

True Mirror: A Reflection on Seeing and Believing

By Shamim M. Momin

Main Entry: re-flec-tion

Pronunciation: ri-'flek-sh&xn

Function: *noun*

Etymology: Middle English, alteration of *reflexion*, from Late Latin *reflexion-*, *reflexio* act of bending back, from Latin *reflectere*

1 : an instance of reflecting; *especially* : the return of light or sound waves from a surface

2 : the production of an image by or as if by a mirror

3 *a* : the action of bending or folding back *b* : a reflected part : FOLD

4 : something produced by reflecting : as *a* : an image given back by a reflecting surface

b : an effect produced by an influence <the high crime rate is a *reflection* of our violent society>

5 : an often obscure or indirect criticism : REPROACH <a *reflection* on his character>

6 : a thought, idea, or opinion formed or a remark made as a result of meditation

7 : consideration of some subject matter, idea, or purpose

8 *obsolete* : turning back : RETURN

9 *a* : a transformation of a figure in which each point is replaced by a point symmetric with

respect to a line or plane *b* : a transformation that involves reflection in more than one axis of a rectangular coordinate system

I really like to give people what they want. I like to think about what everyone wants, to determine desires implicit in the situation and make them explicit. But it's like that saying, "Be careful what you wish for."

—Ellen Harvey

Like any public institution, a museum has a specific identity, often determined by its size or location, by the types of exhibitions it shows, and by the work that it collects and maintains. One of the ways a museum communicates this identity to the world is by developing a descriptive catalog that allows viewers an overview of the major works in its collection. This is a necessarily subjective formulation: rather than the work being chosen in some quantifiable way, one relies, as in an exhibition, upon the expertise of the museum professional to present the work meaningfully in the catalog. The selection of work in a collection catalog can function as a snapshot in time, telling its own story of art historical interpretation, incorporating new ways of thinking about older pieces and presenting works that the museum has more recently acquired.

The 2003 installation that Ellen Harvey was invited to create for the Whitney Museum of American Art was the second exhibition in the series *Contemporary Artists on Contemporary Art*, for which artists are invited to create new work to be shown alongside selections they make from the Whitney's contemporary collection. Her project, *A Whitney for the Whitney at Altria* (2003), was constructed around the museum's recently published collection catalog encompassing both historical and contemporary works [see page 60]. An enormous gold frame, with the exhibition title painted overhead, bordered the granite doorframe of the gallery at the branch museum, located in a corporate atrium in midtown New York. To enter, the viewer was required to step over the frame and into the space beyond, effectively entering the picture. Before even opening the doors to the gallery, the viewer had engaged a critical aspect of Harvey's project, which literalized multiple definitions of a frame: "a structure made for admitting, enclosing, or supporting something," "to give expression to," or "to fit or adjust to something in order to achieve a desired outcome or interpretation." The collection catalog chosen, titled *American Visionaries*, is the Whitney's metaphorical frame for itself, a presentation of the iconic images that in turn define the museum's most current vision of its identity.

Many of Harvey's projects engage this notion of framing from different perspectives; for example, a 2004 piece entitled *Walk-In* provided a life-size doorway view of a baroque interior set in the back of a gold-framed, closet sized space [see page 50]. Enticing the viewer like an ironic, truncated version of the children's wardrobe access to the fantastical country of Narnia in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Harvey's *Walk-In* literalizes the idea of a painting as window (or doorway) onto another world. However, like her invocation of the get-what-you-wish-for adage, one physically disorienting and ultimately unsatisfying in its realization. Approaching the idea of framing more as a definition of delineated social space, *Welcome to My Home* (2005)-also marking Harvey's increasing use of literal reflectiveness-is an actual mirror with a drawing of the artist's house engraved onto the back and illuminated [see page 40]. Standing before the glowing, elaborately framed reflection of the domestic interior, viewers thus see themselves as if inside the artist's home. An inverted version of the Whitney project where the viewer in essence enters a privately scaled version of the public institution, Harvey brings the private space of the artist-and all of its romanticized historical connotations with it-into the public realm.

