach the ocean in the final room. The exhibitions of paintings from the Groeninge's depot, hung behind pierced mirrors, follow this schema. Not surprisingly, the Groeninge has a large collection of paintings of views of Bruges and its environs, many of which have hitherto led relatively undisturbed lives in storage. What is interesting is that many of these less-regarded paintings tend to conform quite strongly to contemporary expectations of how Bruges looks or should look. They essentially form a sort of visual dictionary of received ideas of Bruges. My only regret was that we couldn't fit them all in.

Opposite the exhibitions of the depot paintings, I wanted to show a contemporary version of the same progression and so chose to make paintings based on a satellite view of Bruges' connection to the ocean. These four paintings are identical in size to the hanging storage panels opposite. There is no painting in the room that contains the depot painting of the sea; that room is otherwise empty. I chose to paint (rather than print) the satellite view, both to create a dialogue with the depot paintings being exhibited opposite and to make a piece that very clearly exposes painting's limitations as documentation: it's just not physically possible to paint everything at that level of detail and scale. Even a somewhat inaccurate version is pretty grueling to paint. There's a certain pathos also in trying to use painting as a technology of representation today. My view is necessarily a fiction, just as much as the most idealizing painting in the Groeninge collection.

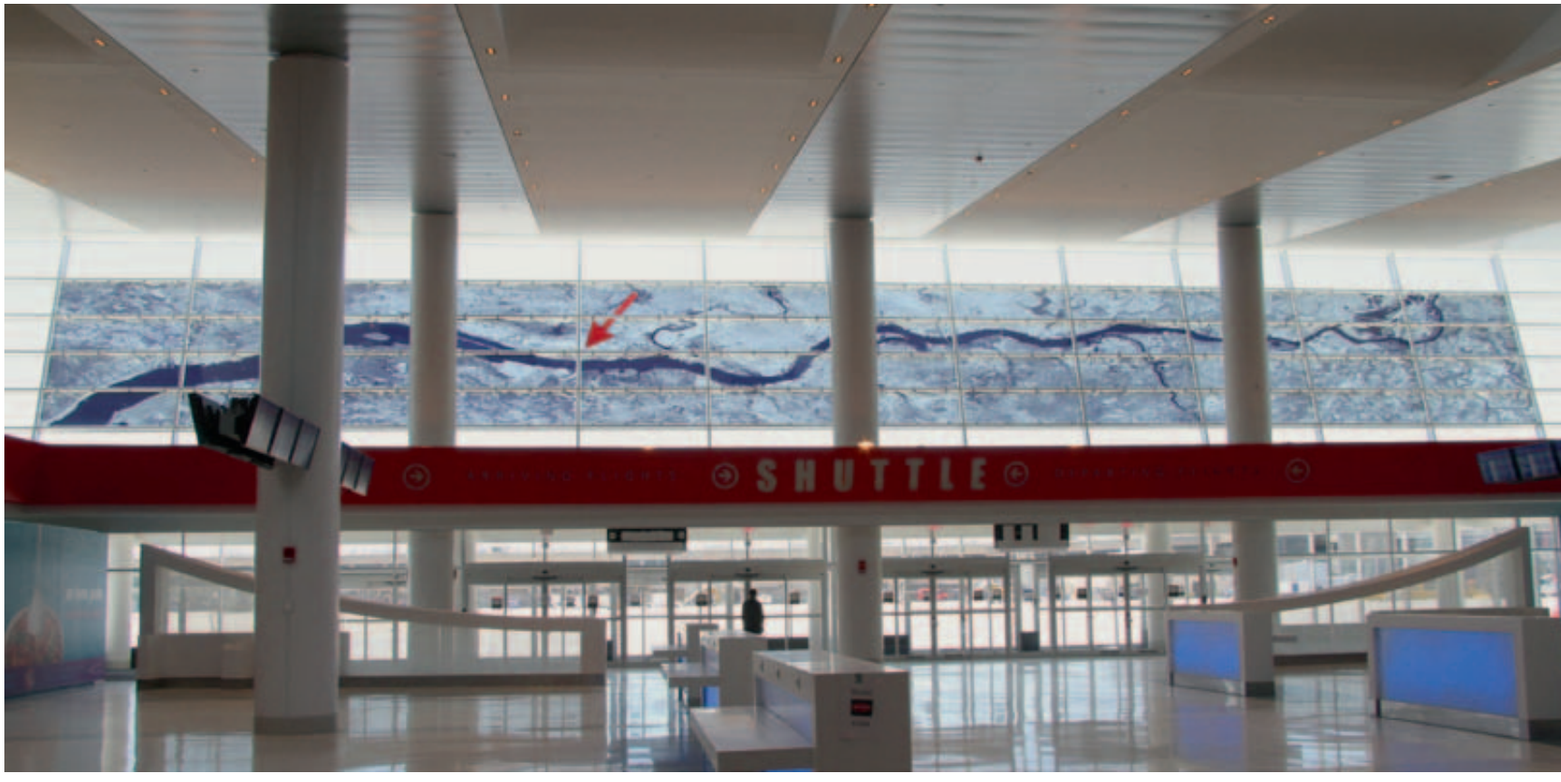
The canal system in the paintings was inlaid with mirrors both to make it more "watery" but also so that it would in turn mirror and be mirrored by the pierced mirrored panels in front of the depot paintings. The openings in the mirrored panels visually

