

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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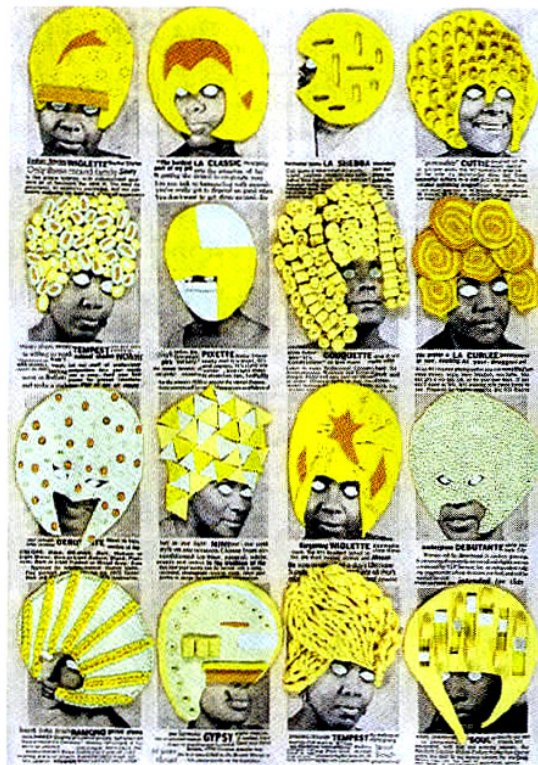
### Gallagher's Ghosts Art Inspired by Myth and Stories

**E**LLEN GALLAGHER was born in 1965 in Rhode Island, the daughter of an African-American father with ties to Cape Verde in West Africa and an American-Irish mother. Now she divides her time between New York and Rotterdam. Ms Gallagher mines sci-fi, marine biology and black history for her art, variously making use of cut-up paper, pencil, plasticine, printed matter, rubber, gold leaf and photogravure. It is out of this rich interbreeding of method and materials that her astonishing work arises.

This summer two new Gallagher exhibitions will open, one on each side of the Atlantic. A substantial survey at Tate Modern in London will be followed by a 20-year retrospective at the New Museum in New York.

The first room at the Tate Modern show has been covered with ruled writing paper, a reminder of the importance that the line and the grid play in Ms Gallagher's work and of the inspiration of minimalist artists such as Agnes Martin and Sol LeWitt. This humble papering provides a formal background for her work and helps steer it away from pomposity. But there is much more to Ms Gallagher's work than linear scaffolding—much to be read into it and much to be resisted, especially easy clichés about race or gender.

Early works from the 1990s, such as “Untitled, 1992”, for instance, play with the red lips and white-ringed eyes that recall black and white minstrels. An abstract pattern emerges, then (more surprisingly) disembody “golliwog” smiles. “Negroes Ask for German Colonies” (2002) takes its title from a phrase in an article that was written in 1919 by a Harlem radical, Hubert Harrison, and which Ms Gallagher cuts into paper. Above the words is a grid of 20 female wig models with black, white and



**Rational exuberance**

brown faces. The wigs, one named “Innocence” and another “Coquette”, are made from elaborately cut white paper. Pink plasticine curls emerge from the models’ eyes. It is exquisitely constructed and at the same time funny to behold, alluding to the rise of American black consciousness and poking at the covert racism of so much consumer advertising.

The works Ms Gallagher calls the “Yellow paintings”—which include “Falls and Flips” from 2001 and “Double Natural” from the year after, as well as “Pomp-Bang”, which Ms Gallagher painted in 2003—take this theme further (detail pictured below). Each one is a monumental grid of 396 advertisements for wigs and other items, such as hair grease or skin-whitening cream, as well as illustrated articles from black magazines of the 1950s and 1960s, such as *Ebony*, *Our World*, or *Black Stars*. Each face wears an elaborate, fantastical yellow plasticine wig. What could be dry social history becomes exuberant art-making.

Ms Gallagher often folds historical characters into her work, including “Peg Leg” Bates, a one-legged tap dancer, and Eunice Rivers, a nurse who was implicated in the notorious Tuskegee syphilis experiment carried out on black Alabamans between 1932 and 1972. At the age of 20, sponsored by the Sea Education Association, Ms Gallagher spent some time aboard an oceanographic research vessel collecting, studying and drawing pteropods—microscopic wing-footed snails. This experience has combined with her interest in the myth of Drexciya, an underwater country peopled with the unborn babies of pregnant African slave women thrown overboard mid-Atlantic. It has generated an extraordinary body of work collectively entitled “Watery Ecstatic”. Detailed drawing, intricate paper cutting, and dreamy watery colour, together create a universe of strange sea creatures. They suggest an imagination gripped equally by precision and fluidity, by science and poetry, and a mind that feeds on the beauty of nature while being haunted at the same time by the many layers of human history.



“Bird in Hand”, the great 2006 work on paper that is owned by the Tate, also draws on these preoccupations, generating out of myth and marine biology the startling figure of a one-legged pirate standing at the bottom of the ocean. His hair floats upwards in the water in a baroque confection of seaweed made from card and paper, all painstakingly cut by hand. His stump has sprouted seaweed. His black face is occluded by a white mask. This is a work that indulges in patterned beauty even as it freezes the spirit.

Many of the works exhibited, including the films she has made with her longtime collaborator, Edgar Cleijne, and the double-sided paintings called “Morphia”, reveal a determination to express complexity through an elaborate process of making. Canvases are built up in collaged layers. Mysterious, balletic animations are projected alongside archival film that has been doctored to produce strange new narratives. The paper Ms Gallagher uses is meticulously drawn on, painted, cut, stuck, pierced, both on the front and the back, and then hung in glass boxes. Her works are dense with thought, but thought transformed by intensive creative workmanship into something rich and strange. ■

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“Ellen Gallagher: AxME” is at Tate Modern in London until September 1st. It will travel to the Sara Hildén Art Museum in Tampere, Finland, in the autumn and to the Haus der Kunst in Munich, Germany, in 2014. “Don’t Axe Me” will be at the New Museum in New York from June 19th until September 15th.