



Ellen Gallagher
Watery Ecstatic 2004

■ **Ellen Gallagher**
Fruitmarket Gallery Edinburgh
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To enter into Ellen Gallagher's show 'Orbus' is to enter into worlds that are simultaneously touched by myth, history and race. These worlds are realised through a range of media: 16mm film, sound, the found image, animation, painting but, above all, drawing.

Throughout 'Orbus', a scalpel is used in a variety of ways. In the 'Watery Ecstatic' series, 2002-04, Gallagher cuts into watercolour paper creating delicate sea creatures that are not what they seem. In one of the 16mm film projections making up the installation *Murmur*, 2003, a 50s sci-fi film is scratched into and drawn onto, making an alien appropriation of the human body a very visceral erasure. In the centre of the black enamel painting *Psychoalphadiscobetabioquadolopp*, 2001, an Afro-American head is made up from tiny eyes and tongues cut from rubber. Thus to be drawn to the surface of Gallagher's artworks is also to be drawn into a world haunted by, while playing with, specific historical legacies.

This is at its most overt in *Double Natural*, 2002, a huge painting that incorporates over 400 monochrome adverts, taken from magazines such as *Ebony* between 1939 and 1972. The faces of black models would predominate, except Gallagher uses yellow plasticine to block out eyes and each head is crowned with yellow plasticine hair. The range of 'wigs' sculpted, plaited or cut into simple blocks are both admirable and amusing, but the cumulative effect is a disturbing one. Yellow-on-black is a loaded choice for, as the adverts themselves spell out, beauty is inescapably shaped by the politics of the time. *Double Natural* reminds us that desires for cosmetics that lighten skin or to wear a 'natural looking' Afro wig ran in parallel with the black American civil rights movement. It therefore creates an ambiguous masquerade in which collective identity, its desires and history, are all subject to some kind of erasure. Yet, ironically

this partial erasure is necessary for the artist to subvert the nostalgia attached to this archival material, even interrogating the fascination it inevitably holds.

While *Double Natural* is an impressive example of the artist's intervention with found material, it is the smaller works that are revelatory. This is in part because a series such as 'Watery Ecstatic' offers a more intimate viewing experience, but also because it demands more from the viewer. An example of this is *Watery Ecstatic (3 15N, 73 00E)*, 2004, which from a distance looks like a sheet of blank paper; a closer look reveals a subtle and sensitive cut-paper-on-paper work. A series of small fictional islands have been marked into the paper, their coastlines studded with sea creatures. Any casual viewer, who doesn't attend to Gallagher's delicately cut drawings, would miss the fact that these are hybrid creatures – so what appears to be a long shell is in fact an elaborate pony tail that crowns a tiny African head. All the sea creatures in this particular piece have African faces, and this metaphorical use of underwater creatures also recurs in other works. For example, in the film installation *Murmur* these hybrid creatures are compellingly animated into a shoal, which with great simplicity moves ethereally above a seabed. The creation of hybrid creatures has its own ancient history, but Gallagher's hybrids movingly allude to those African slaves who perished at sea, and explores the possibility of how those spirits continue to inhabit a place, even if this is in the realm of myth.

One of the most striking aspects of 'Orbus' is the way such narratives creep upon the viewer, so the more you look, the more is revealed. There are points in the show in which some works don't operate at this level, although this seems intentional. Some of the individual drawings of skates and jellyfish in 'Watery Ecstatic' are beautiful, but not as charged as others. This may be another visual strategy, one that plays with, and extends, notions of otherness that Gallagher's work has generally been credited with, but it is hard not to miss the infusion of lost, imaginary worlds that resonate with historical suggestion.

'Orbus' is a seductive encounter, in which Gallagher's dexterity with her materials invites a surprising chain of

associations. Sea serpents evoke Egyptian Queens, while black enamel invokes the figure of the black activist. Regency wigs and outlandish beehives are summoned up in plasticine, a material associated with childhood. The process of loss and disappearance hover over all these worlds: it is their trace to which the work of Gallagher responds so poetically. ■

NICKY BIRD is an artist. She also lectures on Contemporary Photographic Practice at the University of Northumbria at Newcastle.
