

A Challenge to History: Ellen Gallagher's 'Coral Cities'

'Our imaginations are inhabited by ghosts... To have a new vision of the future, it has always first been necessary to have a new vision of the past'.

Theodore Zeldin, *A Intimate History of Humanity*

To see an Ellen Gallagher show is like visiting Venice for the first time – the mix of beauty, fragility and history just takes your breath away. The real wonder of Venice is that it survives and flourishes despite the threat of water. In *Coral Cities* Ellen Gallagher harnesses the power, mystery and wonder of the watery deep to reclaim, renew and re-imagine black histories in the African diaspora.

Gallagher is fascinated by islands. Not only are they her heritage, with one parent from the archipelago of Cape Verde and the other from Ireland, they are key metaphors in her work, which balances ideas of home, retreats and staging points, against the sea's capacity to transport, transform and conceal. To take one example: in her captivating white-on-white three-dimensional painting (slide 12), she organises the text reproduced from ads in vintage black magazines and places them like found objects that a beachcomber might retrieve for examination and contemplation. Laid out in a circular fashion they become 'ports' on a fantasy island lost in time. Islands are everywhere in this world – see, for example, the foam-like configurations of (slides 14 and 15), elongated land masses that threaten at any moment to disappear beneath the surface.

Far from being humourless or didactic, Gallagher's work encourages multiple and sometimes very witty readings and responses – subjectivity and context is all. Disembodied heads, eyes, mouths and hairpieces appear like bubbles or nodes caught up in or clinging to different 'strands' of memory, history or representation. Strange at first, their repeated presence offers a form of familiarity and play as they appear in varying forms and configurations in Gallagher's fantasy of Black survival and evolution. Her influences are complex and varied, but key to Gallagher's practice is the reworking of ephemera she has mined from creative responses to racial oppression: hairstyles, speech, music, dance and dress, in all of which black people have found refuge. She fuses this with an eagle eye for fact and detail as she constructs her monument to the past. In so doing she leaves her mark on these ephemera, transforming them into pieces of a complex jigsaw that she is both piecing together and constructing at the same time. In her stratified world, she deconstructs from one context only to reconstruct its elements in another, but they are never 'unmarked'. Her intricately crafted cuts on paper of women's heads, lips and eyes are like coastal outlines, but they also serve as delicate hieroglyphic, inscriptions from a time when exaggerated racist representations of black people were the norm. By producing a counter-memory of meaning and value, Gallagher sidesteps polarisations of beautiful vs ugly, harnessing these forms to her own ends.

Her obsessive examinations have a focus: she pinpoints historical moments of transformation from black history, and dissects and plays around with characters from these histories, those who have names, like Eunice Rivers or Peg Leg Bates, and the anonymous hundreds of unidentified black models taken from small ads in the black magazines and newspapers of the 1940s '50s and '60s.

The longer you stay with the work, you get to know and identify the differences and similarities which are at the core of her practice. Gallagher's background (as illustrator) in marine biology has given her a discourse for her taxonomic art. Her strategy is to change contexts, obliterate phenotypical representations, defiantly recontextualise texts and images – most dramatically with the entrenched stereotypes from the black consumer press that fostered black beauty through the purchase of wigs and

hair adornments. In a celebrated essay, Kobena Mercer has written about black hairstyles as cultural statements of resistance; Turner Prize winner Chris Ofili pays homage to them in works like 'Afrodizzia' and 'Afrobluff'; Ayoka Chenzira has satirised black hair culture in her film *Hair Piece* (1984). Gallagher's emphasis is somewhat different from these, treating her images as outlines of 'unfinished business' that she has retrieved from a past, lost reality. To have currency in her world, they need to be hand-finished by her, like delicate pieces of china. The tools she uses for this are as complicated and as loaded as the origins of the texts themselves.

Hair has always been a marker in black culture: how you style it, what you put on it, or if you let it be seen at all are all ways of saying something. This is true above all of the consumer focused 'black beauty' world of the 1950s and '60s - the source of many of the print ads used in Gallagher's work. Her selection of words and phrases like: Miracle Whip, Ice or Salt, Greaseless, Apollo, La Shebba, The First Lady, Apollo, Shanty, Mini Flip, to be appropriated and re-contextualised into delicate arrangements, surfacing like a hidden code to a repository of colonial memory, placed where they can be read in relation to diagonal or immediate opposites.

Dual readings in Gallagher's work are not there by chance. It may, for example, seem paradoxical to associate art that works on popular black culture in this way with the poet Aimé Césaire, advocate of a Black classical culture founded in the mythic past, but Césaire's Negritude is clearly a part of the complex cultural history on which Gallagher draws. Césaire's writing, especially *Return to the Native Land*, is not only a matrix for the celebration of Africa and the Caribbean, it also prompted a radical shift in how black people were able to think about and look at themselves.

**my negritude is not a stone
nor a deafness flung against the clamour of the day
my negritude is not a white speck of dead water
on the dead eye of the earth
my negritude is neither tower nor cathedral
it plunges into the red flesh of the soil
it plunges into the blazing flesh of the sky
my negritude riddles with holes
the dense affliction of its worthy patience.**

Césaire – like Gallagher a poet of islands -- likened Negritude to the circulatory movement of the blood in our veins, set moving with every heartbeat. He cites the past as the key ingredient for this life force, 'we must have the wisdom to acknowledge and recognise history.'

