

Interview with Ellen Harvey



Nudist Museum (installation view), 2010, Oil on gessoboard, thrift-shop frames, magazine pages, Dimensions variable, photo credit: Etienne Frossard

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Ellen Harvey's recent exhibition of the "The Nudist Museum Gift Shop" at Dodge Gallery in the Lower East Side was a multi-layered examination of the nude and its ever-changing role in the history of art. By making copies in oil and reusing current mass media, she created a site-specific installation that challenged our perceptions of the classic and contemporary nude while at the same time touching upon our desires of collecting. Upon meeting Harvey in her studio, I was particularly taken by her incredibly thoughtful process in making exhibitions. She is able to move from space to space and re-install work with entirely new strategies and, despite having challenges along the way, is able to keep with her initial concepts and vision.

Meaghan Kent: "The Nudist Museum" was based on 54 copies in oils of every nude in the Miami Bass Museum's collection. How did this project come about?

Ellen Harvey: I've always been interested in clichés of art production of painting in particular. I love playing with people's expectations for an "art" experience, it is a



great way to explore what art is for. For example, I've done a lot of work with the landscape, the portrait, the self-portrait, etc.. but I had never done anything about the nude despite the fact that it's one of the most popular expectations for art, especially outside of the art world. So when Silvia Cubina from the Bass Museum asked me if I'd like to do a project with them, I thought, perfect, Nudes in Miami. It seemed an obvious choice. And when I found out that the Bass Museum had a historical collection, I immediately asked them if they could let me know how many nudes they had. Fortunately it was only 54. I could never have done this project with the Met, for example...

MK: Why did you select nude portraiture in particular? And how long did it take to make the copies?

EH: I think art is all about desire. I think that's one of the reasons that art is so segregated from real life in our society; desire is dangerous. So we create a special social space to contain desire that is both all-permissive and totally non-threatening because it's so powerless. The nude is particularly interesting in this context because it conflates sexual desire with the larger desires that art attempts (and in evitably fails) to fulfill. I think that's one of the reasons that art world outsiders often expect nudity in art.

The copies took many months to make. They're painted free-hand in oils based on the documentation sent to me by the Bass Museum. The images were cropped to accentu-



Nudist Museum Gift Shop (detail of installation at Dodge Gallery), 2012, Oil on wood panels, paint, Dimensions variable, wood shelving, photo credit: Etienne Frossard

ate the nudes and everything that was not nude was painted in grisaille, in black and white, with the painting spilling out onto the thrift-store frames in which the paintings were framed. The idea was to make it obvious that this was not just a found collection of nudes, that it was an artificial construct.

MK: The work was recently re-installed at Dodge Gallery in the Lower East Side, how did this new installation change the project? Was it more or less challenging in Miami than in the Lower East Side space?

EH: There were some limitations in Miami due to recent construction so I was excited to be able to install the Nudist Museum at Dodge Gallery as one unified installation exactly as I had intended. I hung the paintings over pasted-on images of contemporary mass media print nudes - from pornography, fitness and fashion magazines, etc.. to create a dialog between the art historical nude and present-day nudity. What was interesting was how much more varied the art historical nudes were in terms of the kinds of bodies portrayed and the meanings attributed to nudity. For example, there were a lot of religious scenes and a lot of mothers with children. By contrast, the contemporary nudes were much more monotonous in terms of the physiques shown and were almost all highly sexualized. It's especially interesting when you think that the art historical nude essentially "produced" our current mono-dimensional nude.

It was also a lot of fun making a gift shop to go along with the "Nudist Museum;" the fact that Dodge Gallery has a beautiful downstairs "museum" space and a traditional New York storefront upstairs worked perfectly. I installed shelving and then made paintings based on images that I found by typing in the word "nude" on eBay and then rejecting everything that was "art." The idea was to have a gift shop of the applied arts upstairs go with the fine art of the museum downstairs. They were interesting objects, many quite impossible and a bit sad. Things that had been made "nude" to make them more desirable that now were being flogged on eBay - failed objects of desire...

MK: You will be installing, or rather, re-installing "Arcadia" in Philadelphia this upcoming June. What are some of your thoughts with your approach to installing this piece the second time?

EH: The first time, at the Turner Contemporary for which it was originally commissioned, "Arcadia" functioned in a very site-specific manner. It was all about Margate, the somewhat down-at-heel seaside resort where the new Turner Contemporary was opening, and about Turner's own megalomaniac ambition and his fascination with Margate as a particularly beautiful natural site. The piece was a replica of Turner's Gallery with all his paintings replaced by a hand-engraved rear-illuminated mirrored panorama of contemporary Margate done in the style of engravings of Turner's time. Visitors came to Margate to see the new Turner Gallery and then entered into the original Turner Gallery and were confronted by a drawing in light of Margate reinserted into the aesthetics of Turner's time.



Arcadia (exterior view of installation at the Turner Contemporary), 2011, Wood shack, aluminum sign, light bulbs, 34 hand-engraved plexi-glas mirrors, light boxes, Dimensions variable, photo credit: Jan Baracz

Outside of that context, it becomes a piece that is much more about our longing for a sublime natural experience that we then destroy: essentially turning “Arcadia” into an amusement arcade. The “ARCADIA” sign on the outside and the fun-house mirrors on the inside reference the arcade while the engravings of Margate vividly display what happens when people flock to a beautiful place and then completely wreck it. I’ve built a completely new open framework for the piece for the exhibition at Locks Gallery which will be titled “Arcade/Arcadia” so that the dichotomy will be much more visible than in the original presentation.

