

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Ellen Gallagher

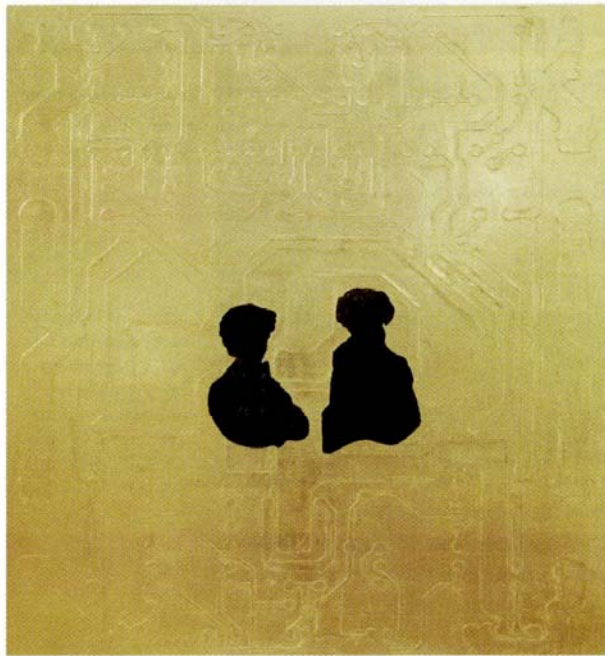
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Greasy. The word less sits on the page than penetrates it, threatening slickness or seepage, and, more to the point, an unruly mess. That it reads as inescapably classed is apposite, too, as is the implication of unmanageable hair and one of its oft-advertised solutions, pomade, given Ellen Gallagher's previous employment of the stuff. Indeed, for "Greasy," the artist's first solo show in New York in five years, she invoked several protagonists, narratives, and strategies from her past work, such as the lined penmanship paper and disembodied minstrel lips found in the pieces that first brought her critical attention, and the magazine and newspaper substrates that followed. If anything, her recursive process further clarified the slipperiness of her forms, demonstrating how hard Gallagher has to work to manage them, how conditional is any instance of their becoming—and, most of all, how mobile, even animate, they remain. Which is not to say they are unmoored; on the contrary, Gallagher maintains a density of referentiality, still more resonant over time.

The silhouetted figures embedded in the gold-leaf armature of the large-scale *IGBT*, 2008, for example, appear again, in greater detail—one with a bow tie; the other, a '70s-cool slim-fitting jacket—as the frontispiece for the show's catalogue. In both instances, they recall the portraits found in nineteenth-century slave emancipation narratives,

though their more proximate source is another work, *Abu Simbel*, 2005, in which they debut as aliens aloft in a blue fur-trimmed spaceship. (Located in the gallery's print room, the piece was not officially part of the show.) There, the figures hover above an image of the temple taken from Freud's study, newly overlaid with references to Harlem real estate speculation and Sun Ra. Central to one of the show's strongest paintings, *An Experiment of Unusual Opportunity*, 2008, is the Tuskegee experiment, that shameful, decades-long study in which the US Public Health Service closely monitored the progression of syphilis in hundreds of black sharecroppers—without telling the men they were infected with the disease, much less treating them for it. Doctors' reports from the trial surface amid a tracery of paper (Gallagher soaks sheets of penmanship paper in indigo, cuts them the width of their ruled lines, and assembles the slats into mosaic-like clusters), though the figure wrested from the work is not so much a character as a mood.

Ellen Gallagher,
IGBT, 2008, gesso,
gold leaf, ink, varnish,
and cut paper on
paper, 79½ x 74".



However reliant these works are on allusions, they nevertheless remain decidedly oblique: a doctor becoming his own prosthetic arm in *Bone-Brite*, 2009; a nod to a black rodeo in *O EO*, 2010; the suggestion of a growing African-American middle class via grooming implements and automobiles in the namesake *Greasy*, 2011; and so on. To be sure, reading these paintings as unduly wedded to such stories is to deny them their status as sites for physical transformation, and post-hoc confirmations of it; these smudged, stained, perforated, and abraded grounds harbor more than they disclose. Excessive fragmentation—very little survives the operations of collage intact—and the redaction of whole textual passages save for *e*'s and *o*'s suggest an equivocation about how much to set free. These vowels propose openings, passages that Gallagher literalizes in a suite

of eight gorgeous perforated double-sided drawings interspersed throughout the gallery. Encased in glass and mounted atop freestanding tables, *Morphia*, 2008–2009, appeared like so many specters coming in and out of focus. In spending time with these lavishly tended-to objects, I began to think of the show as representing—in all senses—an ethics of care. “Greasy” as ointment, then, but with the proverbial fly in it.

—Suzanne Hudson