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Art Review: “Ellen Harvey: The Alien’s Guide to the Ruins of Washington, D.C.” at the Corcoran Gallery of Art

In this quirky, humorous show, aliens from outer space visit an earth bereft of life.

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Photograph of Ellen Harvey's "Alien Souvenir Stand" by Etienne Frossard.

Destroying Washington in the service of art is a device that seems irresistible to filmmakers, never more so than in 2013, when not one but two lackluster movies with budgets big enough to wipe out the Corcoran's entire deficit have been released. The fact that *Olympus Has Fallen* and *White House Down* are so spookily similar tells us rather a lot about audiences today: 1) They hate Washington. 2) They love Washington in a way that makes its immolation both haunting and oddly cathartic. And 3) there's hardly anything more visually striking than classical architecture in ruins. Just look at Rome, or Detroit.

“The Alien’s Guide to the Ruins of Washington DC”—the newest work by British-born, Brooklyn-based artist Ellen Harvey and the latest in the Corcoran’s contemporary NOW series—doesn’t destroy Washington so much as revel in the magnificence of its desolation, but title aside, it’s much less concerned with Washington specifically than it is with the architecture of power in general. Harvey’s Washington exists in an imaginary future when humans have long since snuffed it. And

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yet the inevitable tourists remain, this time in the form of aliens who flock to earth in droves to try to understand the mysterious species that lived there, and why it was so compelled to erect pillars, porticos, columns, and colonnades everywhere it settled.

Harvey describes classical architecture as a “virus,” and nowhere is its proliferation more blatant than upstairs in one of the Corcoran’s galleries, where she’s assembled between 3,000 and 5,000 postcards of buildings around the world and displayed them all on three vast walls, drawing links between them with hieroglyphic-esque symbols. A collection of cards depicting the Parthenon in Athens, for example, hangs next to postcards of the Parthenon in Nashville, a full-scale replica of the Greek version constructed in 1897. There are ubiquitous domed state capitols and memorials and museums and palaces and theaters and banks and basilicas, classified in a simplistic but meaningful fashion (with lines and squiggles linking them together), and the scale of it all is breathtaking.

Harvey is clearly baffled, in a good-natured way, by the cross-cultural dominance of a single architectural form and its resilience over several thousand years of civilization. Her aliens are baffled, too, and in an attempt to understand the “lost pillar-builders of Earth” they misattribute motivations to humankind, which are printed on the Corcoran’s walls in space-age-y text. Here, we can learn that our beliefs were grounded in “egalitarianism, collaboration, and flirting,” and that our many, many cities on the water were constructed as part of an ornate mating ritual involving swimming upstream. Befuddled by the different sizes of Earth’s many ruins (imagine the DC War Memorial next to the US Capitol), the aliens have also deduced that humans come in three sizes, a bit like socks.

Downstairs in the Corcoran’s atrium, which also confuses the aliens by having its pillars on the inside of the building instead of the exterior, Harvey has constructed a souvenir stand, modeled after Washington’s hot dog stands and featuring around 150 handpainted images of local ruins. It’s here that you start to realize quite how boring the city is. Bereft of identifying elements or signage, the buildings all start to blend together, from the Archives to the American Red Cross Building to the magnificently stately Jewish Community Center. Yet the black-and-white images, hastily painted, do more than just provide an apocalyptic glimpse of a desolate, barren, unoriginal city. If this is art, Harvey seems to be asking, then what about the gaudy pictures of half-smokes all over the Mall?

Bringing the outside in, and questioning what defines art in a quirky, unselfconscious way, is characteristic of Harvey, who made a name for herself painting tiny landscapes illegally in graffiti hotspots in “The New York Beautification Project” from 1999 to 2001 before copying every single work in a Whitney Museum catalog in “A Whitney for the Whitney” in 2003. In 2005 she made a video projection depicting the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art as a ruin, and in 2010 she hung hand-copied nude paintings from the Bass Museum’s collection next to images from porn magazines.

In Harvey’s world, the aliens understand humanity much as people understand art: They interpret what most makes sense to them. The “pillar-builder archive” of postcards, preserved in a time capsule, is presumably as hard to explain for them as it is for us, given such damning evidence of banality. The aliens even mimic the style themselves, building a spaceship in the Corcoran’s rotunda that’s modeled after an obelisk. The aspirational nature of it all—that you can build your way to greatness via this bizarrely dominant form of architecture—is distinctly unnerving. These alien archaeologists, daffy as they are, have been infected with the virus, too, and their ultimate downfall may now be as inevitable as ours.