



NOT YOUR TYPICAL LAWYER

BY JONATHAN T. WEISBERG

MOST OF THE TIME

ELLEN HARVEY IS NOT A LAWYER AT ALL,
BUT RATHER A CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED ARTIST,
WHO RECENTLY HAD A SOLO EXHIBITION
AT THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART'S ALTRIA—
FORMERLY PHILIP MORRIS—ANNEX IN NEW YORK CITY.

HARVEY'S INSTALLATION,

THE SECOND IN AN ONGOING SERIES ENTITLED

"CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS ON CONTEMPORARY ART,"

WAS CALLED

"A WHITNEY FOR THE WHITNEY AT ALTRIA,"

AND WAS ON DISPLAY

FROM JANUARY 23 THROUGH APRIL 4, 2003.



**ELLEN HARVEY '93 STANDS IN THE WHITNEY
AT ALTRIA ON 42ND STREET, SURROUNDED
BY HUNDREDS OF HER PAINTINGS.
OR MAYBE THEY'RE NOT HER PAINTINGS.**

On the walls, painted in neat rows, are tiny copies of 394 works found in the Whitney's permanent collection. The question of whether these are her paintings, or just copies of other people's paintings (and photographs and sculpture), is deliberately complicated.

Seen from a distance, the gallery is a gleaming contrast of white walls and spots of color. Once you step through the gilt frame that borders the room—like stepping into a painting—it can seem like a kaleidoscope of fractured bits of every possible medium—line drawings, vivid primary color blots, sculptures, hyper-realistic paintings, and black and white photos. There are hints of a thousand different thoughts. It's the work of one hand and many minds.

There's no doubt that hand was Harvey's: she spent five months working on the meticulous portraits, landscapes, abstract shapes. She even built the walls on which the paintings are set and the ceiling overhead. "There was a point at which I was like, 'Oh my god, it's me versus the Whitney and the Whitney has won,'" says Harvey. >

She points to one of the paintings, which is a single block of color, and says that became her favorite from the whole collection. “It’s a different relationship to the art when you have to copy it.”

Harvey made her copies from the pages of a catalog of the Whitney’s permanent collection, which she taped to the walls as she painted. The catalog is now chained to the bench in the Altria gallery for visitors to peruse, but it’s been reconstituted, with the addition of Harvey’s handwritten notes and commentary, after being cut up and rearranged. If you look closely, you’ll see that each painting is exactly twice the size of its photo in the catalogue. “I hate making decisions,” Harvey says to explain why she used the same ratio for each piece. The exhibition also includes seven items from the Whitney’s permanent collection, because it’s part of a series in which emerging artists select works from the collection and respond to them. Harvey used the seven most recent acquisitions that would fit in her space and set them behind cutouts in the walls.

The paintings run in alphabetical order of their original creator (again Harvey dodged a decision), from Vito Acconci to Marguerite Zorach, but a visitor to the gallery can navigate through them by any of several methods. One can look for familiar images, such as the Edward Hopper showing a nude woman sitting in a ray of emulsified sunlight, or simply seek bright colors or striking designs, like the reproduction of a photo of a tongue touching an eyeball.

One can also go to the catalog and compare the photos Harvey worked from with the image that ended up on the wall. There are always differences and yet the two works are recognizably the same. Sometimes it’s hard to say which version is more interesting. All of the paintings also seem to have some quality in common, whatever their source—they’ve been imbued with something by Harvey’s hand.

A clear statement is hard to find in Harvey’s painted room. “I like things that resist having a single meaning,” Harvey says, and by that benchmark “A Whitney for the Whitney at Altria” has been a success. “The readings I’ve gotten of it, even just the reviews, have been very different. From, ‘It’s a failed piece of anti-institutional critique,’ or ‘It’s a searing indictment of corporate sponsorship,’ to ‘It’s this weird Buddhist, trance-like piece of self-flagellation.’”

When pushed on the question of what it means to her, she’ll say, “It makes you think about the fact that most of the time we don’t experience artworks in person, and just see the catalogues and photographs. Photographs are always

unreliable, too—not quite as unreliable as me, of course. It’s an extremely unreliable version of the museum.”

After a few minutes in Harvey’s reproduced museum, you may realize that you are smelling paint. It’s as if you’ve become immersed in painting by thinking about it. Harvey would be pleased. “One of the jobs you can have as an artist is to seduce people into thinking,” Harvey says. “I make a lot of pieces where, if you look at them, you think, ‘Yeah I know what’s going on, I feel very comfortable with this.’ Then you look at it more closely, and you think, ‘Actually, wait a second, this isn’t what I expected.’”

