

# ELLEN HARVEY: *Nostalgia*

by Nicole Miller

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Every era has a gadget that speaks to the spirit of the times. In the 17th century, new optical instruments evidenced an emerging scientific worldview. In the 18th century, there was the Claude glass or black mirror: a handheld device for the leisure pursuits of a new middle class. Touring the English countryside, seeking the picturesque vistas of Claude Lorrain—whose paintings of moody landscapes and classical ruins influenced painters from J.M.W. Turner to the Hudson Valley School—the Claude glass was like an Instagram filter for the landscape connoisseur. In the dark, reflective surface of the glass, the world appeared transformed by lurid light—a murky region between the rational ideal of classical beauty and the terror of the sublime. (If the Romantics found in these depictions of nature a reflection of their inner, private worlds, today’s brightly lit screens depict mainly the surface of things—evidence of our leisure and lifestyle, markers of class identity.)

British-born, Brooklyn-based artist Ellen Harvey is interested in our mechanisms of looking. Over the last twenty years, her painting-based practice has included video, sculpture, installation, and works made in public space—an extensive body of work that examines forms of representation in their institutional or social settings. “My work,” she has written, “is an often futile attempt to deconstruct



Ellen Harvey, *Arcade/Arcadia*, (2011-2012), Wood frame, aluminum letters, light bulbs, and 34 hand-engraved Plexiglass mirrors over Lumisheets. Courtesy the artist and Danese/Corey.

clichés of art production in order to understand or reveal their continuing hold on the popular imagination despite all their apparent obsolescence.”<sup>1</sup>

In the back room of Danese/Corey, where Harvey’s solo exhibition *Nostalgia* is installed, there’s a Claude glass hung by a hook on the surface of a larger, traditional mirror. Looking into that bright, reflective field to adjust your collar or fix your hair, you might miss what else the piece has to offer. The oblique device at the center of the work doesn’t give up its image so easily. Stepping closer, you peer into the black mirror, perhaps expecting to find your own face; instead you discover only the room where you stand. Giving and withholding in the same glance, the piece seduces by appealing to our self-regard.



Ellen Harvey, *Arcade/Arcadia*, (2011-2012), Wood frame, aluminum letters, light bulbs, and 34 hand-engraved Plexiglass mirrors over Lumisheets. Courtesy the artist and Danese/Corey.

The central work in the exhibition, *Arcade/Arcadia*, (2011 – 2012) uses the mirror to multiply the dimensions of the picture plane. The installation, a wood-frame structure the size of a large shed, reprises a work commissioned by the Turner Contemporary Museum in Margate, the British seaside town that captured the imagination of J.M.W. Turner. The structure welcomes visitors with a bright marquee of tall letters spelling “Arcadia.” Inside is a dazzling panorama of present-day Margate on thirty-four hand-engraved, rear-illuminated Plexiglas mirrors.

On the dark, mirrored surface of the panels, Harvey’s detailed etchings depict shabby arcade amusements and boardwalk diversions in a place past its prime, where blocks of council housing stand alongside the old city. There are billowing clouds and the swells of the sea, luminous and eerie as Turner’s own landscapes. The installation is modeled on the London gallery Turner built to display his work, and the placement of the panels replicates the arrangement of paintings in the space at the time of Turner’s death. Here, past and present converge in the place-time of the viewer, whose image also appears on the landscape. Like a kaleidoscope or magic lantern, the images multiply and shift, set in motion by the movement of the viewer—the mirrors giving back the world to itself and the glinting light like sun glitter on the surface of the water. As the work revives the past, it also renovates the present, gilding the site with lavish care.

In his novel *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*, Italo Calvino describes the “polydyptic theater”—a room lined with mirrors—designed by the 17th century Jesuit, Athanasius Kircher. Kircher is perhaps best known as the creator of a celebrated *wunderkammer* of animal specimens, Egyptian hieroglyphs, art objects, antiquities, musical instruments, and machines—a precursor to the natural history museum and a link between the world of the occult and modern, scientific inquiry.

