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“The Alien’s Guide to the Ruins of Washington, D.C.”
At Corcoran Gallery of Art to Oct. 6

Ellen Harvey imagines a D.C. that perplexes its extraterrestrial invaders.

By Kriston Capps

Science-fiction fans: Steer clear of “The Alien’s Guide to the Ruins of Washington, D.C.” As a summer blockbuster about the destruction of the capital of the free world, it leaves much to be desired. In Ellen Harvey’s paintings, no one lasers the White House into oblivion. In fact, it’s not clear what happened to the residents of our city upon a hill (and seemingly all the rest of mankind): Harvey doesn’t say whether it was a megavirus or a neutron bomb that did us in. Another special effect that’s missing from this Corcoran show: the aliens. There’s only one depicted in the show, a kind of Easter egg for close-lookers, like the trailer that runs after the credits.

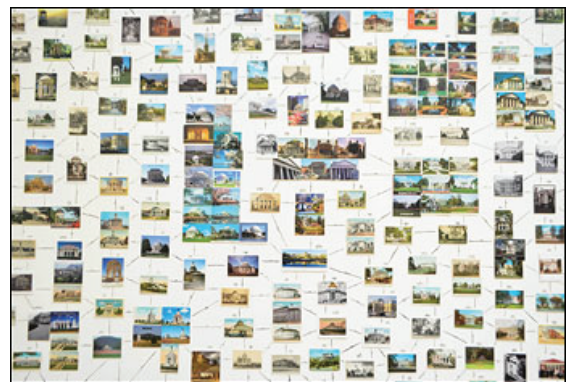
Washingtonians may want to skip Harvey’s exhibit, too. The artist’s vision of the District as an interstellar tourist trap may be too much to bear for residents who can barely endure one planet’s worth of tourists. That’s the gist of this fiction-fueled exhibit: Aliens visiting Earth at some far-distant date can’t seem to make much of the so-called “Pillar Builders” who left the planet’s warm oceans in order to build classical monuments on its shores—and they can’t get enough of them, either. The one thing that these obsessive future-scholars can determine about our once inhabitable M-class planet is that classical architecture—Pillar Building—was born in D.C.

Silly aliens! Through touristy kitsch, Harvey relays their many mistaken impressions: There’s a jumble of souvenir paintings assembled on a hot dog cart stationed inside the museum. The souvenirs are all paintings by Harvey, black-and-white landscape depictions of buildings like the U.S. Department of the Treasury and the White House (all made significantly worse for wear by time and erosion). A two-sided map of the District—a fold-up paper print by Harvey, and a nice takeaway from this show—provides a key to Washington architecture. The aliens look at Washington the way that we look at Stonehenge: They can describe many of the features and achievements built into the Really Complicated Pillar Thing (i.e. the Capitol), but they can’t divine its purpose.

That Harvey’s aliens deduce from ruins across the globe that Washington must be the birthplace of classicism is a funny knock on the architecture of American hegemony. Washington includes so many different modes of architecture that it must be the source, these aliens conclude—when in reality the capital city is a hodgepodge of neoclassical offerings. As you might imagine, there is a lot to read in this exhibit: Viewers need to do some work to get up to speed with Harvey’s mythology before they can begin to break the work down.

On this point, museumgoers may feel a different sort of dissatisfaction than D.C. boosters and sci-fi nerds: There’s just not much of Harvey’s work to see. For the Corcoran’s rotunda space, she’s built a Corinthian capital onto the bottom of an aluminum pillar resembling the Washington Monument, a 20-foot-tall rocket tchotchke. This sculpture breaks with Harvey’s theme of archaeological excavation, but no matter, as her continuity isn’t nearly so interesting as her paintings. Building these paintings onto a hot dog stand for tourists’ consumption lifts them into the realm of witty installation and passable criticism—a Walter Benjamin-esque gag with an Andrea Zittel angle. But a gallery-spanning installation of postcards featuring classical monuments from around the world feels tacked on, a work that merely moves the plot.

Harvey has a tantalizing catalog of thoughtfully executed paintings on plucky themes; a solo show of her work deserves more space than the “Now” series at the Corcoran affords. On the other hand, building a compelling alt-history backstory requires more space still. A solid solo survey of Harvey’s work would be welcome, and a carefully crafted conceit by Harvey could work, but “The Alien’s Guide” is only an exercise—one that left me wanting more.



Ellen Harvey, “Pillar-Builder Archive” detail (2013)