

Excerpted  
from Re-imagining Reality  
Siân Ede

Revealed: Turner Contemporary Opens, 2011

From the infinite to the local and back, the Kent-born American artist Ellen Harvey, like Crotty, has taken inspiration from a visit to Margate and this together with allusions to Turner's abandoned studio evoke a sense of yearning that seems timeless. We confront what looks like the exterior of a stage set constructed in the form of a cheap plywood shack. Leaning discarded against the outside walls are letters that make up the title of the work, *Arcadia*, a reference to the classical notion of pastoral idyll, but more portentously, to the ambiguous Latin phrase *et in Arcadia ego*, a reminder that Death is present even in the midst of pleasure.<sup>15</sup> An alternative but not much more cheerful interpretation is that the phrase is a reminder that those now dead once enjoyed pleasure. In Harvey's work, the letters ARCADIA are rendered in fairground mode, illuminated with garish light bulbs, which resonates with Margate's seaside history, its 'arcade' sideshows, slot machines, picture postcards – '*Having a lovely time. Wish you were here.*'

Inside the shack thirty four frameless pictures are hung salon-style, in the same kind of disarray as was found in Turner's private London gallery after his death, of which this is a three-quarter scale reconstruction. Between them they reveal an interrupted 360° daylight view of contemporary Margate, the upper picture slots containing portions of sky, the sea-front terraces, promenades in the middle and the sea at the bottom. The picture-postcard views are frozen in time, accomplished engravings on mirrored Plexiglas, back-lit by lightboxes. Viewers therefore see themselves through the looking glass, contained in alternative worlds, perhaps a Crazy Mirrors fairground attraction – or is it Buren's infinity of parallel universes? Is this an arcade or Arcadia?

In works elsewhere Harvey has reproduced the kind of aesthetic that we would think of as Romantic picturesque. She came to public attention as an urban guerrilla rather like Buren, producing overnight, around degraded New York sites, little oval classical landscapes in oils, positioning them in ways that raised questions about the status that we accord to different forms of art – high art or graffiti. Her facility in making pictures reminds one of Turner's boyhood recollection of selling his paintings of skies to a stall at Soho Bazaar. 'They gave me 1s 6d for the small ones and 3s 6d for the larger ones. There's many a young lady who's got my sky to her drawing.'<sup>16</sup> Harvey presents wonderfully skilled artworks as if they were picturesque postcards, offering images of perfectibility and the promise of pleasure and escape. But their situation in provisional spaces, run-down heritage sites and mock-up picture galleries heightens the sense of *memento mori*, the prospect of our eventual disappearance. *Et in Arcadia ego.*



Ellen Harvey. *Observations Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty*, 2009, detail of one of seven 41 × 51 cm signs installed in the Citadelpark, Ghent, Belgium 2009  
Courtesy the artist. Photo: Ellen Harvey