insert the depot paintings into a mirror, transforming them into unreliable picturesque moments within the view. They provide viewers with the familiar images of Bruges they have come to see—transforming the mirror into an experience that not only contains my painted version of contemporary reality and the viewer's reflection but also both fulfills and resists the viewer's desires. Viewers walk through two opposing visual stories, both noncanonical, unloved in different ways, only to have them endlessly interact.

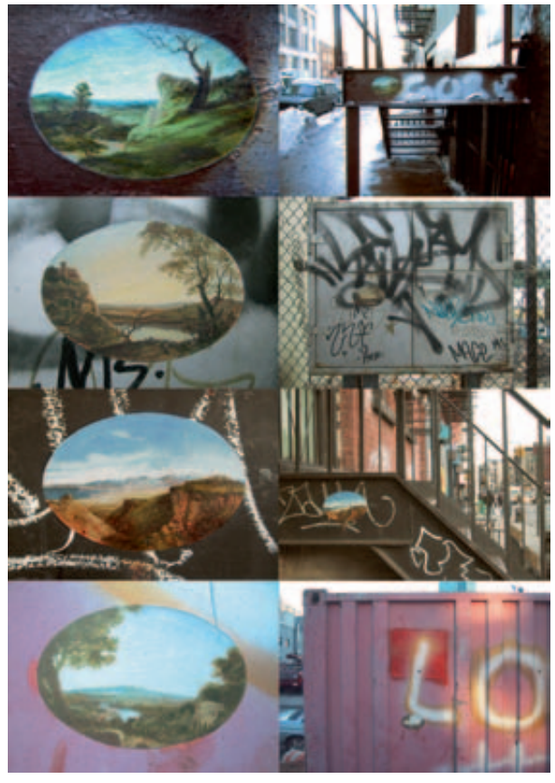
NH: Often you focus on images of nature and the landscape, and your new project *The Unloved* is no exception. Obviously this is one of the core traditions of art, but there is something quite precise in your work that is very much about the act of looking at these very kinds of images. The actual context of seeing comes into focus. There seems to be a comment there on how our experience of nature is increasingly mediated by images and "secondary" experiences. Would you agree?

EH: When I was younger I was bored by landscape paintings. I much preferred big narrative history paintings—preferably with lots of naked people in them. I honestly never gave landscapes much thought until I chose them to function as graffiti tags for the *New York Beautification Project* (ill. 6, p. 26), which involved my illegally painting small oval landscapes in oils over graffiti sites throughout New York City. At the time, my primary motivation was to create a discussion about how aesthetics and demographics influence who is allowed to make public art in our society. I chose to paint landscapes precisely because they seemed so anodyne, so inoffensive. I was looking for the aesthetic opposite of the regular graffiti tag—something that could function as a popular art signifier—something that most people would immediately identify as art and that would resonate with contemporary urban beautification projects (which often involve the addition of some form of nature to the city). The landscape seemed the aesthetic equivalent of my tragically uncool white European female self.

It turns out, however, that's it's impossible to paint forty landscapes in public in New York City, with a lot of very talkative and opinionated bystanders, without starting to think more deeply about landscape's relationship to people's expectations for and preconceptions about art. One of the things that struck me very forcibly is how strongly the popular relationship to the landscape can still be seen as "picturesque." Much like William Gilpin, who popularized the term in the eighteenth



ill. 5 *You Are Here*, 2013



ill. 6 *New York Beautification Project*, 1998–2001

ill. 7 *Observations Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty (Sign 5)*, 2009

century in his guidebooks to the English countryside, most people seem to appreciate the landscape primarily on an aesthetic rather than a practical level: its primary value is reduced to its ability to provide a pretty picture. This obviously produces a relationship to nature that is very different from that of a farmer or hunter/gatherer, and I think it has had serious implications for all of us and our environment. An aesthetic relationship to the landscape is a hierarchical one that privileges the human response and denies the practical interconnected reality of actually living in a landscape. It's also highly dependent on familiarity with the conventions of landscape painting—or in the case of most people, the aesthetic hangover produced by the otherwise forgotten landscape paintings of the past.

