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ELLEN HARVEY *Dust to Settle*

by David St.-Lascaux

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Around the time Goethe wrote his first bestseller, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (and Thomas Paine *Common Sense*), a bizarre device became popular among tourists in the natural world: William Gilpin's "Claude glass," or black mirror. With this pocket-sized device's onyx-like, sometimes slightly convex surface, viewers could look at a reflection of the "picturesque" scene in which they were envired. Further, because of its desaturating capabilities, the image they would see would be painterly (in the style, Gilpin claimed, of 17th century landscape painter Claude Lorrain), i.e. muted and misty. Now this device has been rediscovered and appropriated by the artist Ellen Harvey, and is featured in her work in a show curated by Diana Shpungin at Cuchifritos, a gallery in the Essex Street Market in the Lower East Side and a program of the Artists Alliance Inc., a nonprofit visual arts organization.

Harvey's piece, "Broken Claude Glass" (2010), is a miniature wonder. As one might expect, a Claude glass would need to be pocket-sized, and it is: 4 × 6 inches. "Broken Claude Glass" is exactly that: an open Claude glass, with its glass shattered, but intact, open vertically in the corner of the wall. Harvey's Claude glass, described: a hinged case of bright green leather with delicate, simple gold stamping on its edges; when opened, it reveals black glass on one interior face, and dark chocolate velvet on the other (presumably for effect *de luxe* and practical protection). But wait, there's more: On the facing wall, abutting the Claude glass at 90 degrees, Harvey places a miniature painting of a landscape, in mirror scale to the glass. The painting itself is both remarkable and unremarkable: Harvey's color scheme is renaissance black (actually dark slate gray) and white pigments to create the tones and tints of light on surface (think Leonardo and Caravaggio), painted on a scrapsized piece of plywood. It's an appropriately small-scaled piece that creates a sense of surprise and discovery analogous to the feeling one gets when witnessing the tiny animals in a Roldana sculpture, or a magician's trick, or an optical illusion.



"Broken Claude Glass" (2008), Ellen Harvey. Photo by Jan Baracz.

Indeed, Harvey's "Broken Claude Glass" is an optical illusion, but, this being the 21st century, and we being very clever, it is also *trompe l'esprit*—a mental illusion. In reintroducing us to the absurd notion that people would travel to experience unspoiled nature only to turn their backs on it (or send a text to someone sitting next to them), employing a mechanical device no less, looking at what they came to see—literally—through a rearview mirror, Harvey raises myriad—and intellectually delectable—metaphorical and metaphysical issues. For example, in the timelessly proven world in which truth is stranger than fiction, she addresses the conundra of reality vs. perception, of humanity's place on Buckminster Fuller's "Spaceship Earth," and our frequent preference for fantasy over reality.

The element of fantasy is not the least notable of Harvey's needles. It was probably not coincidental that the Claude glass was popular during the era in which fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen emerged. Harvey's broken mirror is quite comparable to works in Rachel Feinstein's recent exhibition, *The Snow Queen*, at Lever House. The contrast couldn't be starker: Feinstein's airheaded fantasy is a paradigmatic example of the lightweight decorator escapism of a class requiring self-entertainment, presented in a perennially churning nouveau-riche venue of means (and whose previous piece of Park Avenue Public Art pabulum was *Hello Kitty*); Harvey's incisive, intellectually dense challenge is laid down in a humble *peoplesgarten*. In Feinstein's defense, fantasy abounds in our abdicative society, which may be one of Harvey's points: while our global Rome burns, we concern ourselves with anything but participation and responsibility, preferring to look away, to more serene, romantic times. The Alexander McQueen show at the Met, with its exquisitely gorgeous gothic fantasies and gilded duck feathers, is an on point fairy tale embodiment of the creatures one might expect to hold—or spring from—Harvey's talismanic magic black boxette.

"Broken Claude Glass" also stands in complementary contrast to Harvey's "Room of Sublime Wallpaper II" (2008), recently exhibited at the Austrian Cultural Forum (and most comparable, scalewise, to Feinstein's "*Ruins in the Mirror Room*," a human scale house-of-mirrors compared to which the miniature has the atomic weight of a plutonium bomb. In "*Room*," the entering viewer sees a montane landscape reflected on a facing wall of seemingly crazily angled mirrors; once inside, one finds oneself reflected from various points of view, and one gets the joke: the back wall contains the landscape, whose palette is similar to that employed in the smaller work. It's a fine illusion, and pleasure inducing, because it's so clever, and because it's an unsettling experience to be in an Alice in Wonderland roomful of mirrors. The two should be exhibited together.

With her Claude glass series, Harvey has taken historical, commercial phenomenon and repurposed it to entirely novel effect. She is due for a major museum exhibition: these exquisite works bear serious, if dark, reflection.

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