



Landscape Artist

NEW YORK — On a few chilly days in February 2001, pedestrians passing by 495 West 37th Street in the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood met with an unusual sight. Standing in the dirty snow with her back to the street was an attractive brunette, who, equipped with a box of oil paints, was delicately painting a small, oval-shape landscape onto the building's graffiti-covered exterior.

The woman was artist Ellen Harvey and the landscape was part of her "New York Beautification Project," a series of 40 such works she was painting on various derelict surfaces and worn-down facades throughout the city.

"I wanted to make people think about what makes something art and something not art," says Harvey of the project, which took place between 1999 and 2001. "Graffiti often elicits a negative reaction because of its tough aesthetic. So I thought, 'What if I simply changed the aesthetic and did something supersweet? And what's sweeter than a landscape?'"

Since each carefully rendered painting took two to three days to complete, Harvey spent plenty of time mixing with the locals. "It was rare that I worked alone," recalls Harvey, sitting in her Williamsburg studio in Brooklyn. "I usually had an audience of between five and 10 people."

Harvey kept a journal of her experiences, which she published this month, along with corresponding images of each painting. The book, "New York Beautification Project," (Gregory R. Miller & Co.), is full of amusing anecdotes about the motley cast of characters the artist encountered throughout the city. It also raises probing questions, such as who gets to make art in public, and why.

Harvey, who's soft-spoken British accent and Yale law degree hardly fit the graffiti-artist stereotype, admits that, were she not of a certain demographic, her career as an illegal street painter might have been more difficult. "I was always being caught and always being let off. That may not have been the case if I didn't look the way I do." Although the threat of local law enforcement remained a constant, the painter had only one, albeit harrowing, brush with the police. While working in the Meatpacking District, she was suddenly grabbed from behind and slammed up against the concrete. She turned around to face two cops. "We thought you were homeless," they explained.



An image from Harvey's book.



Ellen Harvey in her studio.

Overall, she found the city streets to be an environment that respects artistic endeavors and fosters creativity. "I was struck by how generous and kind New Yorkers are to artists. People were always looking out for me. I got so much free food. Still others would just want to tell me their ideas about art."

Since the project's completion in May 2001, many of the tiny paintings have been destroyed — victims of the elements, neighborhood gentrification or simply more recent graffiti. Far from mourning their fate, however, Harvey is excited by the idea of her creations fusing with their urban setting.

"There's a painting that I did in a Puerto Rican neighborhood in the Bronx that a woman told me was everybody's favorite picture of Puerto Rico," Harvey says, smiling. "It's actually based on an 18th-century French landscape by Claude Laurent. But it was so nice. It was like the piece had this whole little life of its own."

— Evelyn Crowley