

ARTFORUM

July, 2013

Ellen Harvey

CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART
500 17th Street, NW
July 3–October 6

In the distant future, the aliens of Ellen Harvey's humorous and intriguing four-part installation embark on Earth-wide research regarding the function and design of classical and neoclassical "Pillar-Things." The exhibition turns Washington, DC's imagined future ruins into an alien tourist site, while questioning the production—as well as the understanding, assimilation, and appropriation—of cultural memory and heritage.

For *Alien Souvenir Stand*, 2013, Harvey has repurposed a vendor stand—a current-day staple of the DC tourism circuit. Painted with black, white, and gray images of the city's monuments as ruins, the stand invites visitors to identify these buildings based on their damaged remains. The paintings' compositions are reminiscent of many postcards of sites from antiquity, such as those included in the *Pillar-Builder Archive*, 2013—a compendium of approximately three-thousand postcards from the world over. The archive serves as the aliens' schema for understanding the lineage of obelisks, columns, and domes, while questioning our familiarity with the structures that surround us each day. Quite taken by the "Pillar-Things," the aliens fashion their *Alien Rocket-Ship: The Latest in Pillar-Builder Space Travel*, 2013, after a Corinthian (aka "very frilly") column, and the vessel's passengers are encouraged to "enjoy the very latest in Pillar-Builder-inspired space travel."



Ellen Harvey, *Alien Souvenir Stand*, 2013, Oil on aluminum, watercolor and latex paint on clayboard, wood, aluminum sheeting, propane tanks, and Velcro, 9 x 17 x 5 feet

The exhibition extends into DC's streets with the "Alien's Guide" map—also distributed in select local hotels—which enables current-day visitors to become the alien tourist and walk among the original structures that give rise to the ruins, while deciphering the particulars of the "lost Pillar-Builders'" daily life. Providing imagined roles for different buildings, based on their designs and the artifacts found within, the map text distills the descriptions to what many a student in an introductory course to ancient architecture wishes they were called: for instance, the classic "Round Thing on Top of a Triangle-Topped Rectangular Pillar-Thing"—in other words, the US Capitol. The Guide repositions these "Pillar Things" within the familiar and the unfamiliar as it engages viewers in its quirky and clever inquest.

-Leslie J. Ureña