MK: Have you noticed differences in the reception to your work in these different cities and environments?

EH: A lot of my work is originally site-specific or situation-specific but then travels which impacts the meaning of the piece. When a piece is made for a particular place, it generally engages very directly with that place and audience. Outside of the original context the pieces start to be about the underlying questions that motivated me so the work functions much more abstractly.

MK: You were included in the 2008 Whitney Biennial. What were some of the challenges you had to face in installing your piece in an exhibition with over 80 artists?

EH: I had a bit of trouble fitting my piece into my allotted space so I ended up installing it differently than I had originally intended but overall the experience was fan-

tastic. It was fun being part of such a big group of artists and working with Shamim Momim and Henriette Huldish was great. They were very supportive and committed and I thought they came up with a great narrative for that Biennial.

MK: And the current Whitney Biennial is remarkably smaller with just over 50 artists. What are your thoughts on the different approach with this year's contribution?

EH: It's nice that the Biennial is different each year, think how dull it would be if it were always the same. I enjoyed this year's curatorial choices and presentation. It was interestingly anti-spectacular which I liked because while I love spectacle, I think it's important not to limit art production to artists who can afford to create the big fancy things. There were a lot of fascinatingly humble things in this Biennial.



Arcadia (interior view of installation at the Turner Contemporary), 2011, Wood shack, aluminum sign, light bulbs, 34 hand-engraved plexi-glas mirrors, light boxes, Dimensions variable, photo credit: Amit Nachumi

MK: You have mentioned that your process has a lot to do with conceptual ideas with a craft output. Is the outcome usually in line with what you originally envisioned?

EH: I'm generally motivated by a question or a situation that I want to explore and I spend a great deal of time trying to think of the best knife-through-the-heart way to communicate what it is that I'm thinking about. While I don't rule out any medium, I often find using traditional media or techniques allows me to very directly access the viewer's expectations, it's a kind of short-hand. People think they're getting one experience and then it's up to me to surprise them, to seduce them into thinking. It's



also a good way to get people to stop and look at something. We are social creatures. If someone has obviously taken a lot of time to make something, people tend to check it out just to see what it's all about. Of course, I also just enjoy making things myself.

MK: The “history of art” is an integral part of your work, how did this process initially come together? Were there any particular artist(s) that motivated you in this direction?



Arcadia (detail of mirror panel #23, 2011, Wood shack, aluminum sign, light bulbs, 34 hand engraved plexi-glas mirrors, light boxes, 47 x 66in, photo credit: Jan Baracz

EH: Being an artist is an odd thing. Making art is an unusual occupation. You work but you have no guarantee that you'll get paid for your work or that your work will be valued by anyone else. It doesn't make much sense to people outside of the art world. So I'm interested in how this state of affairs came to be and why this social category exists. And part of that interest is in how it was historically produced.

Art is both continuous and discontinuous. There are ways in which what I do is very much linked to the medieval altarpiece painter and ways in which it's utterly different: economically, socially, emotionally. I've also always loved art since I was a child, starting with the Flemish primitives. They were so ambitious in what they were trying to do.

MK: Are there any artists that you are looking at now? Historical or contemporary?



EH: I look at everyone and everything. Especially artists whose work is very different from mine. I'd have to write a book to include everyone.

MK: You have also mentioned your interest in the idea of desire and failure in the artistic process. What do you strive for in your own creative output?

EH: I think failure is what links art to life. In both cases, people dream of the extraordinary, desire transcendence, but inevitably fail. We are all limited creatures. Art is that failure made manifest. It's the one place where it's good to be incoherent, good to be contradictory, good to be non-linear. A good artwork is a failed piece of communication that is all the richer for that failure.

**Ellen Harvey was born in the United Kingdom and lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. She is a graduate of the Whitney Independent Study Program and took part in the PS1 National Studio Program. She has exhibited extensively in the U.S. and internationally and was included in the 2008 Whitney Biennial. Recent solo exhibitions include "The Nudist Museum Gift Shop" at Dodge Gallery, New York, "The Nudist Museum" at the Bass Museum, Miami Beach, FL, "Pictur-
esque Pictures" at Galerie Gebruder Lehmann in Berlin, Germany, "Empty Collections" at Galerie Meessen de Clercq, Brussels, Belgium, "Ruins are More Beautiful" at the Center for Contemporary Art, Warsaw, Poland, "Mirror" at the Pennsylvania Academy and "A Whitney for the Whitney" at "Philip Morris" at the Whitney Museum at Altria. She has completed projects for both the New York and Chicago Transit Authorities, most recently including a mosaic for the new Metro-North Yankee Stadium Station and is currently working on commissions for the Federal Government's Art in Architecture program, New York's Percent for Art, among others. Her book, "The New York Beautification Project," was published by Gregory Miller in 2005 and "Ellen Harvey: Mirror" was published by the Pennsylvania Academy in 2006. A monograph "Ellen Harvey: The Museum of Failure" will be published by Gregory Miller in 2013. Her exhibition "Arcade/Arcadia" opens at Locks Gallery in Philadelphia on June 1.**