Passing through Harvey's gold frame at the Whitney at Altria, the viewer entered a room constructed within the gallery made of ten-foot-high panels bearing painted copies of each of the 394 images featured in *American Visionaries*. Though painted directly onto the panel, the copies appear to hang salon style. Roughly following the alphabetical ordering in the catalog, each copy was scaled twice as large as its printed image. Rectangular openings in the panels revealed artworks-the actual objects, rather than painted copies-placed behind the walls at seven points. Hung as in a typical gallery, they are only visible in their entirety when the viewer stands extremely close to the corresponding cut-out frame. The seven works were the most recent acquisitions in the Whitney's collection at the time of the project's inception, barring several that were necessarily excluded because of size or condition constraints. Distancing herself from the selective act of curating by basing her "choices" on an objective process albeit an arbitrary one-Harvey further emphasized the temporal nature of institutional presentation, a snapshot of selection at the moment of the catalog's publication.

The viewing frames that look onto the new acquisitions were approximately the same scale as the hundreds of painted images on the constructed walls, effectively integrating the objects beyond within the overall selection. While the painted copies were easily accessed by the viewer, the recent acquisitions were physically unattainable and enticingly difficult to engage. The forced distance from the works and the seductive act of peering at them through the diminutive, shadowboxed openings in the panels placed the viewer in the role of voyeur. The pristine hanging of the originals called attention to the minor imperfections of Harvey's copies-the numerous smudges and drips that marred the white surface of the panels and revealed the process of their creation. The recent acquisitions were simultaneously presented as precious, protected objects-the only ones permitted a physical presence-and as yet outside the institutional canon represented by the copies.

Ideas of valuation, commerce, and the commodification of art are consistent themes in Harvey's work. An equal opportunity critic, she trains her rigorous, questioning eye equally on herself, on the art world and its institutions, and on history. For a project exhibited at the Frankfurt Art Fair in 2002, she repainted a very small trompe l'oeil version of the best-known painting in the city's Städel Institute of Art, Johann Tischbein's 1786 portrait of Goethe. The incongruity of the scale and style of Harvey's rendition, in contrast to the fair's largely contemporary fare, and its accompanying title, *Not for Sale* (2002), revealed the way art fairs have increasingly cloaked their essential commercial nature in the high-quality rigor associated with museums [see page 68]. While Harvey's work often mocks the conventions of different aspects of the art world, it steers clear of condescension or mean-spiritedness. The broad humor it evokes and the often awesome labor and seductive aesthetics of her work allow her revelations to be a seduction into ideas rather than an aggressive didacticism, even as the sharpness of Harvey's wit keeps it from the opposing trap of sanctioned, self-congratulatory insider critique. Another art fair installation, in Berlin in 2003, rather bluntly addressed the exponential rise of the art market in recent years: the exorbitant prices, the rush of collectors joining the fray, the potential glibness of the interaction-from the "celebritizing" of artists to the superficiality of a collector's knowledge. Titled *Wallpaper for the Rich*, Harvey selected and hung several samples of papers typically seen in houses of the wealthy, with smaller oil paintings exactly replicating the wallpaper pattern behind [see page 48]. "After all," the artist writes, "what is art at an art fair?" The title provides the less gentle answer, as Harvey says, to give them what they want.

When approaching the Whitney project, initially daunted by the enormous research binders of the contemporary collection and the charge of site-specificity, Harvey's first impulse was to construct an exhibition of works that address institutional critique and the process of collecting-works that ironically become reappropriated by the system they are critiquing once they become part of an institution's collection. Uncomfortable with the curatorial process this necessitated, Harvey realized that the collection catalog had already done such work-already determined, in a sense, what the Whitney is. Using that publication as her source, the artist's focus centered on viewers and their desires for the specific space of the branch museum. Harvey's engagement with traditional processes, such as painting, is partially an attempt to investigate media seen by some in the art world to be less relevant than newer technologies. More significantly, painting is Harvey's way to access a more popular conception of art and explore its function for the broader public. "My work," Harvey states, "is an often futile attempt to deconstruct clichés of art production in order to understand or reveal their continuing hold on the popular imagination despite all their apparent obsolescence."

