



LAPL BLOG

A Chat With Artist Ellen Harvey

Ani Boyadjian, Principal Librarian, Research and Special Collections, Friday, July 26, 2024



Conceptual British-American artist Ellen Harvey has been commissioned to create an installation for the Los Angeles Public Library/Library Foundation of Los Angeles' upcoming exhibition, [No Prior Art: Illustrations of Invention](#). This exhibition, part of the Getty's PST ART: Art & Science Collide initiative, explores the intersection of art and science, focusing on patents and invention and highlighting the Library's role as a hub of creativity.

In this interview with Ani Boyadjian, Research & Special Collections Manager for the Los Angeles Public Library, Ellen discusses her path as an artist and the now iconic projects which have made her beloved in the international art world. Ellen, based in Brooklyn, NY, recently visited and sat outside the [Octavia Lab](#) makerspace at Central Library to chat with patrons and encourage them to submit ideas for the Utopia Machine, her art project that will be part of the No Prior Art exhibition.



Ellen Harvey in the LA Central Library. Photograph: Ellen Harvey Studio

Ani: Good afternoon, Ellen! It is great to see you back at LAPL.

Ellen: Lovely to see you again and lovely to be back at the Library. I've had a fascinating time talking to library patrons about their ideas for what would make our world into a utopia. I already have 45 submissions! And they're so varied!

Ani: Ellen, maybe we can just start off by you telling us a little bit about your practice and your background.

Ellen: As you can probably tell from my accent, I'm originally from the UK, although my mother is German. My family emigrated to Wisconsin when I was 14 for my father's work, which is how I ended up living in the States.

I always wanted to be an artist since I was very, very small. For my sixth birthday, I asked my mother if we could go somewhere to look at paintings. We were living in Germany at the time and my mother, rather impressively decided that we would take the train to Florence—which of course just reinforced my impression that paintings were just about the most fabulous thing ever. I've never really lost that feeling.

I've been painting and drawing for as long as I can remember. But growing up, I didn't really consider it as a career option. The fact that I can support myself as an artist now is a source of continued wonder and joy to me. In fact, I had a brief career as a lawyer before I decided to make art my life. I worked for three years on Wall Street and then quit once I'd saved enough money to live for a year. It's funny to look back and think about what a long time I thought that was back then.

Ani: Did you practice law?

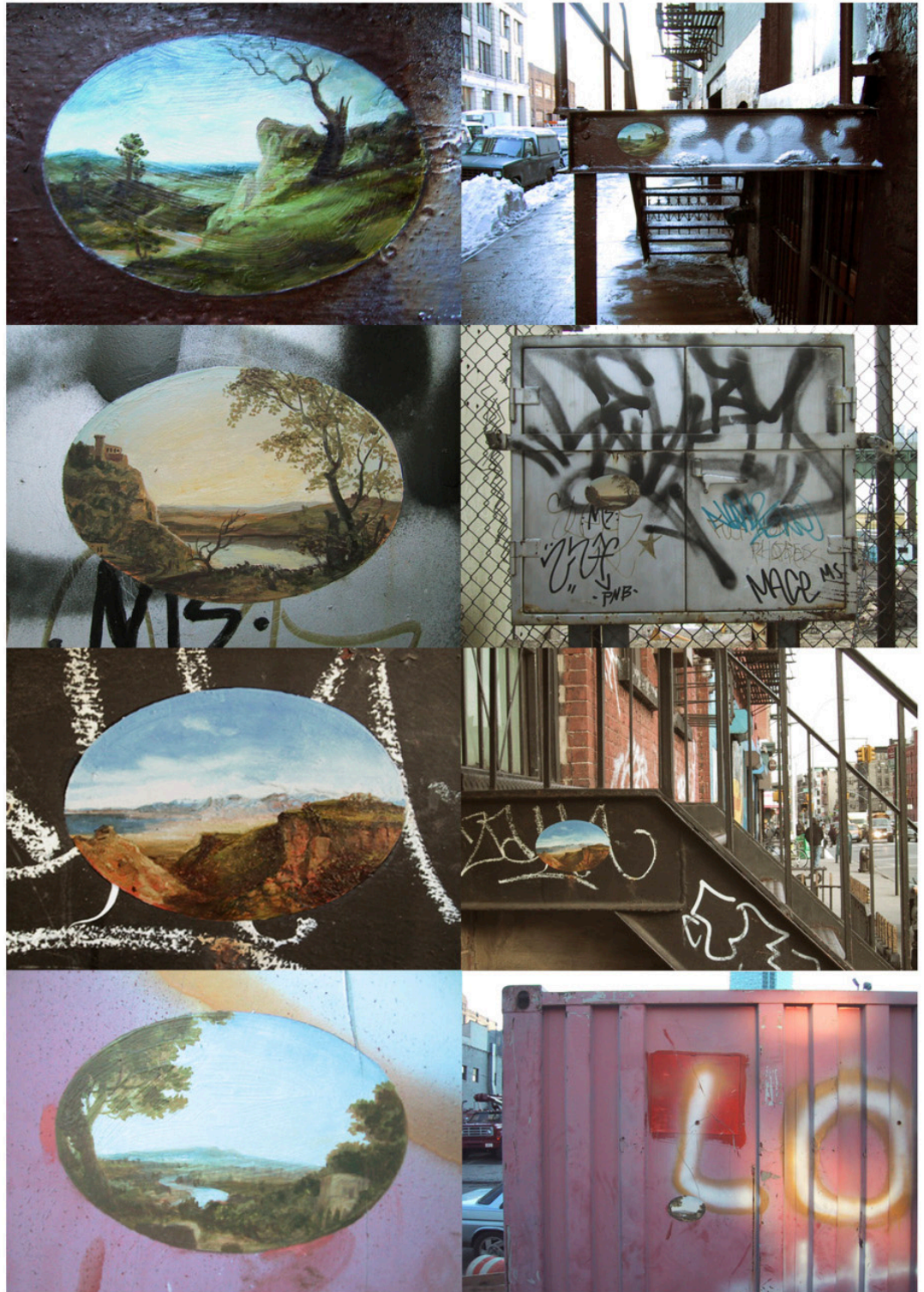
Ellen: I did, briefly. I worked mainly with Brazilian companies, helping them list on the New York Stock Exchange. Back then, I spoke pretty good Portuguese but now it's just all muddled with Spanish. After that I did the Whitney Independent Study Program and I've been exhibiting and doing large scale public projects ever since. I'm very, very lucky.

