

Art or Anarchy?

Renegade artist Ellen Harvey recounts her one-woman mission to use graffiti to beautify New York City.

Words: Darren Ressler

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Most graffiti writing takes place at night on a prominently visible target by a crew of artists. New York-based artist Ellen Harvey doesn't fit the profile of most writers—she doesn't dabble with aerosol or markers in her work—but she set out to investigate the medium on her own, and she did it in broad daylight.

Harvey copiously painted oval-shaped landscapes—some of which took days to complete—in all sorts of weather between 1999 and 2001. A UK native, she wandered New York City, leaving her 5x7-inch tags on dumpsters, buildings, a car, and even a tugboat. Her work, which she entitled "New York Beautification Project," now appears in a lavish new hardcover book of the same name.

She came up the idea for the project while taking part in an art exhibition in the newly renovated Highbridge Park. "I painted all the vandalized lampposts in

the park gold," Harvey says. "Then I had some time left over, so I thought I'd make some park-appropriate graffiti for the park [because it] already had a lot of regular graffiti." She chose a tiny landscape based on French baroque era painter Claude Lorrain, and plastered it over someone else's tag. "Later, my painting got tagged back by the guy I tagged but in miniature which I thought was great."

Over the next two years, Harvey painted landscapes on graffitied sites from Harlem to Williamsburg. "I had a theory that if your aesthetics are conservative enough, you can get away with anything," she continues. "Of course, it helped that I was a white woman in her early thirties."

Harvey established a few ground rules at the beginning of the project: she only painted on sites that were already tagged, and stopped whenever someone objected. "I was curious to see what would happen—if people would treat the project as art or as graffiti," she says, noting that some people even gave her food and moral support while she painted. "I picked landscapes as a subject because pretty much everyone likes them; also, beautification projects are generally all about bringing nature into the city, so that fit."



Artist Ellen Harvey: "Of course it helped that I was a white woman in her thirties."

