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Alien Visitation

New Corcoran exhibit explores our fascination with classical architecture from a unique perspective

By Doug Rule

Right now, Washington is awash with tourists. They're trying to take in too much in too little time, and will end up getting at least some of what they see or learn wrong.

In 10,000 years, Ellen Harvey projects aliens might be doing the same. In a special exhibit at the Corcoran Gallery, the painter and mixed-media artist imagines a future in which no humans and little of human civilization remain -- except our seemingly ingrained love for classical and neo-classical architecture, typified by pillars. "It's so fascinating that this style has been so popular for 2,000-plus years," she says. "It's that whole symbol of democracy, harkening back to the Athens ideal."

"What if aliens came and they too were just infected by this love and passion for pillars?" Harvey continues, explaining the basic concept for her exhibition, *The Alien's Guide to the Ruins of Washington, D.C.* A British native who lives in Brooklyn, N.Y. Harvey has no formal architecture background. In fact, her academic degrees were in literature and law. "I'm sort of a failed lawyer, a long time ago in my misspent youth," she jokes.

"I tend to be interested in creating experiences for people," she says, and with her new exhibition, the experience is one of seeing our everyday world through the lens of outsiders. With few details to go on about how these structures were built or what they were used for, "the aliens of course get everything wrong." For starters, they reason that the pillars must have all originally stood in rivers, given the preponderance of water on Earth. They also romanticize construction, totally glossing over the blood, sweat and tears and the often less-than-savory power dynamics that built "an architecture of empire." It's a kind of history as told by the last ones standing.

Much like overly rosy and patriotic tourists before them, the aliens, according to Harvey, "think it's all about this sort of lovely equalitarian society. [They] have an incredibly lovely and optimistic view of what human society must have been like."

The Alien's Guide to the Ruins of Washington, D.C. runs now to Oct. 6 at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, 500 17th St. NW. Admission is \$10. Call 202-639-1700 or visit corcoran.org.



Ellen Harvey: *Alien's Guide to the Ruins of Washington DC* (Photo by courtesy Corcoran Gallery of Art)