Both the painted copies and the windows that looked onto original works were numbered in concordance with the battered copy of the catalog used to paint the replicas, which sat on the central bench in the gallery for viewers' reference. Like the panels, the swollen and tattered catalog bore the marks of the artist's process: the entire book was clearly unbound into individual sheets, then reconstructed and augmented to include the recent acquisitions and works that were logistically unusable for Harvey's project. In addition to providing basic information about each original work, including the artist's name, dimensions, and the media used, the catalog allowed the viewer to function as a critic, to compare the original image to the painted copy-underscoring both the artist's obvious skill and the tremendous labor involved, as well as the impossibility of creating an exact replica of or from a printed photograph.

Representation and reflection in their many meanings form the crux of the investigation proposed by Harvey's project and a theme frequently engaged in her previous work. As with most compelling conceptual work, Harvey's installations tend to be deceptively simple in concept; their deadpan cleverness and blunt obviousness belie the depth of its complex investigation of representation and perception. What the artist has referred to as a "poetic visual joke" and an "act of complete megalomania" is also a rigorous, obsessive engagement with the politics of selection and display, and the communication of meaning. The multiplicity of framing in the piece refers beyond its site-specificity to how art overall is contextualized. *A Whitney for the Whitney* plays off the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century paintings commissioned to record art collections, which functioned simultaneously as factual communication, educational tools, and subjective interpretative artworks in their own right. Reproductions of two familiar examples, Johann Zoffany's *Tribuna of the Uffizi* (1772-78) and Samuel F.B. Morse's *Gallery of the Louvre* (1831-33), serve as endpapers for Harvey's reconstituted catalog. By following the Whitney catalog selection and ordering of works, Harvey avoided the explicit compositional framing found in collection paintings of the past in which the artist selected both the specific objects and their placement within the scene. Additionally, Harvey's concern with the notion of accessibility, coupled with the Whitney's position as a public institution and the branch museum's status as a free, public space, led her to a significant modification of this historical practice. Instead of a single, planar representation, Harvey constructed a painting that viewers entered physically, thus allowing them to be the subject of the piece, to occupy the place of a wealthy patron who might have owned such a collection. The experience of walking into a painting was enhanced by the images having been painted directly onto the panels, rather than hung as individual objects on walls. This "painting" in turn referenced a book, thus layering the fantastical suggestion of also being inside the catalog. Accessibility, giving people what they want, is Harvey's endlessly double-edged sword-a truly generous impulse that may create a new lens through which to see that the thing desired is not exactly what they thought. Reflections, from the Latin root meaning the "act of bending back" includes among its many definitions quoted above: the production of an image by or as if in a mirror, an effect produced by an influence, an often obscure and indirect criticism.

As in many of her projects, Harvey's *A Whitney for the Whitney* uses a deliberately inefficient, even illogical means to achieve her goal-the "implicit inadequacy" critical to the questions posed. While the historical paintings of collections by Zoffany and Morse that inspired the project were necessarily created as paintings, this medium no longer occupies a place as the most accurate means of representation. Because photography allows for the existence

of a far more convenient, efficient, and portable collection catalog, Harvey invests the images chosen for her project with a sense of historical circularity by returning them to their previous state as cumbersome and inaccurate painted imagery. Painted from photographs of the works rather than the original works themselves, the nearly 400 copies are significantly removed from their source. Harvey further exaggerates this distance by translating them into yet another medium. The degree of separation becomes particularly ironic with sculptural works or with conceptual works whose meaning resides in subverting a two-dimensional representation or their removal from the traditional aestheticized object, to which they have now been returned. Harvey's project built on art-historical precedents such as Sherry Levine's deconstructionist copies of famous artworks that question the sacrosanct modernist notion of originality and the masterpiece, Louise Lawler's interrogations of institutional display and aesthetics commodification, and more recent work such as Vik Muniz's photographs of "paintings" of iconic artworks re-created in untraditional media such as chocolate syrup. Harvey's project wryly reveals these influences; works by Levine, Lawler, and Muniz appear in the catalog, and are thus painted into the installation. Harvey becomes a link in this conceptual lineage while simultaneously decontextualizing, aestheticizing, and, ultimately, reinterpreting her sources.²