Whatever way you look at Harvey’s life, you’ll find something unexpected.

She was born in England and moved to the United States when she was fourteen years old. She says she always wanted to be an artist, but had no idea how to do it. “I didn’t know anyone who was an artist. I’d never seen anyone who was an artist.”

Although she had no formal training, Harvey does detect a stirring artistic impulse in photographs her mother took of her when she was a child. “They’re very over the top,” says Harvey, “because I was such a ham....They were like paintings. They were very much from the very traditional ways

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that you see young girls depicted.” Harvey capitalized on this nascent artistry—and the seemingly unconscious expression of conventions—in a 2001 series of paintings titled “I See Myself in You,” in which she painted friends posed in imitation of the photographs.

Harvey went to Harvard for college, and then spent a year in Berlin, painting and taking art classes. She had already applied to Yale Law School, as well as other graduate programs before she left. “I thought maybe my parents are right, maybe I should become a respectable member of society,” she says. At YLS, she painted on her own time and took classes at the Yale School of Art.

She remembers one painting from her Yale period with chagrin: “I spent nine months painting an allegory of my entire life, which was incredibly melodramatic. It was nine



Harvey's reconstituted catalog for "A Whitney for the Whitney at Altria." Right, a piece from Harvey's "I See Myself in You." This one shows two versions of a photograph of Harvey as a little girl holding a pet canary.

Previous spread, Ellen Harvey and her paintings. From left, a miniaturized copy of a work by Sarah Sze; Harvey pictured as she worked on the exhibition; the exhibition as installed in the museum (Harvey painted the gold frame as well as everything inside it).



by twelve feet large....It was a huge, last flowering of my adolescence. I was in the middle in flames, kind of like a really bad record cover.”

Upon graduation in 1993, Harvey continued to try to be respectable. She took a job at Cleary, Gottlieb, Steen & Hamilton, but she also kept painting. She showed her work in bars and cafes, and sold some paintings. Her artistic ambitions evolved away from the personal over this period. “I didn’t know what to do, so I was just painting my clothes for a long time....I did a piece called *A Clean Pair for Every Day*, where I painted a clean pair of knickers for every day of the show. It struck me as a nice thing.”

Harvey found the combination of a ninety-hour work week at Cleary and a fledgling painting career insuperable. She saved enough money to take a year off and concentrate on her painting.

That was the extent of what she calls her “fiendish plan,” but she quickly started showing at venues like the PS1 Museum’s Clocktower Gallery and the Brooklyn Museum of Art, and she completed the Whitney’s Independent Study Program.

Harvey worked a few summers after this point at Cleary, but painting became the central focus of her life. “I started off just by being a painter and really loving painting...and just spent years and years teaching myself how to paint. Then I had this complete breakdown, when at some point I realized that I could kind of paint anything I wanted, anyway I wanted. It was all possible, but, in fact, why? Why bother?”

Harvey points out that many of the functions painting used to fulfill have been taken over by other media. Photography produces a realistic depiction of how you look. Movies create imaginative worlds. But, Harvey says, people still want paintings. “People have this visceral response to painting.... A good way of looking at what people want from art is to look at the things that are already coded in really, really traditional art forms, and try to see what happens if you do them differently. What happens if you take the landscape and put it outside instead of putting it inside?”

SHE LIKED HOW THE CLICHÉS OF LANDSCAPE PAINTING EASED PEOPLE INTO THE ARTWORK. SHE ALSO KNEW HER PAINTING WAS ILLEGAL.

Harvey did exactly that. And what happened? She got written up in *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*—and she eventually got stopped by the police. She called her outdoor landscapes the *New York Beautification Project*. It started when she participated in a one-day art event in Highbridge Park in the Bronx. “There was all this graffiti at the park, but the volunteers for the park had this really Arcadian, idealistic view of the park. They were like, ‘Oh, it’s so beautiful.’ It was, but it’s also totally dangerous.” She thought to add some graffiti of her own. She chose to paint a tiny, oval, romantic landscape, like a version of what people in the city dream wilderness to be. It was also the antithesis of the



More paintings of painting. Harvey says, “I don’t know why I became so obsessed with graffiti.”

Five of the landscapes Harvey painted in the streets of New York City for her New York Beautification Project.





From Harvey's ID Card Project. One of the self-portraits is a copy of her Yale ID, though she couldn't remember which one.



other graffiti in the park. "There were all these graffiti kids who were just like, 'What's wrong with you? This is too small. It's taking too long. Where's your crew?'"

