



Ellen and her elegant etchings

I'LL BE YOUR MIRROR

Reflections on the site-specific stylings of Ellen Harvey

"I WANT TO seduce people into thinking," says 38-year-old Ellen Harvey, widening her eyes and, briefly, looking dead serious. Much like her demeanor, the playful and the serious easily coexist in the work of this absurdly talented, Britain-to-Brooklyn transplant whose site-specific art has been wowing more than just the gallery crowd. In fact, Harvey first earned her stateside street cred with a series of 40 small, meticulous, landscape oil paintings that she painted without permission alongside other people's tags on graffitied walls all over New York City from 1999 to 2001. Photo documentation of these colorful miniatures, accompanied by her chatty, insightful commentary, can be seen in Harvey's new book, *The New York Beautification Project*.

"I make something that the place seems to want," Harvey says when asked how she knows what kind of art to create for a specific location. "The streets dream of landscapes." Regarding her current installation on display at Philadelphia's Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts through January 8, she explains, "the place wanted to be broken apart." For this gigantic piece, Harvey lined the museum's Victorian Gothic-style central hall with 64 backlit mirrors etched with

vine-covered images of what the hall would look like in ruins. Visitors, seeing themselves in the mirrors surrounded by Harvey's depiction of the building's overgrown decay, complete the art. "My art creates space for the viewer," Harvey says.

Using such diverse materials as mirrors, photography, oil paints, brushes, and X-Acto knives, Harvey manages to make her pieces both provocative and accessible. "[My work is] very handmade so someone can look at it and say, 'Oh a person made this. I could do that!'" Harvey says. "I think everyone should be an artist." For an upcoming project, she will be decorating the Queensboro Plaza subway station in New York with a series of murals depicting the streets, signs, and stores outside the station. Not just a fanciful *trompe l'oeil*, the paintings will also orient people as to which subway exit to take. Leave it to a woman to bring practical concerns into public art.

Yet for all the time she puts into each piece—Harvey typically works from 12 to 15 hours a day on a project for weeks in a row—her pieces are designed to be impermanent. The little landscape paintings, for instance, have all disappeared. But in her signature style, Harvey responds, "Nothing lasts anyway." [JENNIFER CALLAHAN]

PHOTO BY MICHAEL SCHMELLING