Harvey's projects often bring to mind Sol LeWitt's seminal "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" (1967), in particular the notion that establishing an arbitrary set of rules might be engaged with the goal of eliminating arbitrariness. In other words, while rules and parameters quite often can function to close down options and imply less freedom, their very clarity can bring into focus a necessary specificity that becomes enlightening and relevant. For example, in the Whitney piece, Harvey maintained her own objective scale for each copy—twice that of its image in the catalog—which calls attention to the fact that images in a book often have no relationship to the scale of the objects that they represent. Yet despite Harvey's intent to create a recognizable copy of each image, even three months of fifteen-hour days and her considerable technical skill would not be enough to create a photo-realistic version of the artworks in the Whitney catalog.³ Though consciously resisted, Harvey acknowledges that some evidence of the artist's presence is unavoidable. While the images conveyed verism from afar, closer inspection (encouraged by the viewing method for the recent acquisitions) revealed her hand in the visible brushstrokes, the slight inaccuracies, the smudges here and there. These traces of her work, in this as in all of the artist's "repaintings," remind the viewer that all images are a product of interpretation, no matter how objectively approached. Harvey allowed her personal engagement with the work to be visible in imperfection, albeit astonishingly accomplished and visually overwhelming, thus celebrating "the idea that my consciousness, or my relationship to the whole thing, manifests itself as failure."

By emphasizing the notion of failure, Harvey's installations effectively examine their opposite: What makes an artwork successful, and to whom? The desires and expectations of the viewer are, to Harvey, far more interesting than those of the artist; figuring prominently in her work is the radical disjunction between the definitions of good art and a "real artist" in the popular imagination with those of art-world insiders. Largely unspoken among art professionals, this distance is the fulcrum of Harvey's approach. When considering the Whitney project, Harvey tried to isolate the interpretative underpinnings of art in the public realm, generally reducible to an interest in skill and aesthetics, from the prioritizing impulse of the contemporary art world, where conceptual depth trumps all. Harvey traces her interest in expectations of viewing and the desire for a particular notion of the artist to her own relatively recent transition to that identity. After an unsatisfying stint as a lawyer, she chose to pursue what she calls her "naïve understanding of art as a locus of desire, a space of freedom where you can do anything you like." Given that popular conception, why, Harvey asks, isn't everyone an artist? Why is art accorded either an exalted and often elitist space in contemporary culture or relegated to a hobby? Why is the work of a Sunday painter not considered serious?

Harvey's *New York Beautification Project* (1999-2001) brought these ideas to bear on the question of site-specific public art [see page 76]. Harvey spent more than one hundred days painting exquisitely rendered reproductions of traditional landscape paintings in degraded sites throughout the city that were already marked by graffiti—illegal drawings or inscriptions made on a public surface—or that had become de facto public spaces. Inserting an aesthetically appealing image of nature that, through its medium and process, signifies as art in the deteriorated urban landscape, Harvey's graffiti merged commonly held criticism of that practice as the province of subversive, chaotic youth with a widely appreciated genre of painting. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani publicly stated his approval of the *New York Beautification Project*, citing it as the kind of public art the city should be supporting. Missing the conceptual point of the project, Giuliani brilliantly, if unintentionally, summarized the issues involved,

focusing on the easily appreciated landscape paintings rather than Harvey's investigation of what is acceptable art. Even if he misinterpreted the intention of the work, the mayor's comment draws out an issue central to *A Whitney for the Whitney*: who has the authority to determine art's validity and value? A postcard project created for the Studio Museum in Harlem addresses many of these same ideas, but additionally nuanced with social content: Harvey created a small oil painting of a heavily graffiti-ed street in Harlem, hung the piece on one of the walls in the depiction, and then photographed it to use as the postcard itself. How does it shift the interpretation of this site, understood to be in a state of urban decay, when translated into a painting which in turn becomes a postcard?

