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NEWS WEB EXCLUSIVE

D.C. for ETs: Sci-fi Archeology at the Corcoran

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A few thousand years from now, when aliens arrive on Earth, human beings and most everything they built will be gone. Fortunately for the archeologists of the future, one type of structure will survive.

The stone creations of the Pillar Builders, a primitive culture that lived in the oceans, can be found all over the planet. For a span of 2,500 years, the aquatic, obsessively flirty Builders made hundreds of permutations on their basic forms, like the classic Round Thing on top of a Triangle-topped Rectangular Pillar-Thing, or The Inside-Out Pillar-Thing. They had three kinds of pillars—Boring, Frilly, and Very Frilly. If this is starting to sound familiar, of course it's because these motifs are known in our culture as Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian.

The Pillar Builders are us—and all the other cultures around the world that adapted the architectural styles of the ancient Greeks as their own. That's the premise of Ellen Harvey's mischievous exhibition, *Alien's Guide to the Ruins of Washington, DC.*, at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. The show also extends to D.C. tourist venues, where unsuspecting Earthlings are being passed maps of the capital's landmarks written by and for the aliens of the future. The map identifies one structure combining a Triangle Top with a Circular Domed Pillar-Thing, thought to be a monument to the planet Earth. This is what we know as the Jefferson Memorial. Then there's The Triangle-topped Pillar-Thing with Adjacent Rectangles, attached to a less common Oval-topped Pillar-Thing, a structure currently called the White House. The guide explains that it may have been used to house pets.

"Obviously they get it completely wrong," says Harvey affectionately.

More whimsical than the movies in which Washington is blown to smithereens, not to mention Trevor Paglen's morbid portrait of Earth currently orbiting in an Echostar XVI satellite, Harvey's sci-fi archeology raises an interesting question about our values, or at least the way we use architecture to express them: Why are pillars so popular?

Or, as Harvey puts it, "What is it about classical architecture that makes democracy in Athens a cultural meme?" "There's no other style of architecture that's been so successful," she comments. "The Enlightenment, the European Empires, the colonies, the Fascists, the Americans. Stalin loved it." The Corcoran atrium has pillars, too, and that's where Harvey has installed her handmade *Alien Souvenir Stand*, modeled after the ones that proliferate in Washington. In the galleries is a massive accumulation of some 3,000 postcards (or, flattened cellulose covered with mechanical pictures, as the aliens describe them), depicting neoclassical architecture in manifestations ranging from a Polish synagogue to an Argentine court. It's the Pillar-Builder Archive, an attempt to categorize Pillar Builder structures all over Earth.



Ellen Harvey, *Alien Souvenir Stand*, 2013, oil on aluminum, watercolor and latex paint on clayboard, wood, aluminum sheeting, propane tanks, and Velcro.



Ellen Harvey, *Alien's Guide to the Ruins of Washington DC*. Brochure, 2013.

Finally, in the rotunda, there's the tall Alien Rocket Ship, the gleaming evidence of how Pillar Builders have now begun to influence extraterrestrials. Tall and sleek, it has a frilly appendage too.

"Once you become fond of neoclassical architecture, you have to make your own," Harvey says.