

Field Guide

Ellen Gallagher: Creating the World She Longs For

The American artist Ellen Gallagher synthesizes Minimalist formal concerns (seriality, process) and racially charged figuration in paintings, collages, and films that often reveal themselves slowly: from afar, intricate abstractions; up close, unnerving narratives. *DeLuxe* (2004–05), for example, is a vast, gridlike entity within which 60 individual frames feature imagery of women culled from old African-American fashion magazines, their stylized faces and hair heightened or obscured by Gallagher's hand. Such works have been featured in solo exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art and have earned the artist—who was born in Rhode Island in 1965 and is now based in New York and Rotterdam—the American Academy Award in Art, among other accolades. As she prepared her first museum exhibition in London, Gallagher talked to *Modern Painters* about how longing and forgery figure into her newest body of work. —QL

You often make use of American historical sources. Do you think your work is perceived differently outside the US as a result? Because of shared historic references with my work, there can be a more nuanced reading of it in the US, but for the same reason, the American response can also be a bit static. An important element is the layering of historical fragments

and ephemera, with which I make an attempt toward a precise nonsense. But if these images are read in a limited way, tied to some kind of caricature of being and body, then possibility gets emptied out of the reading.

There seems to be a tension in your practice between minimalist abstraction and the more figurative narratives that come out of your found materials. Yes. I see these elements in my work as a form of dynamics—a merging between the constructions of a “New Negro” that was an important development in the Harlem Renaissance, and the concurrent developments in European modernist abstraction. Combining these elements is my reaction to the artificial schism between figuration and abstraction. See, for instance, sculptors like Wildfire Edmonia Lewis, poets like Claude McKay, and the gravedigger totems of Malevich.

You once said that you had “a kind of longing for ... the paintings to function through the characters of the ads—to function as a kind of chart or a map of this lost world.” What is it about these lost worlds that you would like to re-create? It is not so much a lost world as it is a world not yet visible. It is one of these realms that appear through openings in perception when cultural strictures shift. Its appearance is both all of a sudden and as if it was always already there. That is why I tend to use familiar found elements like penmanship paper and magazines in my work. Using such materials allows the painting to open up in my process of direct drawing—the page becomes both a character and a ground for the work.

How will this longing manifest itself in your London exhibition?

In the new paintings, the advertising characters, the essays, and the historical narratives are cut and reanimated on the canvas. There are moments of legibility and blank expansions between them. As you cross these points, there is both recovery and loss. Meaning is generated by the elasticity between associations. The work comes out of my desire to create an expansive, fluid realm that is both the concrete historical fragments it is made up of and the new form it describes—the way a font is both what it is made of and what it says.

Any influences right now, artistic or otherwise? My recent visit to Madagascar, TV on the Radio, and the Crack Fox.

ELLEN GALLAGHER, MAR. 18–MAY 3, SOUTH LONDON GALLERY, SOUTHLONDONGALLERY.ORG

