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D.C. sightseeing, through alien eyes

By Jennifer Maas

Tired of the moons of Jupiter or the rings of Saturn as a summer vacation destination?

Why not head to the home of the famous “Oval/Triangle Pillar-Thing” or the “Really Big Pillar” — split into a few pieces, despite successful repairs circa 2013?

That, at least, is how artist Ellen Harvey envisions galaxy-hopping aliens deciding to travel to Washington some 10,000 years in the future. Her exhibit, “The Alien’s Guide to the Ruins of Washington, D.C.,” at the Corcoran Gallery of Art offers a glimpse into a version of the future in which the human race has long been extinct, the Earth is populated only by ruins, and aliens interested in the “architectural legacy of the Earth’s former inhabitants” can take a tour of what was once the capital of the United States.

But who has 10,000 years to wait to see all that? Not the Yugo family of Chicago. In town this week for a D.C. visit, the family decided to sightsee like aliens might, as part of a scavenger hunt Wednesday night that was organized by the Corcoran in conjunction with the exhibit. More than 50 people trekked around the city and the Mall, trying to match Harvey’s depictions of the District in ruins with today’s intact version — and to track down an alien, hurl a “flying saucer” and do a jig in front of the White House.

Trish Yugo said she and her husband were planning to take their three sons to see all these landmarks anyway and was happy to get an alien-themed-assist. Her son Connor, 11, was enjoying himself but didn’t count himself as an extraterrestrial believer.

“Aliens are like Bigfoot,” he said. “They always say they are gonna find him but they never do. If they were real, they would have found them by now.” Not everyone at the scavenger hunt was as skeptical. Emily Blevins, who took part in the after-hours version of the event — alien-inspired drinks at downtown bars, among other activities — said she believes “there is probably life somewhere else in the universe. Whether it’s in the form of little green creatures, that’s questionable.”

Blevins thought the destruction of a city as significant as Washington would be interesting to aliens, who never knew what the city meant to its inhabitants. “It’s always fascinating to imagine a symbol of power or of identity in a state of ruin. What happens when the very core of who we are as Americans is destroyed? What’s left?” she asked.



(Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post) - Colin Best, dressed as an alien, waits for participants in the scavenger hunt to greet him outside the White House.



Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post - This collection of postcards of neoclassical architecture used by aliens to interpret life on Earth are exhibited in “Ellen Harvey: The Alien’s Guide to the Ruins of Washington, D.C.” at the Corcoran Gallery of Art .

Those are the types of questions that Harvey, a painter who is based in Brooklyn, intended to explore with the paintings, model souvenir stand and guidebook that make up the exhibit. She imagines the aliens would see the White House as the “Oval/Triangle Pillar-Thing” and the Library of Congress, full of decaying books, or cellulose, as once a giant food storage room. Aliens might see, in the ruins of the capital city, a “lovely collaborative empire.” The pillars — all roughly the same style— might make them think “we must have been a radically egalitarian society.” But not everything would make perfect sense. “Congress totally baffled them. What was it for?” Harvey said.

She said she was inspired by the neoclassical architecture in Washington and by time spent in London and Rome. “It is so interesting all these cultures think the perfect thing to represent them is a building with a whole bunch of pillars,” she said. “So I thought of, not knowing history or about the Roman empires, colonial empires, the Enlightenment, what would you think of this?” The exhibit imagines aliens traveling to Earth 10,000 years from now to ask those questions. But it’s possible some eager extraterrestrial tourists have already made the trek. On two weekends in July 1952, multiple people reported UFO sightings over the White House and Capitol.

Harvey believes such a visit could have been possible. Humans can’t be the only ones in the universe, she thinks. But aliens might not be making the trip again any time soon. “We’re having trouble getting off our planet. Maybe they are too,” Harvey said. “Maybe they don’t have enough public funding for space travel either.”