

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Now, Voyager

Born and raised in Rhode Island, with studios in New York and Rotterdam, the artist Ellen Gallagher—now celebrated with simultaneous exhibitions on either side of the Atlantic—draws upon fact, fantasy and traces of her own meandering life.

By Julie L. Belcove



Photography by James Mollison

BLUE HEAVEN | Gallagher in her studio in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, with an untitled work in progress. The painting will be part of an exhibition of the artist's work at the New Museum in New York, opening in June.

IT WOULD BE EASY to connect the dots of Ellen Gallagher's biography and come up with two different but equally inspiring story lines. In one account, Gallagher, the biracial daughter of an Irish-American mother and an African-American father, grows up to make art about the subtle but profound ways racial stereotypes pervade our culture. Another version has Gallagher, born and raised in Providence, Rhode Island, a maritime city where whaling once thrived, shipping out aboard an Alaskan commercial fishing boat and later spending a college term living on a schooner, studying tiny water snails. Dividing her time between studios in New York and Rotterdam, another port city, she makes art that frequently takes the ocean and its centuries-old link to human migration, as a prime subject. Both plots lead to great critical acclaim, representation by the powerhouse Gagosian Gallery and exhibitions at some of the world's foremost museums, including the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art.

Gallagher, 47, laughs at how, in retrospect, it all sounds so neat and tidy. The reality was much messier. The vintage *Ebony* and *Sepia* magazines that have become a staple of her work first caught her attention not for their black-oriented content, in fact, but because of their layouts. The small, inexpensive advertisements chopped up the pages into "haphazard grids," which appealed to her taste for modernism. Only then did she focus on what they were selling: pristinely styled wigs to hide kinky hair. And when she thinks back to her time at sea, she recalls "desperately trying to understand, What am I doing on this boat studying pteropods in the middle of the night, looking at these things under a microscope? How is this going to mean something to who I am? I just remember how terrified I was—when the boat lands, what am I going to do? It's that feeling of being 20 and not knowing what's coming next."

The narrative arcs we use to make sense of the past don't feel all that linear in real time. History has a way of leaving out the nuances. Its uneasy answers, particularly as they relate to race, are a central theme in Gallagher's art. "I do think you can change the past and the present somehow," Gallagher says from her Rotterdam studio. "Even if something has already happened, it doesn't mean it's settled."

Gallagher's oeuvre, which spans painting, drawing, collage, printmaking, sculpture and film installation, will be the subject of mid-career surveys at the Tate Modern in London (May 1–September 1) and the New Museum in New York (June 19–September 15). On view will be new paintings as well as some of her best-known works, which marry the painful iconography of minstrel shows—thick lips, bug eyes—with pages torn from issues of *Ebony* published on the eve of desegregation.



Photography by James Mollison
CLOSE ENCOUNTERS | A detail from Gallagher's untitled work in progress.

Gallagher comments on history by playing with it—mixing and layering references, but also fearlessly melding fact and fantasy. Her series *Watery Ecstatic*, begun in 2001, in which she borrows the idea of a black Atlantis called Drexciya from a '90s band by that name, is a powerful ode to mythmaking. In it, she conjures sea creatures descended from slaves who drowned during the voyage from Africa, known as the Middle Passage. Gallagher's follow-up, *DeLuxe*, in addition to being a technical tour de force of printmaking, turns advertisements—many of them for products designed to make blacks look whiter (skin lighteners, hair straighteners, coiffed wigs)—into grotesques, with blank zombie eyes, masked faces and Plasticine creatures that appear to be crawling out of a model's head.

"My own readings or misreadings of historical material, that kind of falsification is what creates friction or energy in the work," she says. "You get a sense that these stories really happened, but that maybe it's not a reliable archive."

Theaster Gates, an African-American artist whose work has also mined *Ebony*, maintains a long-distance dialogue with Gallagher from his home in Chicago. "I think she's attempting to complicate these big ideas—around identity, around urban space and maybe even ideas around what artists should think about," he says.

Growing up in Providence, Gallagher lived with her single white mother, a strong woman with a belief in self-reliance. Gallagher's mother helped raise her many brothers and sisters, after her own mother died when she was 12 years old. "She was in a way supportive of failure," Gallagher says. A coordinator for Head Start, Gallagher's mother chose a racially mixed neighborhood for herself and her biracial daughter—a decision the artist seems to think was "more mom instinct than theory." She was also genuinely interested in black culture, particularly literature, which she encouraged her daughter to explore and discuss with her. "She would never want me to feel isolated," says Gallagher, who felt completely embraced by her Irish clan. Her mother seemed aware that as a practical matter, Gallagher would be perceived as African-American. "At the same time she wouldn't want that to take me away from her." Gallagher's father, a professional boxer, was not around as much, but his mother, an immigrant from the Cape Verde islands off the coast of West Africa, lived close by, providing a connection to that side of her family.

After attending Moses Brown, a prestigious Quaker school, on scholarship, Gallagher went to Oberlin College, where she took her first art class, in printmaking. She was attracted to the idea of carving into the plate, just as now she cuts into her paper or canvas. Still, she was shy about drawing. She had doodled plenty, but "had never made a proper drawing." Sensing her hesitation, her teacher "took my hand and drew with me, with his hand over mine."

