

GAGOSIAN

ARTFORUM

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PARIS

Ellen Gallagher

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What remains so shocking about the connection of the sea with slavery? And why is it that certain historical truths are expeditiously forgotten only to resurface years later with the rolling waves of time? Ellen Gallagher's work sparks such questions, and their evident gravity lends weight to her art's subtle beauty.

The opening room of her first solo show in Paris featured the black tetraptych *Negroes Battling in a Cave*, 2016, titled after a racist comment discovered beneath the surface of Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square*, 1915. The piece hung opposite the predominantly white *Watery Ecstatic (RA 18h 35m 37.73s D37° 22' 31.12')*, 2017, perhaps posited as a counterpart to Malevich's *White on White*, 1918, but also a ghostly invocation of the victims of the Middle Passage of the transatlantic slave trade: White is transformed into the color of sun-bleached bone, brine-washed skin, and the hegemonic power of the slave masters on the wooden decks of ships bound from Africa.

The way Gallagher carves and gouges her surfaces and her use of a variety of materials (paper, ink, rubber, oil, enamel, collage on canvas) rendered these paintings both shiny and reflective, as if arrogating the complicit gaze of their audience. The watercolors of the second room conjured a sense of descent into the oceanic abyss, through Congolese masks of the dead, the minutiae of marine biology, and a nightmarish vision of battling bodies. In *Watery Ecstatic*, 2018, Gallagher renders tusklike shapes similar in form to Kongo ivories, sculptures avidly collected by Belgian colonialists. Their surfaces, though, are pink, not ivory, and filled with esoteric symbols that echo the twin recto-verso drawings *Morphia*, 2008–12, inspired by the Greek god who gave shape to dreams and unconscious perception. In Gallagher's fantastic hallucination, fish consume the eyes of the dead submerged beneath the waves; the works bear the influence of J. M. W. Turner's *The Slave Ship*, 1840, originally titled *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon Coming On*. Nor did the mordant visions end there. The exhibition continued with works such as *Elephantine*, 2019, inspired by Gallagher's research at the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Brussels, a place redolent with the horrors of Leopold II's Congo Free State. The museum was constructed by the king during one of the most violent



Ellen Gallagher,
Watery Ecstatic,
2018, watercolor, oil,
pencil, varnish, and
cut paper on paper,
90 1/8 x 50 1/8".

refugees washing up on the beaches of Greek islands, or teenage Iranian refugees crossing the English Channel at night in a rubber dinghy and heading desperately for the lights. The devil's favorite tool, according to Goethe, is the destruction of memory. Exiting Gallagher's exhibition, half in shock, no doubt, but half enraptured, one seemed to feel the water raging and the deck of the boat listing.

episodes of European colonial history and once included the display of Congolese people in a human zoo.

White was the color of bad luck in the eyes of the enslaved—the color of spirit demons, endless mourning, and, above all, death. Within the monochromatic realm of Gallagher's paintings, such rare colors as her palette affords are rendered especially poignant. In *Ecstatic Draught of Fishes*, 2019, we experienced viscerally the shimmer of gold leaf on canvas, always emblematic of wealth, just as beneath the surface of *Negroes Battling in a Cave* we might have discerned the swirling pools of red sienna under the layered blackness: a liminal narrative of the wound still open, the keloid scars left by the whip, and a trajectory of blood. Violence, we understand, was always the corollary of this maritime trade in human beings, its consequences generational, its reparations left unpaid. Today, we can think as well of trafficked migrants from sub-Saharan Africa lying beneath the waves of the mare nostrum, Syrian