I found Gilpin's approach sufficiently fascinating that I wrote a pastiche guidebook, supposedly by him, to the Citadel Park in Ghent, which was distributed to everyone living next to the park. Like all of his guidebooks, it was ludicrously focused on how the park could more perfectly approach his compositional ideals. In addition to the guide, *Observations Relative Chiefly to the Picturesque Beauty of the Citadel Park* also included an archive (supposedly of Gilpin's letters and watercolors) (ill. 8, p. 27) exhibited inside S.M.A.K., signs in the park showing sites of special pictorial interest (ill. 7), and tours of the park. There was something about the juxtaposition of Gilpin's fussily English viewpoint with the park, which had been built for the 1913 World's Fair, that I found very productively bizarre. It was startling to what extent the park was very much constructed to create a series of small moderately picturesque moments. I was also pleasantly surprised by the number of people who showed up for the tours of the Citadel Park under the impression that Gilpin could have actually visited the park in 1799, and who were ready and willing to view the park as an aesthetic experience despite its apparently rather unsavory reputation.

NH: Often your images reference the sublime in art. I'm thinking for example of the work *The Room of Sublime Wallpaper* among others, with their grandiose paintings of nature and the unfathomable—the idyllic, inspirational, unquestionable beauty of nature that extends far beyond what is possible for the human mind to comprehend. Artists—from Tacita Dean to Andreas Gursky—continue to be compelled to create such images. But I think with your work, you touch on the impossibility of genuinely portraying such subject matter. Could you tell me about your approach toward these kinds of images?

EH: The sublime is too often conflated with the picturesque as one of those vague old-fashioned categories of description

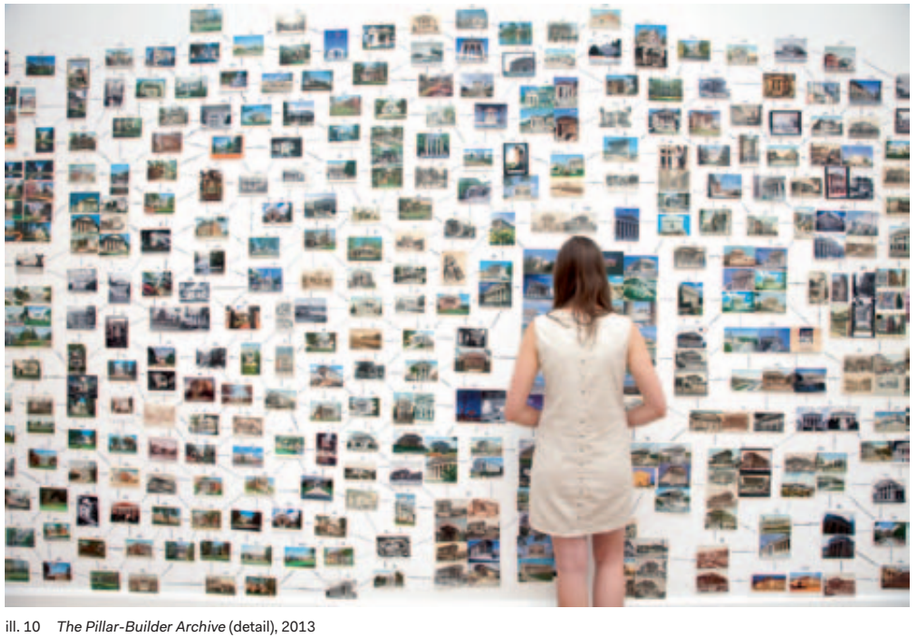
ill. 8 *Observations Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty: Gilpin's Archive* (detail), 2009

that obscure as much as they reveal. But it's actually radically different from the picturesque. Instead of valuing something because it approaches a pictorial ideal, it is an aesthetic valuation of a certain emotional response. As such it presupposes a very particular kind of viewer—one with the leisure and education necessary to examine and appreciate the feeling of awe or terror produced by some overwhelming experience. It's obviously not a response that is available to someone dealing practically with something that is actually overwhelming. For a supposedly universal category it requires a removal from reality that is limited to a small subsection of humanity.

The two *Room of Sublime Wallpaper* (ill. 9, p. 28) installations were very much intended as the idea of the sublime taken to its ludicrous and problematic conclusion. In each, the rear wall of a room is filled with angled mirrors hung over newspapers (the very poorest kind of wallpaper). The two side walls are painted with identical mountainous views (wallpaper for the very rich). From outside the room, the angled mirrors reflect the painted landscapes to create a salon-style hanging of glowing landscapes. Once the viewer enters the room the illusion vanishes and they are confronted with their own reflection. The sublime landscapes in the mirrors exist within a matrix of our everyday commercial reality. The viewer's attempts to own them, to come closer, destroy the very beauty that drew them in in the first place.

