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An Alien's Guide to Washington

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INSIDE WASHINGTON, D.C.'s

Corcoran Gallery of Art, just to the right of the information desk, two floors of neo-classical pillars surround a large rectangular atrium. Brooklyn, N.Y. based artist Ellen Harvey took note of these pillars. So did the aliens she created for her show there. "This Pillar-Thing is highly unusual in having Pillars (Frilly and Boring) only on the inside," the "aliens" write of the Corcoran build-ing in their guide to the city, distributed at the museum's front desk. "Its original use is debated but the remains of woven fabrics found inside suggests it may have provided protective skins for delicate Pillar-Builders exposed to the unfamiliar elements of dry land." The "Pillar-Builders" are humans, and the text comes from one of the centerpieces of "Ellen Harvey: The Alien's Guide to the Ruins of Washington, D.C.," which opened July 3 and runs through Oct. 6 at the Corcoran. Ms. Harvey—a graduate of Harvard College and Yale Law School whose work has been seen in museums in New York, Miami and Poland—imagines a distant future when Earth is deserted by humans. Aliens are using the planet as a tourist destination; the classical and neoclassical architectural ruins they observe all over fascinate them. These aliens call humans "Pillar-Builders" and speculate over the use of several of Washington's most famous landmarks. The exhibit features a souvenir stand, modeled from a Washington hot-dog cart, a 23-foot "rocket-ship" in the shape of an up-turned Corinthian pillar, and a post-card "archive" spread across three gallery walls. "It's completely dotty, of course," says Ms. Harvey, whose project was inspired by her trips to the Corcoran, where she began thinking about the building's neoclassical architecture, especially its pillars. Then she started noticing pillars everywhere, from ancient Greece to Washington, in all kinds of societies. "If it was an infection, it would be like the flu," she said, "I thought it would be so funny if aliens came and thought, yes, pillars, this is the style for us."

Ms. Harvey painted more than 150 black-and-white images of some of Washington's historic locations—the National Mall, the Supreme Court, the White House—in various states of ruin, then arranged them carefully on a cart parked in the museum's



WISH UFO WERE HERE Ellen Harvey's 'Alien Souvenir Stand,' above, at Washington's Corcoran Gallery of Art; right, some of the postcards in the artist's 'Pillar-Builder Archive.' She collected about 4,000 cards.

atrium as if for sale. She collected an estimated 4,000 postcards, gathered online and from many thrift shops, of buildings with classical and neoclassical architecture for her "Pillar-Builder Archive," in which the aliens meticulously track and classify the buildings using their own obscure system of symbols. "You can kind of get into the alien's mind-frame and see the connections they're making. It makes a kind of logical sense, except that it's totally wrong," says curator Sarah Newman, who added that it has been interesting to watch visitors approach the pieces. "They look like they're reading standard exhibit text, and then they just start cracking up." Ms. Harvey's past projects have similarly toyed with audience reaction. Between 1999 and 2001, as part of her "New York Beautification Project," she painted miniature oil land-scapes in public places throughout New York City—on buildings and subway poles, for instance, often beside more traditional graffiti. Born in the U.K., Ms. Harvey moved to Milwaukee as a teenager. After Harvard and Yale, she practiced law for close to three years before focusing on art full-time. "I'm interested in why we have art and what people expect from art," she says, "Art for me is about this attempt to make

something exceptional that then collapses." At her studio in Brooklyn's Williamsburg neighborhood, a high-ceilinged room off to the side of her apartment, boxes of undistributed alien guidebooks line the floor near the entrance. Seated in her living room, Ms. Harvey unfolds her "Alien's Guide" to reveal a vast and useless map of Washington, missing both place names and an orientation key. The aliens note that the Capitol building, or "The Really Complicated Pillar-Thing," is "built almost exclusively using Very Frilly Pillars" and that its complex symmetrical design is "thought by many to provide definitive proof of Pillar-Builder telepathy." "They're very optimistic, these aliens," said Ms. Harvey.