The first painting raised all sorts of interesting questions for Harvey. The form of the painting was immediately familiar; it was something people related to as art. But, embedded in graffiti, "What makes that an artwork, and something that's also paint on the wall not an artwork? Why is this beautiful?" She liked how the clichés of landscape painting eased people into the artwork. She also knew her painting was illegal.

Harvey painted close to forty more landscapes, all around New York City—on the sides of buildings, on a fire alarm box, on a car that was left in one spot too long. She spent two or three days on each painting, and as she worked, people often spoke with her, asked her what she was doing. "It was like 120 days of discussing what it is to be an artist versus a graffiti artist on the streets of New York."

She faced the challenge of creating so many unique landscapes. "At some point I was like, okay, tree on the left, tree on the right, tree next to the lake, tree with a lantern, ruined temple. I was running out of ideas. So I shamelessly stole them from all kinds of places." And then there was the challenge of eluding the police. While painting on 14th

Street and 10th Avenue, she was grabbed from behind and forced up against a wall by police officers. She had to abandon her embryonic painting as just a simple hill and sky in want of details.

The *New York Beautification Project* brought Harvey broad attention. A writer in Milwaukee proposed a beautification project for that city after she stumbled on one of Harvey's paintings. The Secession Museum in Vienna, Austria, asked her to create a graffiti for them, and she copied a portion of

“WHAT'S PUBLIC PROPERTY,
WHAT'S PRIVATE PROPERTY?
WHY ARE PEOPLE ALLOWED TO DO THIS?
...WHAT ARE THE UNWRITTEN RULES?”

a frieze by Gustav Klimt that's inside the museum within a graffiti-style rendering of the words "Bad Boy Klimt Lives!" This time, when the police tried to stop Harvey, the director of the museum rushed out to inform them that he had asked her to deface the building. "He got to rescue me; it was very exciting."

Nonetheless, the artistic scofflaw Harvey sees a connection between her legal studies and her current artwork. "My practice as an artist has, in a way, circled back to questions

that motivated me more when I was a lawyer or when I was studying law. What's public property, what's private property? Why are people allowed to do this? What are the conventions? What are the unwritten rules?"

As Harvey reevaluated her reasons for painting, she also moved away from the romantic self expression of her earlier paintings. "I've become less and less interested in expressing myself and more and more interested in the audience," she says. An example of this is Harvey's 1998 *ID Card Project*, which she describes as an attempt to make a "boring self-portrait." She used every ID card she still owned—the most pedestrian, least expressive images of herself—as source material, and then obscured any biographical information on the cards.

Her latest project, "A Whitney for the Whitney at Altria," has a built-in means for the audience to participate: a comment book. It's filled with expressions of gratitude, raves ("Terrific. I had to hold myself back from making copies of your copies"), and a few pans. "People write these enormous essays," Harvey says with surprise. But she's grateful for the feedback. She's spent time in the room just to hear what people say, and the museum's security guards moonlight as her informants.

"Whatever response anyone has is great," says Harvey. "People are so busy, anyone who stops to actually look at something, I'm incredibly flattered and touched."

Harvey continues, "I feel strongly about this very romantic desire that people have for art, for a space in which...you can live out your fantasies. And yet, at the same time, that desire is doomed to failure. As an artist, I can never fulfill that desire." This tension is a source of the humor in much of Harvey's work. "All I can do is laugh, really," she says. Harvey also draws satisfaction from the act itself. "I'm a really conceptually driven artist, obviously, and most of my pieces are very much about an idea that I have and the aesthetics are subservient to the idea. But I also really, really love painting."

Some of the projects Harvey had in mind as the Whitney exhibition neared the end of its run included a wall painting for the Sculpture Center ("We should do a flat sculpture; there are all these three-dimensional sculptures."), and a series of paintings at the homes of security guards who work at the Queens Museum of Art (The guards would choose the subject matter for each painting.). She was working on a video and a painting for the Princeton Art Museum, in which she deliberately broke the rules about copying artworks in their collection. Harvey was



Fifteen out of the 394 repaintings Harvey did over the course of five months for "A Whitney for the Whitney at Altria"

also preparing for a solo show at the Müllerdechiara Gallery in Berlin and to participate in the Prague Biennial over the summer.

She didn't have her future all mapped out, though. Unlike the original Whitney, which has ambitions of permanence, Harvey had no plans for what to do with "A Whitney for the Whitney at Altria" after the exhibition closed. It might be sold in some form or other. Or, Harvey says, "Probably it will take up a lot of space in my home. On the other hand, I'll have my own Whitney Museum." ▣