NH: The idea of "the universal" seems to be very much present in your work, which I think is on numerous levels. There is the universality of nature and humanity's connection to it. There is the proposed universality of museums as educational spaces mediating knowledge, a bit like the universality at the core of the idea of the university. There is of course the history of universal and world exhibitions too as major tourist attractions, which were spaces for portraying the perceived condition of all humanity. Do you see your work as nostalgic of this idea, or as a kind of critique of it—or perhaps both?

ill. 9 *The Room of Sublime Wallpaper (I)* (detail), 2008



ill. 10 *The Pillar-Builder Archive* (detail), 2013

EH: Universality is a beautiful dream—the idea that there can be commonality, that our shared humanity can lead to shared ideals and to consensus. We would be the poorer if we didn't aspire to it. But there's also a dark side to the idea of universality. Ideals presented as universal are in fact often excruciatingly specific to a society, class, race, gender, or ideology. "Universal" values are all too often just the values of whoever's on top.

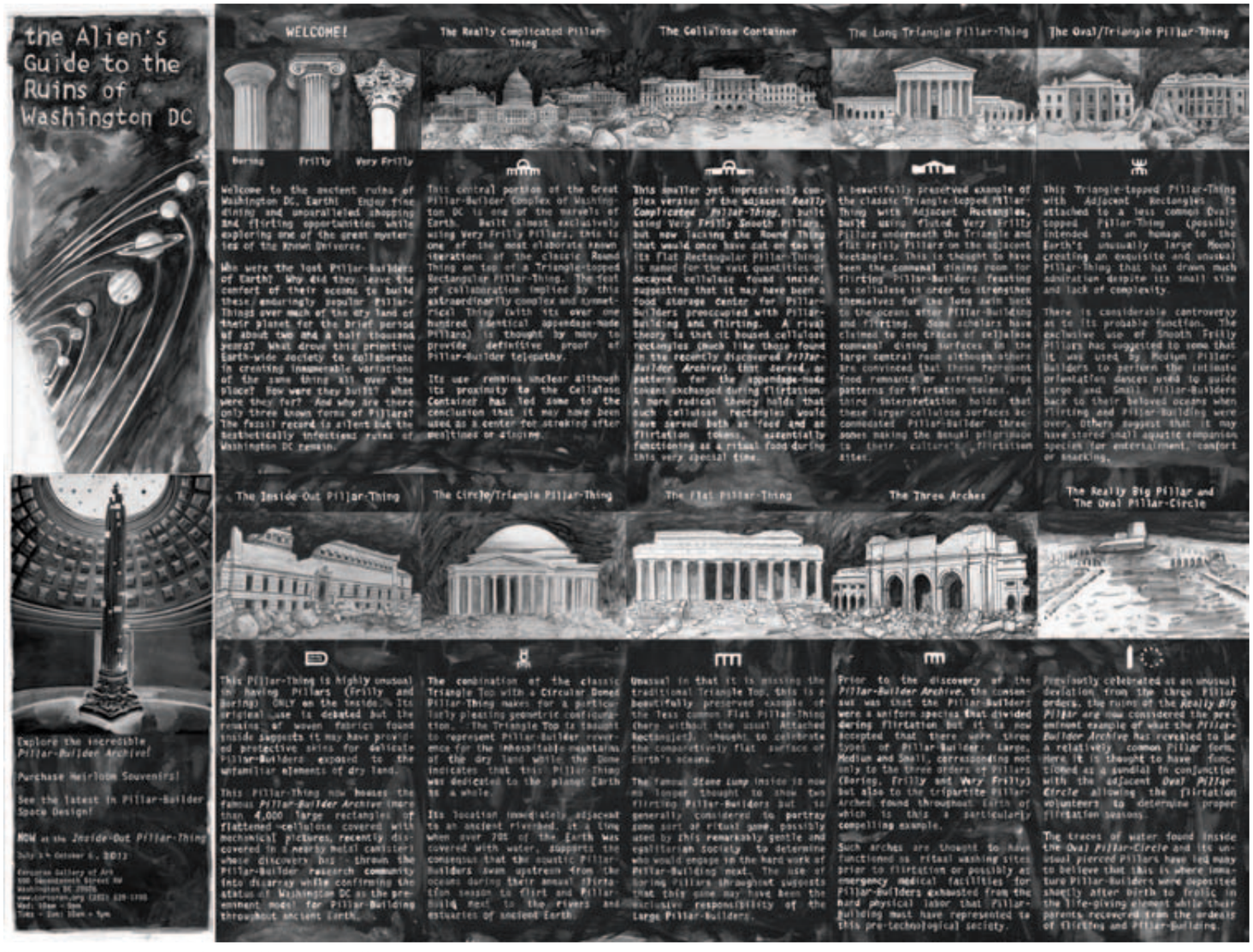
I think that's what I find so fascinating about classical and neoclassical architecture. Here's an aesthetic that really did make a claim to universality and that's been going strong for over two thousand years: if it were a disease, it would be the flu. By comparison, modernism is just a flash in the pan. Classical architecture in some way provides a physical expression of the idea of the universal, and not surprisingly turns out to be startlingly specific when closely examined. Its distribution is highly dependent on the amplifying events of the Roman Empire and the European colonial empires. Ruskin was definitely onto something when he called it the architecture of slaves. Its hierarchical form echoes the hierarchical nature of its production—it's a very top-down form of architecture. It's not surprising that it was beloved of Stalin and of the Fascist movements. But it's also been seen by many as the very embodiment of democracy and the humanist ideals of the Enlightenment. It manages to carry a positively startling variety of meanings.

