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Ellen Gallagher: Greasy at Gagosian

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Ellen Gallagher: *Greasy* at Gagosian

555 West 24th Street

By Matthew Farina

Revealing her most personal and least socially assertive work to date, Ellen Gallagher's large mid-career show *Greasy* is more seductive than political. The artist's varied interests including natural history, minimalist abstraction, the Harlem Renaissance, and marine life come together with unexpected results, especially within a series of new translucent collages interspersed throughout the exhibition space.

One thing that viewers will notice, especially since this much of Gallagher's work hasn't been seen in New York since her 2005 show *DeLuxe* at the Whitney, is her less pointed use of social commentary and sarcasm. Her former interest is still certainly there, in titles and in collaged rolling eyeballs viewers may remember from the early 2000's. The artist makes fewer direct references to racially charged ephemera like *Ebony Magazine*, ads for hair-straightening or skin-lightening products which consistently seemed high-impact but heavy-handed in her shows. The comment on race in her work generated an inseparable discussion of the topic among the viewing public and critics when commenting on her pieces. Since then the artist has intelligently side-stepped into the shadows of this imagery and the decision has only added to the power of her personal aesthetic. The works in *Greasy* still connect the dots in the story of her artistry- just into a more ethereal realm.

Gallagher's show is ambitious and full of work that walks the line between dark imagery and glistening abstraction (some of it actually does glitter). In *Bone-Brite* (2009) we encounter the most representational work in the show, rendered in the same nocturnal blues and greys that you'll leave the gallery loving. *Bone-Brite* recalls the faceted compositional acuity of Romaine Beardon while presenting a menacing figure enacting some derisive act onto a skeleton. The artist's disparate influences and vague socio-historic references, which she also imparts in *An Experiment of Unusual Opportunity* (2008), seem to provide viewers only so much in terms of her intent. Although, to be fair, benefiting from the emotional power of her work, especially in the larger pieces, doesn't require full understanding of her ideas. The pieces are simply engaging on many levels. As one can inhale and exhale in various depths, Gallagher's pieces are imbued with the same kind of oscillating flexibility. While you ponder the content, you

are entranced by the material – in turn you consider her deftly honed process, and so on.

The star of Gallagher's show is *Morphia* (2010). Eight two-sided translucent collage works on paper are presented in the round. The pieces are delicate and milky in appearance and feel lighter and less formal than the looming canvases that fence you into the space. Light and reticent content seeps through the cracks of each work made from ink, varnish, egg tempera and other collaged pieces. The imagery in *Morphia* is generative and lacy although strangely scientific. You'll see veiled internal organs, masks and sea creatures that recall the artist's personal purgatory, *Drexcija*– the mysterious under-water world she has discussed in many interviews as a "Black Atlantis". The images in *Morphia* hover in stormy weather, swallowing the imagery before it emerges in new layers like precipitation. This group of collages adds yet another level of complexity to Gallagher's recent oeuvre. Thankfully, its odd presence doesn't turn the exhibit into a one-woman group show.

What really dazzles about Gallagher's work is her capable range that, in *Greasy*, unveils the artist's most personal work to date. An aqueous elasticity can be found in each piece that is tranquil without being warm, and bares the history of a whole story rather than a sequential narrative. The loss of socially or racially charged imagery in most the work serves as a benefit to Gallagher, who seems to be moving away from comment for others and toward a process that is more for herself. The result is a cool glow of ethereal danger that soothes in an equivocal way, just before you feel uneasy.

Ellen Gallagher at Gagosian continues until February 26, 2011.

Matthew Farina is a Brooklyn-based writer and artist.