

Breaking Laws and Mirrors

From illegally painted landscapes to 3-D oils,

Ellen Harvey plays

with the conventions

of realism

BY ANN LANDI

Yes, I am perverse," Ellen Harvey readily agrees when discussing her work. Take, for instance, *Mirror*, her installation last fall at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, commissioned to commemorate the institution's 200th anniversary. Harvey engraved nearly life-size views of the institution's Victorian Gothic staircase and hall on backlit reflective panels. But Harvey imagined the space not in its full 19th-century glory, when Thomas Eakins was the school's most notable teacher, but as a decrepit ruin with plants sprouting through the masonry, arches toppling, plaster crumbling, and boards covering the museum's entry doors.

"There are four 9-by-12-foot panels, Plexiglas mirrors. The back of each was cut with a diamond point—all by hand, by me," the artist explains, sitting in an airy loft a few flights up from her studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. As with many of her projects, this one was labor intensive, requiring 12-hour days over a period of about six months.

"The museum originally wanted a contemporary piece," she adds, "but I thought, 'Why stop at the present?' The Gothic Revival building is an industrial-age version of a ruin made modern, so I thought it would be nice to be circular and take it back to being a ruin."

Not content with simply envisioning the academy as a decaying wreck, Harvey also included three videos. One documents her engraving one of the panels and then smashing it with a hammer. Two others, playing simultaneously in side rooms, show the artist creating pencil sketches of the first two academy buildings. Then, at the same time as the mirror in the central video smashes, the drawings burst into flames—a reference to fires in 1845 and 1886 that destroyed works in the collection. "It's an orgy of destruction," Harvey says happily. "And then it all becomes very peaceful and calm again."

The 38-year-old artist was born in the English countryside and retains a distinct British accent, along with the roses-and-cream complexion of a Gainsborough portrait. A tall, striking woman whose speech is punctuated by frequent laughter, Harvey cuts her own spiky, dark brown hair and extensively alters her clothes to achieve a certain raffish chic.

Harvey has been playing with the conventions of realism for almost a decade—she's created 3-D oils for viewers to walk into, made paintings of wallpaper mounted on wallpaper, and hung scenic images in the very locations they depict—but her path through the New York art world has been far from typical. She moved to Milwaukee with her parents and two sisters at the age of 14, and though she had always painted, it "just didn't seem like a real career

option," she recalls. "I never actually saw anyone being an artist."

After earning a B.A. from Harvard in literature and history, Harvey attended the prestigious Hochschule der Künste, an art school in Berlin, but soon decided to drop out. "And so I went to Yale law school," she says. "I realized I hated law, but half a degree is useless, and so I decided to finish and make enough money so that I could have a year where I



Ellen Harvey in her Williamsburg, Brooklyn, studio.

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