In *The Pillar-Builder Archive* (ill. 10) I installed almost four thousand contemporary and vintage postcards of neoclassical buildings, organizing them solely on formal grounds—as if organized by aliens. This ahistorical and ageographical organization yielded some fascinating juxtapositions: a Polish synagogue next to a Southern slave plantation, a bank in Hong Kong next to a morgue in Argentina, an Italian church next to a post office in the Midwest, a Stalinist memorial next to a building dedicated to President Lincoln—to name just a very few. There is something truly wonderful about the idea of all those people traveling to buy postcards of buildings that are identical to those that they have at home and then sending them off to prove that they've traveled. What's funny now is that I'm constantly noticing how often neoclassical buildings are featured as identifying backdrops in the news, despite the fact that their universality makes them remarkably ill-suited to this purpose.

The Pillar-Builder Archive was a part of an exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C., titled *The Alien's Guide to the Ruins of Washington, D.C.* (ills. 11–13, pp. 29–30), which imagined an earth without life, where aliens visit and are enchanted by the classical and neoclassical ruins they find. Much like the various societies before them, they enthusiastically adopt the classical form as the perfect embodiment of their

ill. 12 *The Alien's Guide to the Ruins of Washington, D.C.* (front), 2013

ill. 11 *The Alien's Guide to the Ruins of Washington, D.C. (King Street Metro display, Alexandria, Virginia)* — among others, 2013



ill. 13 *The Alien's Guide to the Ruins of Washington, D.C.* (back), 2013

ideals, writing guides and maps for alien tourists, producing souvenir stands (ills. 14–15, p. 31) and neoclassical spaceships. They also speculate about the nature of the lost pillar-builders of earth, who they assume to have been three-sexed aquatic beings who lived in the oceans and swam upstream each year to have sex and build pillars. The startling similarity of the buildings worldwide is taken by the aliens as definitive proof of our telepathic powers and the uniformity of the pillars as an obvious testament to the radically egalitarian nature of our society. They also interpret classical architecture as universal, and, not surprisingly, for them it perfectly mirrors their own values and experiences.

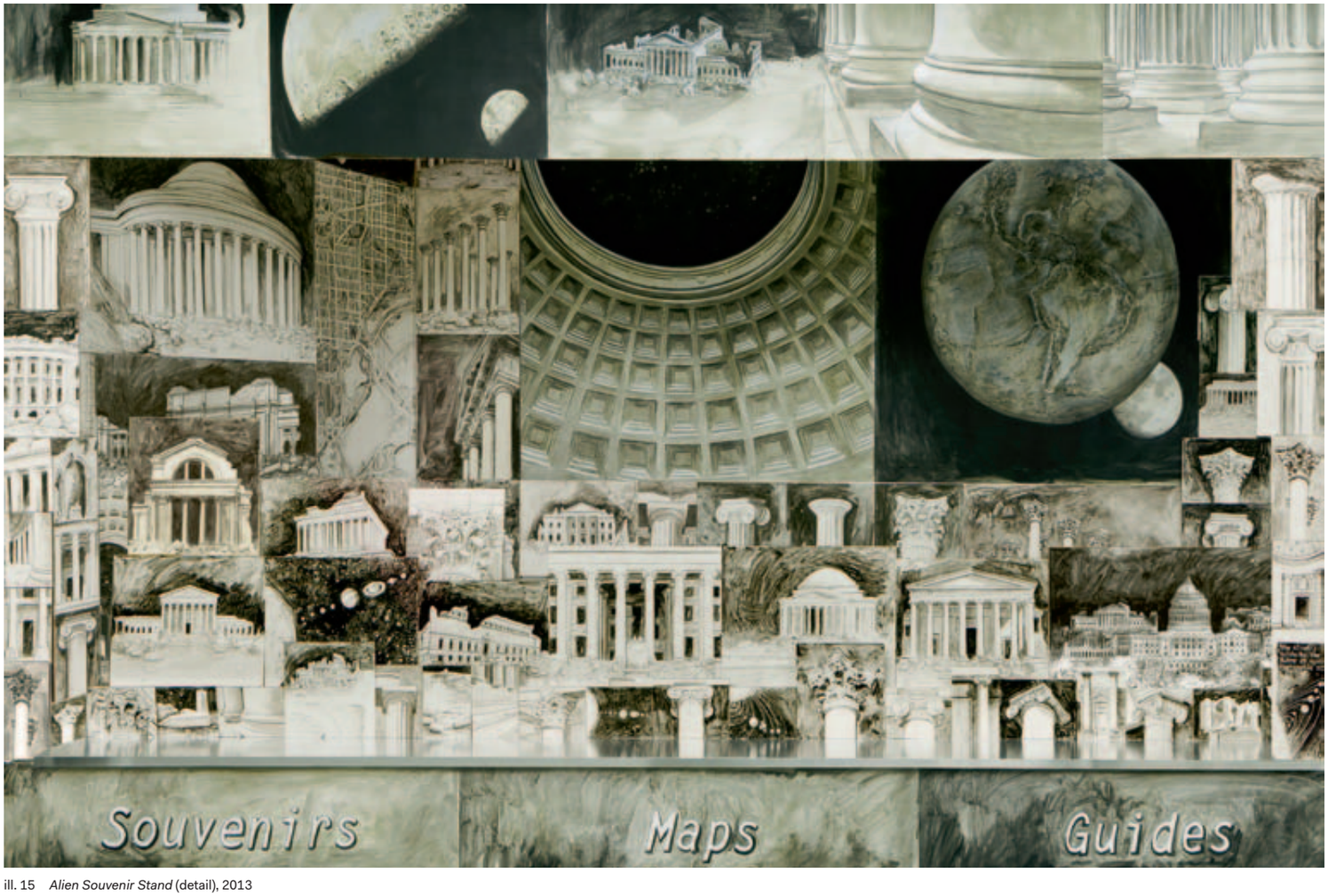
NH: The use of the mirror has recurred in numerous works you have produced. It has numerous art-historical connotations but also popular cultural ones, if you think about arcades and attractions. Other than being a device for making viewers aware of themselves, I think the mirror has other qualities, creating illusionistic space or forming surfaces that might hide something. What is it that attracts you to mirrors?

