

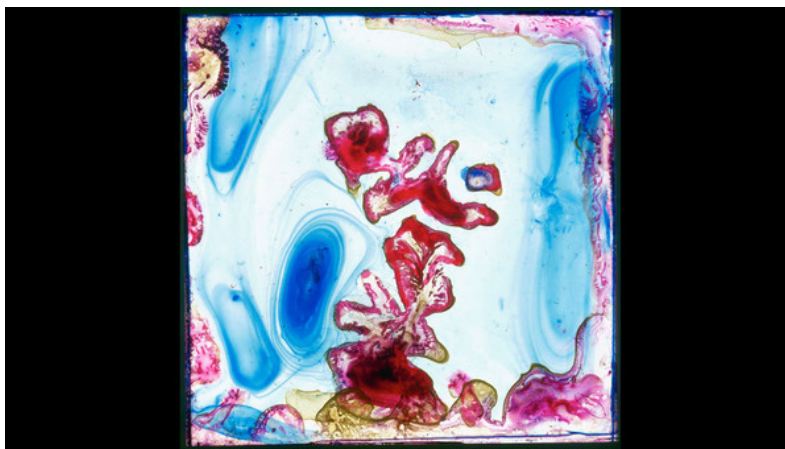
## GAGOSIAN GALLERY



### Ellen Gallagher: Don't Axe Me, New Museum, New York – review

*Once a standard-bearer of identity politics, Gallagher is now exploring elusive new directions*

Ariella Budick



*A still from 'Osedax' (2010)*

Ellen Gallagher's mid-career retrospective at the New Museum catches a gifted artist at a dangerous moment of transition. The slim survey isn't terrific, but it offers a glimpse of an experienced talent poking about in new directions, leaving a trail of puzzlement and beauty. The show – which has overlapped with Tate Modern's just-closed Gallagher exhibition – takes the word “retrospective” literally, opening with her most recent paintings, a series of tangled forms that look like dilated entrails. Black birds nestle among the pink and red coils, visible only when their polished enamel feathers catch the light. Tiny crumbs of paper adhere to their flanks, sparkling like diamond chips. Gallagher has snipped the letters “e” and “o” from old copies of *Ebony* magazine and fixed them to the canvas as a sort of secret code.

This cryptic manner is new for her. A couple of decades ago, she was a standard-bearer of identity politics, and her angry paintings were shot through with the declaration: made by an African-American woman. Now, labels seem to have lost their urgency. Race has penetrated into the mettle of her work, and explicit messages have dissipated into abstract unease. The results feel hopeful but unresolved and tentative. There's something exciting about seeing a talented mid-career artist casting about for certainty, but the New Museum would have done her a greater service by waiting another few years.

Instead, the show scrolls back through time, leading viewers down a flight of stairs to her early minimalist abstractions. At first glance, those elegant grids echo the cool, whitewashed aesthetic of Agnes Martin. But lean in and you can make out what Gallagher calls “the disembodied ephemera of minstrelsy”: tiny googly eyes and thick Sambo lips, the dismaying components of blackface. These embers heat up the rational rhetoric of minimalism, suggesting that the issue of race is embedded in society’s most fundamental structures.

Later, her artistic arguments grew even more pointed. She tore pages out of vintage black lifestyle magazines, with their ads for wigs, skin-lightening creams and specialised shampoos, then gleefully enhanced those enhancements. Sometimes she adorned the ad copy, photos and slogans (“Natural!”, “The Just Warm Pressed Hair Look”,

“Johnson’s Ultra Ware will make you really proud of your hair”) with glitter, gold leaf and moulded Plasticine. The two works from this period in the New Museum show are more restrained. In “Skinatural” (1997), she disguised the models with black bandit masks. In “Bouffant Pride” (2003), she encased outlandishly puffy hairdos in lurid yellow helmets and gave all the faces bug-like blank eyes.

In the complex and playful works from this period, Gallagher charted how hairstyles could express shame and pride, sometimes both at the same time. Black men and women of her parents’ generation tormented themselves with beauty products. At the same time, though, the explosive afro became an assertion of pride – a way of staking out a bit of extra space in the world, like an aura. Gallagher deploys art partly to rescue those conflicted consumers, fashion rebels and victims of market-induced self-doubt. “The wig ladies are fugitives, conscripts from another time and place liberated from the ‘race’ magazines of the past,” she has said. “But I have transformed them, here on the pages that once held them captive.”

It’s a good idea, after revisiting her past, to head back upstairs to the present, where the mood grows more mysterious and the pale palette gives way to darker hues. The centrepiece of the upper level is “Osedax”, contained within a room-sized black cube. Duck inside, and you plunge into a claustrophobic ocean, a Davy Jones’s Locker of the imagination. A video of a foundering ship plays on one wall; on the other, a slide show of abstract paintings flips by, evoking languid creatures of the deep. The scene shifts, as the camera follows an animated bird gliding through caverns beneath the sea, accompanied by the soundtrack of a meditative guitar.

When you duck back out of “Osedax”, you realise that you’ve seen that underwater bird before, in the series of paintings that opens the show. Suddenly, those dark avian forms look like wounded sea creatures, their ravelled viscera morphing into fluttering strands of bloodied seaweed. The whole dim room takes on a briny atmosphere, full of coiling flora.

It’s not clear what this waterworld means to the artist, and the opacity seems deliberate, an antidote to the rather obvious ironies she once trafficked in. A text panel alludes to an Atlantis-like tale with a gruesome creation myth: during the Middle Passage, pregnant African women drowned, but their fetuses learned to breathe underwater, begetting a new species of marine mammals. Gallagher, too, is in search of an adaptive mutation. The art world changes, stridency is passé, and survival depends on accommodating to a new environment. In these latest pictures, she keeps obsessively reworking the same series of awkwardly composed forms, as if gasping, grasping, and struggling to evolve.