

ELLEN HARVEY IN PHILADELPHIA

December 11, 2008

By Chris Bors



Ellen Harvey, "666 West End Avenue (1993-99) with lightings and cuts" (2008), Courtesy Locks Gallery

PHILADELPHIA — Brooklyn-based artist **Ellen Harvey** has long explored viewers' perception in works relying on skewed perspectives and twists on reality — most of them installations that use traditional painting as a starting point. Originally trained as a lawyer, Harvey went on to study art at the **Whitney Independent Study Program**, where she exhibited portraits painted from various ID cards she acquired between 1981 (her first) and 1998, when she made the work, and a series called "Low Tech Special Effects" (1991-2000), largely based on Polaroid photos that take cinematic special effects to a DIY extreme. She later gained notoriety for a cheeky twist on graffiti art: a series of unauthorized public works called "The New York Beautification Project" (1991-2001), in which she painted traditional-looking miniature landscapes in oil on graffiti sites throughout the city. Other prominent shows include a solo exhibition at the **Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris** in 2003 and inclusion in the **Whitney Biennial** in 2008.

For her first gallery exhibition in Philadelphia, on view at Locks Gallery until December 13, Harvey presents four installations she calls "art collections." For *Room of Sublime Wallpaper* (2008), she created an open room in which one newspaper-lined wall is adorned with dozens of mirrors of varying sizes, all reflecting a mountain scene. The reflection is of a detailed landscape painting on the remaining walls, which the viewer

can't see without entering the room; viewed from outside the space's wide doorway, it's a simple, yet effective, illusion.

Harvey also uses mirrors in *Public Collection* (2008), in which a photograph of a display of paintings is reflected in an arrangement of mirrors on an adjacent wall, which, in a psychological twist, also reflect the viewer. And in "Private Collections" (2008), a series of painted diptychs meant to show imaginary art collections in artists' homes, she uses not actual mirrors, but the concept of mirroring; in each, an artist's living space is rendered alongside its mirror image, a painterly bit of magic that is particularly enviable from a New Yorker's point of view.

The final work at Locks is Harvey's installation for the 2008 Whitney Biennial, *Museum of Failure* (2007), which consists of two parts: *The Collection of Impossible Subjects*, a backlit mirrored Plexiglas wall lined with ornate, hand-engraved frames, all but one appearing empty, and, behind it, *Invisible Self-Portrait in My Studio*, which shows paintings of the identical collection of frames, this time with what appear to be reflections painted in them, as if they were mirrors. As in all of Harvey's work, there is more here than meets the eye. The artist herself appears in some of the works, and some include the reproduced glare of a flash. The elaborate installation was a standout at the Whitney, and it will surely dazzle viewers in Philadelphia.

Below, Harvey suggests more art to see in Philadelphia:

1. James Castle: A Retrospective at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, through January 4

"I always love visiting the Philadelphia Museum for its incredible collection and fabulous building, but aside from that, this is a show that no one should miss. I've always felt that the idea of the 'outsider' artist is a bit suspect, but regardless of how you feel about this, James Castle's work is utterly compelling and remarkable in its own right. It's very strange and poetic and heartbreakingly beautiful."

2. December at Vox Populi Gallery, through December 28

"This is one of the best places to find Philadelphia talent — all the shows that I've seen here have been engaging, and many have been remarkable. Opening on December 5, you'll find Amy Adams's reworking of e-mails between herself and her husband, Corey Antis's abstract works on paper, and Anna Neighbor's manipulations of found imagery. There are also a painting collaboration between Justin Witte and Olivia Schreiner, and video animations by Rebekah Tolley."

3. Threads of History: The Fabric Workshop and Museum 1977–2008 at the Fabric Workshop and Museum, December 12, 2008 – February 22, 2009

"I think it must be every artist's dream to work with all the hopelessly talented elves at the Fabric Workshop, and it's always fun to see what artists do with those resources. (Who would have thought that Ed Ruscha secretly longed to make a carpet?) The space's

current exhibition shows works from 1977 to 2008; it's an intriguing and jealousy-provoking overview of projects that artists ranging from Richard Tuttle to Kara Walker have made there."

4. **Odili Donald Odita: Third Space** at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, through March 21, 2009. (The museum is currently closed but will reopen on January 15.)

"The ICA is deservedly famous for its exhibition program, which is almost always both thoughtful and provocative. Right now, you can catch a site-specific painted work by Odili Donald Odita, who makes beautiful abstractions that reference African fabrics and patterns as well as modernist aesthetics."

5. **Peter Saul: A Retrospective** at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, through January 4, 2009

"Ever since I made an installation for them a couple of years ago, the Academy has had a very soft spot in my heart. I love the mad Frank Furness building and its collection of very large, very dramatic history paintings. It's a great, eccentric place, and it makes sense that it should be showing another great eccentric like Peter Saul."