Both images, now integrated into the broadly accessible format of the postcard, conflate the preciousness of the oil painting itself and its completely unvalued site and result in an upending of representational value that is often the crux of Harvey's work.

Investigating how artistic validity is determined is certainly not without substantial precedent in contemporary art practice. For example, Harvey's stated goal of "giving people what they want" is the impetus behind Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid's painting *Most Wanted* (1995-97), for which they asked the public—the future viewers of the work—to make certain compositional and formal decisions about the final product. This project used statistical data based on national responses to questions about aesthetic preferences to create a composite work of art. Ostensibly this artwork should have pleased everyone and, unsurprisingly, it pleased no one. Harvey's approach is perhaps less aggressive in making its point; her use of traditional media and imagery familiar to a broader public provides enticing means for viewers to engage their own desires concerning art and aesthetics. Simultaneously critiquing commonly held assumptions about art and artists, Harvey's work serves as a bridge between the often broad gulf that separates art and its public. Though the artist is aware that each viewer will come away from the piece with a different interpretation, she is committed to the idea that "all dialogues are valuable to the artist." In a similar vein, for Harvey's 2001 performance *Free Portraits* [see page 74] the artist offered fifteen-minute pencil portraits to passersby near art institutions in exchange for a written evaluation of the finished work. Taking a form of art production that is generally considered outside the realm of the "real" art world, Harvey's street drawings reinvest the viewer with a position of power regarding the artwork while simultaneously questioning how certain genres and processes are invested with, or divested of, legitimacy. The real and the artificial, representational accuracy, and the status of originality have been consistent themes throughout Harvey's work. Her series *I See Myself in You* (2000-2001) consists of paintings based on Polaroids of two adult friends each attempting to re-create a photograph of the artist as a child [see page 73]. The theatricality of the original images, in which Harvey vamped and posed in typically childlike performances, underscores the nostalgia of the adult reenactments, what Harvey refers to as "double-faked self-portraits." The two re-creations, painted side by side on a single panel, express the futility of any single interpretation and the aesthetic construction underlying all portraiture. This notion is also addressed in the Whitney piece, which was essentially one version of the institution's "portrait." In both projects, the source image is absent—there is no way to compare the final representation with its original and thus no way to truly determine accuracy. The frustration the viewer feels engaging a copy without an accessible comparison is, in the Whitney work, initially mitigated by the presence of the catalog. Ultimately, however, the work suggests that the distance from an objective assessment is always insurmountable when looking at a reproduction.

Other early works such as Harvey's video *Seeing Is Believing* (2001) and the paintings titled *Low-Tech Special Effects* (1999-2000) address oft-unnoticed aspects of medium and representation [see pages 69, 78, 79]. In the former, a split-screen image of a room is combined with an initially blank "screen" (actually an empty canvas) on which the side of the room seemingly obscured by the canvas is painted during the video's half-hour duration. While the finished piece appears to seamlessly present the full view of the room as seen by the artist, in reality Harvey created the painted half based on a live-feed television monitor at a different angle, which was needed to properly create the illusion of a whole. Like the Whitney installation, the final image is multiply removed from reality even while enticing the viewer to believe it is an accurate representation. By combining a technological medium

