

The Philadelphia Inquirer

June 11, 2012



A haunting evocation of J.M.W. Turner's life and work

Edie Newhall

Since the late 1990s, Ellen Harvey has been relating to things and places that the rest of us might consider complete, finished, or even in decline.

In 1999, Harvey began painting delicate, oval-shaped copies of 19th-century landscape paintings atop graffiti-decorated surfaces throughout New York City for her "New York Beautification Project." That few in the art world ever saw the works didn't

matter to Harvey — the point was to experience what it would be like to paint illegally, to see how the neighborhood regulars would respond to her quaint insertions, and to learn what constituted "acceptable" art.

Harvey's dramatic, disorienting *Mirror* of 2005 is a nearly life-size reproduction of the stair hall in the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts' historic Frank Furness and George Hewitt-designed building, engraved on the backs of large mirrored panels. To it, Harvey added videos and her own fictional details, transforming the stair hall space into the ancient ruin it might eventually become — her way of one-upping Furness and Hewitt's elaborate Victorian Gothic interior, itself a pastiche of architectural styles of the past.

In *Arcade/Arcadia*, a work Harvey made in 2011 for the first exhibition held in the Turner Contemporary's new building in Margate, England, and now sublimely situated in the darkened second-floor gallery at Locks Gallery, the artist conjoined elements of J.M.W. Turner's life as a painter with the history of Margate, the seaside resort where he painted and lived with his lover for many years.

Inside a wood frame that mimics the proportions of the London house in which Turner operated his personal gallery in the early 1800s, Harvey has mounted lightboxes displaying her scenes of Margate engraved on mirrors, so that they offer a 360-degree view of the town.

They evoke Turner's own engravings — the medium through which most people knew his work during his lifetime, because his engravings were widely available — but also his arrangements of his paintings in his gallery. At the same time, the reflections of her illuminated mirrors suggest fun-house mirrors, and the large illuminated letters spelling "ARCADIA" on the exterior of her wood structure quickly reference Margate's amusement arcades and somewhat seedy reputation (there may also be a nod here to the British artist Tracey Emin, who also exhibited in the Turner Contemporary inaugural exhibition, and whose unsparing early work sprang from her youth in Margate). This is a memorably haunting piece that has far fewer bells and whistles than *Mirror* and does just fine without them.

IMAGE: Ellen Harvey's "Arcade/Arcadia," wood, rear-illuminated hand-engraved Plexiglas mirror, at Locks Gallery.