Ani: That's great. You have so many projects. Maybe you can start with New York Beautification Project and sort of your experience as a graffiti artist in NYC?

Ellen: New York Beautification Project was the first project that I did that got some attention. It was done at a time when Rudy Giuliani was Mayor of New York and was cracking down on graffiti artists, many of whom were young men of color. At the time, I was grappling with the question of what it means to be an artist. After having had a conventional kind of career, where somebody tells you what to do and you do it and then you're paid, it was hard to transition to a world where you decide to do something because you want to do it and then label that as "work." As a result, I was really obsessed with asking what makes someone an artist (as opposed to a vandal or a dilettante) and what makes something art.

I thought that I would do an experiment to see what would happen if I became a graffiti artist but if, instead of spray paint, I used oils and, if what I painted was the aesthetic opposite of a graffiti tag. It was actually quite hard to decide what to paint but, in the end, I chose to paint little oval landscapes. I was trying to find a subject that was as retro and uncontroversial as possible. Urban beautification projects traditionally consist of adding greenery to the city. I also thought that such a dorky tag was a pretty good reflection of my own uncool European self.

I ended up painting forty loose copies of 18th and 19th century landscapes over graffiti sites in New York City in broad daylight. I didn't ask for permission and I didn't try to hide what I was doing. I generally wore a bright orange jacket. I had a rule that I would stop if anyone asked me to stop. To an extent that I hadn't quite anticipated, the project was really a performance, because I was constantly interacting with the public.



New York Beautification Project (close-up and distance views of 4 of 40 paintings), Ellen Harvey, 1999-2001. Oil on New York City Graffiti, each 5" x 7" (12.7 x 17.8 cm). Photo: Ellen Harvey Studio / Jan Baracz

Ani: Wow. Talk about that a little, because that one's my favorite.

Ellen: *The Disappointed Tourist* came about because I felt increasingly that we live in a world where nostalgia is often weaponized to create division. And I resent that. That doesn't mean that I would want to live in the past. I would undoubtedly have been a chambermaid, probably, at best, if I was lucky. The past would have sucked for most people with the exception of a privileged few. But we all feel nostalgia. It's a part of the human condition.

The Disappointed Tourist is my attempt to use nostalgia to inspire empathy. It's linked to lost places in part because of a conversation with my friend Larissa MacFarquhar, who writes for *The New Yorker*, about the kind of people who stay in a place and are attached to it versus those who are not. It made me think that actually, we all have those places, even if we are the much maligned, rootless cosmopolitans. So, I thought that I'd look at nostalgia through the love of place. Everyone has some lost site that they love and wish either that they could have saved or return to.