EH: Sometimes I wonder if I haven't taken that old chestnut of art holding up a mirror to nature a bit too literally. Like a magpie, I love shiny surfaces. Mirrors are so simple but they are also magical. They are the ultimate low-tech special effect. It's

impossible to walk past a mirror without looking. I suppose I want that for my own work. I want to harness and direct the viewer's self-obsession. I want people to have to stop.

I also like making the viewer visible in the work because it makes literal my belief that an artwork exists between the object and the viewer; it both implicates viewers in the embarrassment and vulnerability that I feel as the producer of the work and celebrates their involvement. Of course, the other thing that a mirror highlights is the impossibility of truly objective representation. In a mirror, every view is made subjective by the inevitable intrusion of the viewer's image. While the idea of the mirror haunts the idea of representation, it also embodies its impossibility. I suppose that's why many of my mirrors are mirrors that fail or somehow obliterate the image that they are supposed to reveal.

ill. 14 *Alien Souvenir Stand*, 2013



ill. 15 *Alien Souvenir Stand* (detail), 2013

ill. 16 *Observations Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty* (Antique Claude glass), 2009

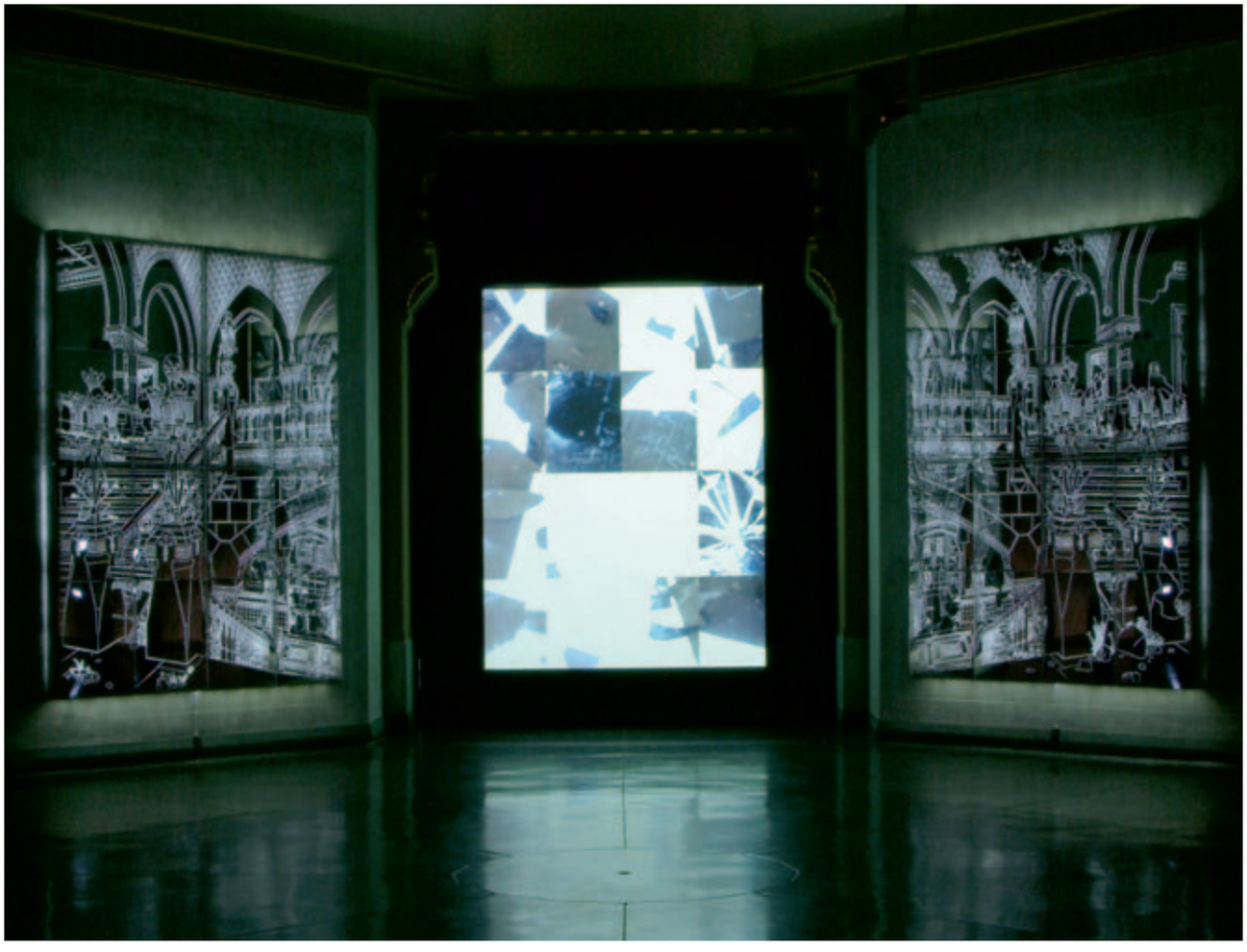
ill. 17 *Broken Claude glass*, 2010

A piece like *The Museum of Failure* (p. 19), which tries to show an exhibition in which context obliterates content, uses mirrors in a multiplicity of ways, both mocking and embracing the idea of art as a mirror. The viewer is confronted with a mirror hand-engraved with a rear-illuminated drawing of a salon-style hanging of elaborately framed glowing white rectangles (made by sanding out the silver on the back of the mirror). Here the viewer's image completes the context of the engraved exhibition. Through the lone opening in the mirror wall, the viewer sees a trompe l'oeil painting of an identical exhibition, with the sole difference being that now the frames contain paintings based on a photograph of mirror views of me painting the work in my studio with my image obscured by the camera's flash. The opening in the mirror functions as a kind of unreliable mirror within the mirror, a "mirror" that shows the viewer the content he or she desires. Of course, the content of the painting is cruelly circular and withholding: the artwork shows only the artwork; the much fetishized studio process is reduced to a rather dull series of still lives; the artist is invisible.