(video) that is often accorded an indexical relationship to reality with an archaic form (painting) no longer given that representational authority, Harvey underscores our desire to privilege the eye, to believe what we see. Humorously engaging this same desire, the painted series *Low-Tech Special Effects* "recreates" cinematic special effects in absurdly unconvincing ways, calling attention to the obsolescence of the painted medium. In the end, the

primary appeal of the paintings is their process, the nostalgia and preciousness of the medium, rather than its ability to evoke a fictional event so easily achieved on film. In a similar process, Harvey's attempt to create a perfect copy of the Whitney's collection catalog reveals the perversity of claiming that painting can function as an accurate representation—in this case, of even another representation rather than the original object. A perversity of a different sort invades the recent *Rose Painting* (2005), which similarly combines disparate media (drawing and video) to undermine the notion of accuracy and representational truth [see page 43]. Two identically sized panels hang side by side on the wall, one a two-dimensional watercolor, a monochrome image of a rose. On the other is a projection of a video showing what looks like the painting being made, from what is seemingly blood from the artist's hand from a self-inflicted razor wound. Is the watercolor the fake, a more palatable version of the almost ludicrously melodramatic rendition of the artist suffering for her work, or is the video a faked origin of the piece intended to mock the same idea of "truth"? The excessive labor and technical skill involved in many of Harvey's projects can serve to ground the work against what might otherwise be considered a clever insider's joke; here, the "pain" of the artist's practice becomes the subject of the witticism, the hyperbolic trope of the artist's suffering both mocked and retaining its evocative power.

The investigation of issues of institutional context and notions of hierarchical power figure more prominently in the artist's recent work. When the Secession in Vienna invited the artist to recreate her *New York Beautification Project*, with typical sensitivity to context, Harvey saw immediately that it would resonate quite differently at that museum and in the pristine environment of that city. She decided to alter the project by painting the words "Bad Boy Klimt Lebt!" (German for "lives") in graffiti-style script on the outside and inside of the Secession building [see page 70]. The letters were filled in with excerpts copied from Gustav Klimt's Beethoven Frieze (1902), one of the Secession's best-known works by one of Vienna's most celebrated artists. As with the *New York Beautification Project*, viewers' responses during the painstaking days of painting were integral to the piece, as was its ephemerality (it was slated to be painted over after three months) and the counterintuitive practice of creating graffiti from a highly valued historical image. For an installation for the Princeton University Art Museum, *My Venus is Better than Your Venus* (2003), Harvey replicated one of the most highly valued paintings in their collection (Cranach's *Venus and Amor*, a paradigmatic representation of the goddess of desire) and similarly undermined the preciousness and exclusionary effects of institutional presentation [see page 58]. She followed to the letter the museum's restrictions on how to make a copy, designed to prevent the possibility of fraud or theft, yet upon completion, she did in fact "steal" the original work and display her own piece in its stead for the duration of the exhibition. The work, as with all of the artist's "copying" projects, will clearly not be the original, but will function as its doppelgänger, inaccurate and revealing its falsity, but nonetheless a richly layered simulation enacting the exchange of desire (the viewer coveting ownership, the artist wanting display) through its aptly selected image.

The Princeton project simultaneously asks the viewer to assess Harvey's copy against the original. What, if anything, keeps her piece from being better than the original work? In *A Whitney for the Whitney*, the artist has taken the question to its most extreme expression in a performance of simultaneous submission and arrogance. Could this installation, which Harvey called "perhaps the world's most insanely derivative work," also fulfill an artist's desire for her work to be better than the celebrated works that preceded it? The intensely concentrated and obsessive relationship with the American art historical canon (as represented by the Whitney's collection) required to paint the piece created a kind of poetic intimacy, making manifest the ever present agony of influence inherent to any creative endeavor. Interventions performed on other sites of institutional architecture pursue a larger investigation of spaces of decay, disuse, and ruin—from a repainted and reflected reclamation of a building's past in *Derenovation* (2004) to the transformation of a disused storage space in *New is Old* (2003) [see pages 44 and 52]. Both respond to the embedded hierarchies of civic renovation and the process of selective validation on a broader social scale, but from essentially the opposing direction of projects such as the Whitney and Princeton Museum projects.

