

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

**Ellen Gallagher**  
*Greasy*

Gagosian Gallery, West 24th Street, New York  
22 January – 26 February



Ellen Gallagher's ongoing artistic exploration of race in America has balanced critique with wit and whimsy, toed the line between figuration and abstraction, and somehow simultaneously displayed restraint and abandon. In her last New York outing, at the Whitney Museum in 2005, Gallagher showed *DeLuxe* (2004–5), a suite of playfully embellished advertisements for hair-straightening and skin-lightening products and wigs from the pages of popular black periodicals dating from the 1930s to the 1970s. While

Gallagher has continued to mine this rich repository of popular black ephemera, she has gradually shifted from using it as support to material, burying its traces, and the racial histories held within, into the surfaces of her exquisite paintings.

The large-scale works on display at Gagosian are assembled from fragments of this found material, stained and painted to the limits of legibility. Their surfaces are scored and finished so precisely that they resemble marquetry more than collage. In *Greasy* (2011), the original text and image is flooded with white ink, its surface burnished to resemble smooth porcelain. Bits of bodies and objects, surfacing like cereal floating in a primordial bowl of milk, swarm around a celestial being holding a stick. Its torso, a patchwork of rectangular text panels, degenerates into cryptic Braille-like strings of e's and o's. The only two vowels in *negro*, these letters may serve as alphabetical analogues for the stereotypical bug eyes and thick lips of minstrel-show blackface that infested much of Gallagher's earlier work.

*An Experiment of Unusual Opportunity* (2008), titled for the notorious Tuskegee syphilis experiment (beginning in 1932, the US Public Health Service withheld treatment to hundreds of syphilitic black men so as to study the disease's progression), is more sinister and abstract. Patches of bright colour and cascading lines distinguish sinewy jellyfishlike creatures from a forebodingly dark background. In the largely monochromatic *O.K. Corral* (2008) and *Puppy Chow* (2009), thin, even strips of indigo-dyed pages constitute both figure and ground, making it hard to distinguish form from pattern, giving the compositions an internal turbulence that is both compelling and frustrating. Floating in these swirling inky depths are tangles of tentacles and tendrils, half-octopus, half-wig hybrids, deep-sea grotesques descended from drowned slaves that might inhabit the mythical underwater realm of Drexciya.

*Morphia* (2008–9), a series of eight collage drawings, features similar shapeshifters. Some resemble portraits, parts of heads visible underneath piles of dense curls and delicate traceries, while others transmute skull or ribcagelike forms into fantastic beasts. Double-sided, executed on translucent paper seemingly embedded with squiggles and often perforated, the drawings are, by turns, opaque and transparent, their forms always labile.

Unlike Gallagher's previous work, these images do not critique race from within the familiarity of stereotype or the facticity of the historical record. They are idiosyncratic and ambiguous, but confident. The distortions of racism are writ large, more visible but less clear. Race is rendered monstrous and spectral, an absent presence that continues to menace and haunt our postidentity moment. *Murtaza Vali*