I like this idea of a mirror that lies. Many of my projects that use mirrors have also used the mirror as an alternative reality that informs and in turn is informed by its surroundings. I've often used the technique that I used in *The Museum of Failure* of engraving the backs of mirrors and then rear-illuminating them to create mirrors that contain drawings in light that can be superimposed over the view in the mirror. I like having the two versions of a situation conflate, imposing a fiction over a mirror image.

This idea of a mirror that converts life into art has been very important to me. Perhaps because of this, much of my work has been directly or indirectly inspired by the Claude glass (ills. 16–17), the small black convex handheld mirrors used to appreciate the landscape in the eighteenth century, which I used in the tours in the Citadel Park.[1] In an age where our experience of the landscape is so often mediated by seeing it on the small screens of our various devices, this prephotographic device now seems oddly prescient. Like a camera, its optical qualities allow the

[1] Participants in the tours were provided with Harvey's antique Claude glass and a collection of contemporary acrylic Claude glasses made by Alex McKay.



ill. 18 *Mirror* (detail of center view), 2005

viewer to see the world compressed; the fact that it is a black (not silvered) mirror also allows for a sharpness of image and a heightening of contrast that improves on the naked eye. Its name derives from the fact that landscapes viewed in the Claude glass were thought to resemble those of Claude Lorrain. Of course the black mirror is also associated with the black arts, with looking into the future. I like that, too.

NH: There is also an aspect of your work that deals with ruination, and its opposite, preservation, as well as the tension between them. I see this in your *Arcade/Arcadia* project, which you presented at Turner Contemporary, for example, which I saw as a response to the context of the seaside town of Margate and its current socioeconomic ruination, just like many coastal towns that once were lively tourist destinations. The ruins are portrayed with a picturesque quality like that seen in much historic painting. I'm personally reminded of J.M. Gandy's renowned drawing *Bank of England as a Ruin* (1830) as one example. What draws you to these scenes of ruination?