When her study-at-sea program ended, she did not return to Oberlin. Instead, a meandering path led to art school a few years later at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and then to Skowhegan in Maine. There, Kiki Smith, who was a visiting artist, took an interest—Gallagher says it's because her attempt at a Xerox transfer of a drawing of lips, using Smith's method, was the only one in the class that failed. "Mine was blank," she says. "I had to take the remedial class."

Gallagher arrived on the art scene with a bang in the mid-'90s. In her early works she blanketed canvases with lined paper—the kind schoolchildren use to practice penmanship—echoing the pencil lines of Agnes Martin, one of her heroes. She then drew, collaged or painted the minstrel icons, repeated in a way that mimics how cultural stereotypes are formed. Gallagher describes minstrel shows and their repercussions as the "erasure of beings." From a distance, the grid-like compositions appear purely abstract. Only up close—in a sort of reverse—Chuck Close effect—do the curious marks come into focus as figuration.

While still living in Boston, she was selected for the 1995 Whitney Biennial. She laughs at the memory of the curator Klaus Kertess leaving her studio in Boston with the admonition, "Don't you think it's time to get out of Dodge?" Still in no rush to do New

York, she moved instead to Provincetown, on Cape Cod. In 1996 she had an acclaimed solo exhibition at Mary Boone Gallery in New York. It wasn't long before the Gagosian behemoth snatched her up.

On a trip abroad, she met Edgar Cleijne, a Dutch artist, who would become a frequent collaborator as well as her life partner. The two divide their time between New York and Rotterdam. Their Rotterdam studio overlooks the fruit port—"I never see fruit unless there's an accident; then, tons of oranges"—and Gallagher has been holed up there this year completing pieces for the twin spring shows. She finds it easy to relate to the city's tough working-class persona. Rotterdam is also conducive to work. "People don't sort of stumble into your studio," she says. "There's a sense of purpose."

The New Museum will feature 11 new paintings, ranging from an intimately sized 2 x 2 feet to a grand 7 x 6 feet. "The one thing that seems to haunt the work is this incised line," she says. "My paintings have this graphic sensibility. The incised line in the new work is buried within layers of paint." Gallagher painted the canvas, waited for it to dry and then scratched into it with an etching needle. Using what she calls "cartoon colors"—red, black and white—she painted over it again, which she says revealed the lines more sharply, then plunged paper into the cuts. "It's more like a hallucination. I sort of imagine this creature in the center of it. It gets planted, literally cut through the surface of the canvas and embedded."



Photography by James Mollison

ABRIDGE BETWEEN THE TATE and New Museum shows is *Osedax*, a film installation made in collaboration with Cleijne. The project developed spontaneously out of a serendipitous find on a Rhode Island beach. "Edgar and I sometimes go to Block Island, when I can convince him to. He's more interested in Madagascar," she says with a laugh. "We were walking around and it was a cloudy, strange day. We turned a corner and there was a desolate beach. There was a shipwreck off the coast. It's a really treacherous route so it's famous for its shipwrecks. Even today, some fishing vessels get into trouble on the rocks. It looked like it had been abandoned to just dissolve into the sea. The elements were taking hold of it."

The couple returned the following day with a 16-millimeter camera and filmed the wreck. "There were these cormorants drying their wings," she recalls. "For the birds it was like an extended landscape."

When they got back to their studio, Gallagher and Cleijne went to work drawing into the film stock and painting glass slides. In the piece the birds dive from the air deep into the water, their descent elongated. "They enter this ocean canyon and they come across this decayed flesh and bones of a whale, but at first they don't see that it's a whale," she says. "It looks like this rocky outcropping on the ocean floor." There, the osedax—worms that scavenge whale fall—bore into the bones, and the cormorants in turn dine on the worms. The birds' descent echoes that of the drowned slaves of Drexciya, and Gallagher references Queequeg's tattoo-inscribed coffin from *Moby-Dick*, but the piece will probably be viewed foremost as a meditation on the ecosystem and loss.

"The ocean is a very complicated subject for her," says Gary Carrion-Murayari, who is curating the New Museum exhibit. "Her personal experience working on the water and living near the water is important, but she is attuned to history."

Gallagher is acutely aware of history and its reach into the present. She recalls walking around New York the morning after Barack Obama was first elected president in 2008. "I saw kids who had clearly voted for the first time, and it was this sense of jubilation. People were doing this fist bump, strangers. The only thing they had in common was they were young. I just thought, This is their reality. It's also my reality, but I have with it this drag to something else," she says, citing painful childhood memories of African-American congresswoman Shirley Chisholm's 1972 presidential race being turned into a joke. "For some people, it's what they get to take for granted."

Gallagher says her own next chapter is hard to predict. That directionless feeling she had aboard the schooner infects her every time she starts something new in the studio. "There's so much happenstance, so many accidents—stumbling into something and finding it interesting and living with it over time and building on it," she says. "It's okay to work from doubt. You need to be willing to not know."