One might see Harvey's current project, *Mirror* (2005) at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts as the culmination of Harvey's near-masochistic assumptions of labor and institutional intervention reflecting both validation and decay. The artist's recreation of the stairhall at the Academy onto huge mirrored panels (engraved from the back and illuminated) is both a representation and a literal, physical construction—the viewer enters into the room itself, and is also reflected within the schematic drawing of the space they just left. The mirror, of course,

is the ultimate representational trickery, what cultural theorist Wayne Koestenbaum has called the “deceitfulness” of mirrors. As he notes, “a reflective surface lies: pretending to send back the same, it pollutes the original.”⁴ A mirror, perhaps the ultimate site of desire (Mirror, Mirror on the wall...), is already itself an inversion of reality—only a true mirror, which is a complicated construction, shows us what other people actually see, and for those who have ever encountered one, it is deeply disturbing, almost entirely unfamiliar.⁵ Harvey further illuminates her mirror as a surface of liminality—seeing through into a “real” space that of course does not actually exist—viewers see themselves both reflected in the actual room in which they stand as well as integrated within the room Harvey has drawn. And it is important to note that Harvey’s drawing reflects (“the action of bending or folding back, consideration of some subject matter, idea, or purpose...”) the stairhall not as we experience it, but as an alternate future, as if it had been left to decay for half a century. The image literally constructs the space we encounter, which is both true and fantastical, both accurately reflective of the world and the originator of one entirely nonexistent. The accompanying video shows the artist laboriously engraving the image into the back of one of the large panels and culminates with the shattering of that panel—seemingly the very one near us, in which we see ourselves, which proves our presence and reality, and then dissolves into a world beyond any we can actually experience. This experience, in its frustrating and contradictory way, is the very definition of what art is.

Ultimately all of Harvey’s work revolves around such a complex and conflicted engagement with art, in which critique and commitment, cynicism and optimism, sincerity and ironic humor coexist. The circularity of making art about art in which the meaning of art is the questioning of its meaning takes on a progressive, almost transcendent note in her oeuvre. “I think of the space of art as being the space of obsession, of nonrational choices,” the artist says. “You just decide to do it, like being in love with someone where you can only think ‘I’ll just keep going and at some point it will end or something will happen.’” The sense of necessity, even compulsion, in her projects affords them a level of intensity that translates to all those who experience them. “Obsession is in a way about a lack of choice—a process that mimics the way I think being an artist just is. There is something beautiful to me about someone undertaking this question because they just decided to How far can one go?” Despite the pervasive thread of wry cynicism running through Ellen Harvey’s work (“like all cynics,” she has said, “I’m just a disappointed idealist”), her practice acknowledges overall the persistence of art’s frustratingly indeterminate power, and that neither it, nor she, has yet achieved the answer to that question.

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NOTES

This essay has been adapted from the brochure that accompanied the exhibition *Ellen Harvey: A Whitney for the Whitney at Altria*, Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria, January 23-April 4, 2003.

¹ Ellen Harvey, interview by the author, December 11, 2002. All the artist’s quotes are from this interview.

² While much of Harvey’s work centers on the idea of desire and expectation, her own aesthetic and conceptual preferences become curiously subverted. Aesthetics, she feels, should relate only to the point you’re trying to express. In *A Whitney for the Whitney*, preference manifested itself in relationship to difficulty of reproduction: “I liked the ones without too much detail.” Additionally, “there are pieces in there that I think are fabulous, but didn’t enjoy painting at all because they were so labor intensive, and also there were pieces that I really love as pieces, but when you turn them into paintings, they completely lose what makes them good Making them into paintings is kind of this terrible, reactionary thing to do to these poor works, where they suddenly become something that functions purely on this aesthetic level.”

³ “I’m not sure there are brushes small enough to achieve that detail on this scale,” the artist commented—a typical llllderstatement that succinctly and modestly summarizes the impossibility of the project.

⁴ Wayne Koestenbaum, *Moirai in Aigues-Mortes* (Brooklyn: Soft Skull Press, 2004), 17.

A true mirror, also called a non-reversing mirror, allows viewers to see themselves as they are seen by others, rather than an inverted image. Actually two reflective surfaces housed in a box-like construction, a true mirror oftentimes produces discomfort on the part of the viewer, not habituated to seeing themselves “for real.”