EH: I love that drawing. Implicit within every structure is that structure's ruin—particularly in the case of those that are based on actual ruins, like neoclassical or neogothic buildings. I suppose that is why so many of my engraved mirror projects superimpose a drawing of a ruined space over its reflection: the ruined Pennsylvania Academy in *Mirror* (ill. 18), the destruction of the rebuilt Ujazdowski Castle in *Ruins Are More Beautiful* (ill. 19, p. 34), the abandoned and reforested Internal Revenue Service in *Reforestation*. These are mirrors that show a dark

future, but they are also drawings that show a more picturesque view of the space reflected. The ruins are perhaps one of the best examples of something that becomes more "artistic" as it becomes less useful. It's easier to appreciate something on a purely aesthetic level when its functionality is no longer at issue. I'm also fascinated by the long history of ruins in landscape paintings and their relationship to nostalgia and longing. What does it meant to desire something more because it is ruined or somehow wounded?

Arcade/Arcadia (pp. 16–17), much like *The Room of Sublime Wallpaper*, explores what happens when humans literally love something to death. It was originally made for the opening of the Turner Contemporary gallery built on the site in Margate where J.M.W. Turner lived in sin with his landlady Mrs. Booth. Turner loved Margate and thought it one of the loveliest sites in Europe. He was particularly taken with the beauty of its skies. Margate subsequently became a popular seaside resort that, with the advent of cheap international travel, fell upon hard times. *Arcade/Arcadia* consists of a scale version of the London gallery that Turner built to exhibit his work in his late twenties and maintained until his death. In my version, the paintings that we know were in the gallery on Turner's death (thanks to his friend George Jones's paintings) have been replaced with rear-illuminated mirrors engraved by hand with a panoramic view of contemporary Margate. Visitors who originally came to Margate to see the new Turner Contemporary gallery were thus invited into Turner's old gallery, only to end up back in a version of the shabby Margate of today reinterpreted in the style of Turner's engravings. The cheap Plexiglas mirrors and the ARCADIA fairground sign on the outside allude to the funhouse mirrors of the amusement arcade. We take arcadia and turn it into an arcade. Paradoxically, Margate's abandonment reinserts it back into the picturesque aesthetic that was such a powerful part of its old charms. Ruined, it recovers its previous fascination.

ill. 19 *Ruins Are More Beautiful* (mirror in door), 2009

NH: In contrast to this, there is the idea of preservation. It is a notion at the core of a museum's function but also applicable today to whole towns and cities. Places like Bruges rely on preservation because of a strategic investment in heritage. It is the main driver of the city's economy through tourism, which in turn aims to protect it from falling into ruin. I have a feeling this tension has informed your new project for the Groeningemuseum. Is that correct?

EH: It can be hard to distinguish art appreciation from tourism. They're both primarily about looking at things—as opposed to using them or interacting with them in any functional way. They are also experiences where the lofty rhetoric popularly used to describe them is stunningly resistant to exploring the financial realities that lie beneath. We may talk about great art treasures belonging to everyone, but the truth is much more complex. We have to pay to see most of these things, one way or another. And our interactions with them are strictly controlled. Things that are tourist attractions are things that you are de facto forbidden to use, lest they be destroyed, crushed by too much love. Even if they were once useful, they are now defined by their uselessness. Art can be only too similar, but maybe it doesn't need to be. Much of my work explores possible functions for art, ranging from the serious to the ludicrous.

This question of ruin versus preservation is at the heart of *Repeat* (ills. 20–21, p. 35), which just opened in Bossuit. The dilemma facing Bossuit (a small village 24 miles south of Bruges) was what to do with St. Amelberga, the village church, which was destroyed during World War I, rebuilt around 1920 and then desanctified in 2008 due to lack of use and funds for its upkeep. I ended up transforming the church into an artificial ruin that

ill. 20 *Repeat*, 2013

stabilized the building—removing the roof, spire, interior columns, and furnishings. I then installed a new terrazzo floor with a design showing all the items that had been removed and also the shadow of the church as it was at the end of World War I. The piece is intended to provide a new multiuse public space for a village that has little public outdoor communal space, while still respecting the memory of its former function. In some ways it returns the church to an older age where the church was often the only public space in a community and was consequently used for absolutely everything. The title of the piece signals the obvious irony in the fact that we humans are constantly destroying and rebuilding, that a building can change so quickly from seeming vital to being obsolete. In order to preserve the church, it was necessary to ruin it. Who knows, perhaps it will even become a tourist attraction in time.

In Bruges the city exists as a curious chimera, the new port grafted onto the old city, tourists ever arriving to see the non-functioning old trading city while nearby the life of the port drives on. It's unusual in that the newer function is as near a replica of the old as is possible. This is not a repurposing so much as a revival. But it's a revival that reveals just how different the trading world of today is from that of the past. The scale of the port canals is utterly incompatible with the canals of the city; there can be no question of storing containers in the old warehouse buildings. Bruges is a city that both ignores and is haunted by its past. The old and the new are chained together in an uneasy dance of water and money.

ill. 21 *Repeat* (detail), 2013