

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ELLEN GALLAGHER

By Nancy Princenthal



NEW YORK Active crosscurrents of racial politics and abstraction wash over the 20 works shown in Ellen Gallagher's exhibition, nowhere more turbulently than in *An Experiment of Unusual Opportunity* (2008). Emerging from the depths of this large (79 1/2-by-74-inch) mixed-medium canvas are several marine forms: coral; a massive eel; a big, gorgeous jellyfish. The hybrid composition, as with many of the works shown, is assembled like intarsia, with puzzled-together bits of drawn and inked paper. Gallagher has said that this work's title refers to the heinous Tuskegee "experiments" undertaken from 1932 to '72 on hundreds of African-American men suffering from syphilis. Assembled by the U.S. Public Health Service, they were left untreated until their deaths so that the progressive effects of the disease could be observed. Apart, perhaps, from its turbid surfaces and the predatory forms swimming beneath them, nothing connects the image to the historical chapter.

The ambiguity is clearly deliberate, a twist on Gallagher's established use of forms that can be read as both narrative and abstract. In early works executed on ruled penmanship paper, there were stacks of curved lozenges and clusters of concentric circles; these details could also be seen as disembodied lips—full, grinning—and wide, minstrel-y eyes. Two works in this exhibition reprise the combination. Once you see the figuration, it's impossible to make it go away, although you might wish you didn't recognize the racist shorthand as facial features. The close viewing these images require enforces an intimacy that only heightens your discomfort.

In other works shown, coded information is associated with power. *IGBT* (2008; even the title is encrypted) has a relief surface modeled on a microchip, greatly enlarged and gold-leafed. Two figures in what seem to be elegant 19th-century jackets are silhouetted in black, completing an image linking the circulation of information with wealth and secrecy. Many collages make use of printed matter whitewashed or otherwise redacted so that only the letters "e" and "o" remain. The former is, perhaps, a reference to the artist's first initial; the latter even more open to interpretation. (It might, for instance, refer to openings both textual and sexual.) Two such works, one with a background that is a glamorous blue-black (*Moon-Glo*, 2010), the other a bleached-bone white (*O EO*, 2010), are both spangled with medallions that contain hybrid faces assembled from mismatched features.

Identity is further troubled in a series of eight graceful, woozy drawings from 2008-09 titled "Morphia," after the narcotic whose name in turn derives from Morpheus, the god of dreams. Displayed, like old master sketchbook pages, in double-sided frames standing on pedestals, the translucent sheets are heavily worked and liberally perforated, so images bleed from front to back—as when a ghostly white face is shadowed, literally, by a vigorous black one. Other subjects range from brainlike forms to clawed and winged creatures. Gallagher has described these rich drawings as forgeries; as with all her recent work, their duplicities are abundant