

## Ellen Harvey

The Barnes Foundation and Locks Gallery, Philadelphia



*New Forest / The Internal Revenue Office Reforested*, 2013, acrylic, oil and varnish on 20 wood panels, 92 x 160 inches

By Becky Huff Hunter

In a 2015 interview with Adam Budak, Ellen Harvey observed: 'For me, the museum exists as an aspirational space, continually collapsing under the weight of its hopes and dreams, much like my own projects.' Since the late 1990s, Harvey has consistently submitted her artistic identity to the same careful scrutiny she applies to cultural institutions. Her two concurrent exhibitions in Philadelphia - the installation *Metal Painting* (2015) at the Barnes Foundation and 'The Museum of Ornamental Leaves and other Monochromatic Collections' at Locks Gallery - continue these dual lines of inquiry. In both exhibitions, Harvey constructs generative feedback loops between familiar museological or archival questions and the endlessly fruitful failure of painting as a contemporary medium.

The newly commissioned *Metal Painting* is a companion to the Barnes' major historical exhibitions 'Strength and Splendour: Wrought Iron from the Musée Le Secq des Tournelles, Rouen'; in turn, both exhibits respond to the museum's permanent display of metalwork, which hangs alongside a primarily impressionist and post-impressionist collection - a curatorial choice that deliberately flattens the historical hierarchy between fine and decorative art. 'Strength and Splendour' presents on plinths intricately worked artefacts - locks and keys, street signs, trowels - to highlight their sculptural qualities and socio-historical functions. By contrast, Harvey's installation comprises more than 800 one-to-one scale oil-on-board silhouettes of every piece of metalwork in the Barnes' collection. Deliberately



crude with roughly textured, almost impasto paint, these black and white paintings are magnetically mounted to a wall, as a reference to iron. They interlock salon-style, a nod to the Barnes' hallmark display mode, and are spatially categorized according to a puzzling system devised by Harvey. Despite its monumental scale, the display is easy to miss, partially hidden behind tall, white walls that corral it from the open-plan gallery space. In this context of shifting classifications, Harvey seems to be questioning the position of her own painting, as both a series of objects and a practice.

Harvey's sensitivity to classifications in word and image runs throughout both exhibitions. At Locks Gallery, the homonym 'leaves' of the show's title appears as a visual pun: in *The Forest of Obsolete Ornaments* (2015), flourishes from Corinthian capitals cast in glue are sorted into idiosyncratic categories and mounted on clay board over an oil sketch of woodland flage. Flora creeps around a blandly modern derelict building in the largescale painting *New Forest/The Internal Revenue Office Reforested* (2013), invoking the melancholy sense of 'leave' - from abandoned buildings to the forgotten treasures of museum archives. Paintings, too, succumb to entropy: *Craquelure Paintings 1, 2, and 3* (2015) mimics the finely blistered surface of aged pigment or varnish, magnified on three interlocking panels. By presenting a constructed 'crackle', the work conjures forgery as much as authentic antiquity. In the past, Harvey frequently copied and reappropriated old master paintings - Lucas Cranach the Elder, Thomas Gainsborough, J.M.W. Turner - to explore painting's continuing high-art status despite its diminishing social use-value. In *Craquelure*, more concise means make a similar point. On display at Locks Gallery, flanked by arboreal imagery, these paintings' textured surfaces recall exfoliating bark. As with *Metal Painting*, context is (almost) everything.

'Narrative structure [...] is highly dependent on when it was constructed,' Harvey told Budak. 'Hindsight lends experience a spurious coherence.' Taken together, the tales of obsolescence in Harvey's elegiac Locks Gallery exhibition create a new setting for the story of its theatrical centrepiece, *Alien Souvenir Stand* (2013). First exhibited at the now-defunct Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., as part of Harvey's playful 2013 project *The Alien's Guide to the Ruins of Washington DC*, the absurdist installation - literally a tourist truck hand-painted with the imaginary ruins of Washington's neoclassical state architecture - is recontextualized here as mournfully prophetic given the shock of the Corcoran collection's deaccession in 2014. The Barnes' controversial 2012 move from its historical location in Merion, Pennsylvania, to Philadelphia makes it a similarly appropriate candidate for Harvey's form of institutional critique. There, her salon-style hang and dry-humoured conflation of metal and painting draw attention to the Barnes' flawed attempt to preserve its founder's collecting philosophy despite a forced shift in display context. Both exhibitions address the ways in which museums, far from being mere keepers of history, can animate, disort and, at times, even erase the narrative they aspire to preserve.