I put out the question in 2019 and to date, I've painted over 300 paintings. They're all 24 by 18 inches in size and they look a bit like old hand-colored postcards. Each painting includes the name of the place and the date of its destruction. It's basically an enormous catalogue of loss. The website www.disappointedtourist.org, has images of all the paintings plus the reasons that people gave for their submissions. It's designed to travel and to date, the project has been shown at Michelle Grabner's Suburban in Milwaukee, Turner Contemporary in the UK, Museum der Moderne Salzburg in Austria, Laznia Center for Contemporary Art in Gdansk, Poland, the Butler Gallery in Ireland, Rowan University Art Gallery & Museum in New Jersey. It's going to the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum next. Each time it's shown, I do local outreach to make sure that local sites are always included. I want everyone who experiences it to feel welcome.



The Disappointed Tourist (detail of installation at Turner Contemporary), Ellen Harvey, 2021. Oil and acrylic on 220 wood panels, each 18" x 24" (45.7 x 61 cm). Photograph: Turner Contemporary/Thierry Bal

What I learned from this project is that people miss a wide variety of places. But there are some general categories. One of the largest, unsurprisingly, is of happy childhood memories—lots of amusement parks and swimming pools. Then there are the happy memories of early adulthood: favorite bars, the restaurant where you met your husband, beloved sporting venues and so on. One of my favorites of these is the New York Chinatown Tic Tac Toe Chicken, which seems to have loomed large in several couples' personal mythology. In Los Angeles, people submitted the Brown Derby Restaurant, Flipper's Roller Boogie Palace, the Carnation Company and Ohrbach's Department Store. People wrote very lovely stories about why these places had been important in their lives. People also send in places that they never experienced themselves. Sometimes, the site is a famous one that they just wish they could have experienced, like the original incarnation of Los Angeles' Venice of America. What many of these places have in common though is that their destruction was generally non-traumatic. They became obsolete (I painted several video stores), they fell victim to urban "renewal" or they just ceased to be commercially viable.

But then things start to get more complicated. Sometimes people are not just lamenting the loss of a beloved or important place but wishing that the traumatic event that caused the loss hadn't happened. And wanting to make sure that that history isn't forgotten. A good example of that is the destruction of Black Wall Street in the Tulsa Race Massacre. While it would be extraordinary to be able to visit that thriving black community today, I suspect that the motivation for submission was more about amplifying the narrative. I have painted a lot of sites that were destroyed by war, colonialism, ethnic conflict etc. Of late, people have also been sending in a lot of places that have been destroyed as a result of the climate crisis, like the Honey Run Bridge in Paradise that was destroyed by the 2018 Camp Fire.

On a personal level, I've loved both being entrusted with people's stories and getting to experience the public's response to the project. It's been very moving to watch people stand in front of it and tell each other stories. It's also wonderful when someone has a personal response to a painting. I remember meeting a Turkish teenager in Salzburg who was thrilled to see the Istanbul beach that she'd heard about from her Grandmother. And there have been so many others. I'm still working on *The Disappointed Tourist*, but I can't paint all the submissions. At this point, places go to the top of the list if they're from a new place or highlight a missing history. Recently somebody sent me a forest in Kyrgyzstan—that was a shoo-in.

But it is a sad project. And it's very backwards looking, so I've been feeling a strong urge to look forwards. Utopia Machine, the project that I'm currently working on for the Library, is sort of a palette cleanser. Instead of mourning the lost past, it's all about what we might want to build instead.

Ani: You've talked a lot about memory and the symbolism and bringing people together. And you mentioned how much you love public libraries, repositories of memory and history. I was wondering if you could speak about the project for our upcoming No Prior Art exhibition, the Utopia Machine. How do you think it's important to humanity? Libraries are so important to humanity. And this is an art project where people can be citizen inventors. I know it's a big question, but what do you think this project will tell us?

Ellen: That is a big question. The genesis of the project (other than *The Disappointed Tourist*) was my experience doing a Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship at the American Art Museum with curator Sarah Newman. It's a wonderful experience where the whole of the Smithsonian Institution is open to you. I had thought I'd be doing research on American landscape painting, but I became fascinated by patents instead. The Smithsonian American Art Museum is actually located in what used to be the Patent Office—it was designed to show the patent models that were then required to be submitted with any patent application. They even had a room where they showed the models for the failed patents. I loved that. I ended up spending a lot of time at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. Their curator Kathleen Franz, let me browse their collection of patent models and I got to meet Eric Hintz, from the Lemelson Center for the Study of Invention and Innovation, who had written a book, *American Independent Inventors in an Era of Corporate R&D*, which is all about the idea of the citizen-inventor.