The mirrored room, as Calvino describes it, could transform an individual into an army or create an infinite series of repetitions from a single figure. But the image in a mirror is not a perfect double. As the image opens some space between itself and its original—between *here* and *there*—the reflection offers the vantage of distance and perspective, or what we call knowledge. Maybe for this reason, mirrors are prized in the ancient hermetic tradition. The mirror has the power to make visible what is hidden: the soul of the universe, the totality of things, the unseen Creator.

There's a link here to Turner. The painter was known to visit his neighbor named Loutherboung, who had an extensive library of texts on alchemy and the occult. Turner's paintings effect an almost alchemical transfiguration of the landscape, as if to conjure some lost world, a region perhaps bordering on that idyll of original innocence, Arcadia.

In Harvey's work, the idealized past is one point of reference. She also relishes speculative futures or the future-past tense. In her large-scale painting *New Forest* (2013 – 2014) she reimagines the newly renovated IRS office in Andover, Massachusetts, as a kind of ruin. Here, the federal building—an emblem of modern bureaucratic rationalism—has been reclaimed by jungle rot. The piece, rendered with photo negative realism in black gesso and white paint, has the same spectral presence of her backlit, mirrored etchings.



Ellen Harvey, *New Forest*, (2013-14), acrylic, oil and varnish on 20 wooden panels, overall: 92 × 160 inches. Courtesy the artist and Danese/Corey

On the opposite wall hangs the title work in the show

*Nostalgia* (2017). Two identical gold frames, referencing 19th century portrait or landscape painting, are hung side-by-side. Their pairing suggests a mirrored reflection, but on the left, the frame encloses mildewed paper, and on the right, a flat surface of gold-leaf. Each scene—one decayed, the other pristine—is a kind of representational failure. It halts the chain of referents proliferating in the mirrored room.

The work advances the conceptual game of her 2007 work, *Invisible Self-Portraits*. In that series of paintings, based on photographs Harvey took of herself while standing in front of a mirror, the artist's face is obscured by the blinding flash. In *Nostalgia*, it's as if the bright flash of the camera has swallowed the image whole. The piece performs its obfuscation through the decay of time or its opposite: incorruptibility—the belief in it, anyway, or a faith in the markers of value that we often conflate with meaning. “If art is a mirror, it's obviously a failed mirror. It cannot escape its



Ellen Harvey, *Nostalgia*, (2017), two identical gold frames, mildewed paper, gold leaf. 8.25 × 21 inches. Courtesy the artist and Danese/Corey.

own subjectivity,” Harvey has said. “Perhaps as a result, I’m particularly interested in the idea of the mirror that lies—in the dark untruthful mirror that converts life into art.”<sup>2</sup>

Noting that *Nostalgia* was made this year, it's tempting to see the work as a pointed critique of an orientation or way of looking that fails to address present predicaments. It's possible to see the piece as a critique of art itself.<sup>3</sup> With *Nostalgia*, Harvey exposes the cinematic lie—but her vision is various, surprising, and supple. Here, at the point of incoherence or collapse, art remains a generative (if symbolic) act. Activating the space between the viewer and the work, Harvey unlocks the future tense. Here is a ruin, she seems to say, as you stand there, becoming the mirror of the not-yet-arrived.

## Notes

Ellen Harvey, quoted in Shamim M. Momin, “True Mirror: A Reflection on Seeing and Believing,” *Ellen Harvey: Mirror* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of the Arts, 2005), 33.

Ellen Harvey, interview with Adam Budak. *Museum of Failure* (New York: Gregory R. Miller & Co, 2015), 299.

I’m thinking of recent downtown shows that raise the specter of Arcadian longing—paintings by Graham Nickson and Duncan Hannah, for example, which place the human form in some seaside dreamtime with credulous naivety or nerve.

## CONTRIBUTOR

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