As a result, I became increasingly interested in the relationship between patents and the founding myths of our country. It's notable that patents are right there in Article One of the Constitution. They're one of the things that the Founding Fathers really prioritized in designing their new republic. They wanted to encourage innovation and to allow people to profit from their innovations. What's also interesting is that patent rights have never been restricted by race or gender. When you apply for a patent, you're invisible. The Patent Office doesn't collect demographic data. Of course, enslaved people weren't able to apply even though they created new inventions, because they didn't count as citizens. But there was a substantial history of free Black patent holders, much of which we know about because Henry Edwin Baker, a Black patent examiner, did the necessary leg work and compiled a "List of Colored Inventors in the United States" that he presented at the 1900 Paris Exposition. Women have also held patents since 1809, despite the serious barriers they faced in trying to commercially exploit those patent rights.

This link between invention and citizenship seems particularly relevant to many of our current-day problems. Invention often feels divorced from our everyday life—the province of corporate research and development rather than individual genius. And yet, who among us has not looked around and seen many things that need fixing or that could be seriously improved. The idea that each of us as citizens (or non-citizens, given that the citizenship requirement for intellectual property was removed in 1800) have a civic duty to improve our world, is one that I find increasingly compelling.

I've always been obsessed with utopias—I wrote my college thesis on utopias. I tend to walk around thinking about how things could be made better. Since I'm not in a position of any power, I thought that I could perhaps at least create a conversation about what people would like to fix. We live in a media environment that is obsessed with dystopias. There's an understandable deep distrust of any utopian solution. One man's paradise is another man's hell. You aim for Arcadia and end up with the Hunger Games, or worse. But maybe, the problem is that we're hoping for an impossible consensus when instead we should just be encouraging people to think. And that's what Utopia Machine is all about: collecting people's ideas for utopias and then making imaginary patent drawings of them and combining them into one huge impossible machine. The drawings all line up, much like in that Surrealist game, Exquisite Corpse, where one person draws a head and then the paper gets folded and the next person draws the body until you have a mad, mismatched creature that makes everyone laugh.

Utopia Machine ended up at the Library because Todd Lerew, who is the curator of the PST exhibition No Prior Art, was talking to somebody at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, who referred him to me. He literally contacted me out of the blue and I told him about my project, which I hadn't even started at that point. It was pure serendipity as I'd always hoped to start the collection of ideas in a library. In many ways, a library is a utopian space. It's a space that has rules; you have to behave properly in a library. Yet at the same time, as long as you don't break the rules, you can read whatever you like. It's a space designed to encourage you to explore your ideas.

My experience in the Library has been really wonderful. I generally stood with my poster in the hallway right opposite the library's maker space, [Octavia Lab](#). People would come down the escalator and I would look at them and see if they looked interested in engaging. About 80% of people coming down the escalator talked to me. I got to meet a lot of people. Artsy teenagers on library dates. People going to various library activities. Makers going to use the Octavia Lab facilities. Unhoused people who wanted to let me know how much the library meant to them. A lot of people came back more than once. One concerned man came back to tell me that he'd found me a date—when I protested that I was already married, he countered with "but he plays the guitar!" A pair of elderly sisters came back to let me know that they'd had the library staff help them to submit their ideas on the Library's computers—they wanted to make sure that I realized that they were two different people despite having almost identical names. I also got to attend the Library's Teens Leading Change presentations where I heard about the civic projects that various teen groups had initiated. They were so impressive!

I left the library with 45 submissions and they're still rolling in. I'm hoping to make it to 99.

Ani: I'm curious how many have been sort of more abstract and how many are like things that you could actually build?

Ellen: I don't think anyone could build any of these, with the exception of the person who submitted toast. That's just about within my capability. So far, there are some categories emerging. Some people send in small practical inventions, like the ant-proof cat bowl. Other people come up with magical machines to solve pressing problems like climate change. There are quite a lot of mind-reading robots. A surprising number of people want to be able to communicate with the dead. Then there are those who advocate for the overthrow of capitalism or universal basic income. A lot of people just want more love, compassion and nature in the world.

Ani: Well that's wonderful. We're looking forward to seeing those submissions. And where can people submit their ideas?

Ellen: You just go to <https://utopiamachine.org> and there's a form there. Once I've done your drawing, I will contact you and send you a copy of it. It'll also be uploaded along with any additional descriptions that you write.

Ani: Wonderful. Well, thank you, Ellen, for your time. I appreciate it. I think that all of your projects resonate so much with people because you are people-centered as an artist. Humanity and empathy are an important part of your work.

Ellen: Well, I'm also selfish. I get back so much more from people than I give to them because for me, every time somebody gives me an idea, it's like a little gift. Anyone who takes the time to sit down and think about how to make the world a better place, I mean, even if I only end up with 99 people who spent some time thinking about it, surely that's a tiny improvement.



Ellen Harvey in the L.A. Central Library talking with Library patron. Photograph: Ellen Harvey Studio



Ellen Harvey in the L.A. Central Library looking at Patent drawings with curator Todd Lerew. Photograph: Ellen Harvey Studio