Gallagher's body of work, itself loaded with bodily metaphors (slide 13), attempts in similar ways to reposition how and what we remember about African displacement in general, and about the victims of the 'middle passage' in particular. One starting point is the notion of a Black Atlantis, referred to by Gallagher as Drexciya, after the Detroit ensemble who developed the myth of an aquatic species descended from the children of pregnant slaves who jumped or were thrown into the ocean during the Atlantic crossing.

Gallagher's is a critical eye, and this shift of gaze is all important, especially as we mark in Britain the 200th anniversary of the abolition of transatlantic slavery. Conservative estimates say eleven million unnamed, unremembered Africans died in the middle passage. Gallagher's work does so much more than mark their passing: she gives dignity and value to their deaths by the simple act of looking. Without her evocative, elaborate depictions they would just be a memory. Through her work we can think of them as people scarred by the revenges of time and sea, but emerging like messages in a bottle to warn against the danger of forgetting.

For most of us, the act of remembering is a simple task – we close our eyes, we look at photographs, we eat food, or if the memory is too hard to retrieve we turn to friends or family for help. But what if the memories we seek pre-date us and all the people we know? Where in an ocean of possibilities are we to turn? Ellen Gallagher offers a timely and much needed shift in how we reflect on black memory and history. Her work frees us to think in multiple dimensions and across time zones. So even if it is showing at a time consciously marking the abolition of the slave trade in the UK – the cultural context for curating this show – slavery and its cultural legacy are for Gallagher just one part of the kaleidoscope of references, stories and events that influence and inform her practice.

To get the measure of what she is creating you need to spend time with the work: the rewards come as each painting builds or cross-references with another (slides 3 and 6), as references to real and fictional characters emerge like the building blocks of a new form of memory: 'Identity is not in the past to be found, but in the future to be constructed' (Stuart Hall). The three-dimensional paintings, mythical charts and white-on-white collages are guides and signposts in our journey 'back to the future' of black representation.

Gallagher's voyage of meditation, exploration and reclamation has at its heart the need to re-imagine black histories: intellectually, physically and emotionally. Equipped with the sensibilities of both deep-sea diver and beachcomber, Gallagher has set out on a genealogical mission of salvage and recovery. The route she circumnavigates is timeless and has no boundaries. From her study and love of marine biology she knows the secrets of the paleozoic ocean, and the unmeasured vastness that is yet to be fully explored. Her fantasy sea-creatures (slides 4 5 and 9) come from a real understanding of the possibility of such discoveries. The deeper a diver goes in the sea, the colours change from blue to black: for Gallagher, her work is akin to such a continuous, fearless exploration.

Much has been said about repetition in Gallagher's work. I would argue that like a tide that ebbs and flows and washes up something a bit different each time, so Gallagher's highly developed labour intensive canvases are subtly varied, throwing up different thoughts and new possibilities. This connects to her interest and training in taxonomy, where the slightest difference can mean a difference of type. Her repetitions work politically, like remembering for Césaire, who conjured with words to build an emergent Caribbean subjectivity. Gallagher physically builds a hypnotic world of fantasy, humour and wonder through intricate combinations of paint, paper, black ephemera, gold leaf and advertising. Her chosen aids in this endeavour are myth, biology, science fiction, advertising literature and black popular culture.

Her creations are often hybrids, revealing themselves through repeated viewing. The most dominating painting in the show is *Bird in the Hand 2006* (slide 2) a beautiful portrait that has cosmic and supernatural overtones. Peg Leg looks out, only part-human, with one leg at the surface and the other taking root in the earth. His presence encapsulates all black possibility, curiosity, adventure and ambition. Like a magnificent wreck on the seabed, he emerges hungry to draw everything to him, reaching out to every island, continent and sea: to touch base with forgotten ghosts of the diaspora. His enormous afro appears to be undergoing a borg-like regeneration, as his magnetic presence sucks in the whole of black history. Looking closer, we see he is made up of elements that are present in microscopic detail in the other works of the show. Through direct reference to Herman Melville's Ahab, in *Moby-Dick*, Peg Leg is an ancient mariner, sailing the seas of history to retrieve the discarded cargo of black souls. Here he is at his most majestic – a futuristic George Clinton, a time-travelling, shape-shifting master over all he surveys.

A sense of humour is apparent, as Gallagher gives a physical form to her exploration of space and time. There is delightful mischief in the painstaking detail, in the elaborately framed mini 'portraits' of

wiggladies; their faces, with overworked features emerging from a collage of cardboard, newsprint and paint, seem like a misshapen chorus of cameos ready to give voice to their experiences of the deep. The warts-and-all collages of Dirty O's (slide 3) are counterbalanced by the lightness of touch required to effect the doily-like delicacy of her archipelago monochrome painting (slides 14 and 15). The level of detail has to be seen to be believed: and the more you look the more you see.

It is often said that the best journeys are those that reflect as much on where you've come from as where you go to. Gallagher's images seem to inhabit the fluidity of the sea, nothing is fixed and everything is possible. In a jazz-like configuration, Gallagher intertwines her motifs with the riffs and rhythms of black identity: a critical intimacy is established with the past and present, while always musing on the future. Imagining a world where the discarded or forgotten from one world are reassigned in a re-imagined natural order, Gallagher is squaring up to Arthur Schomberg's historical challenge: 'history must restore what slavery took away, for it is the social damage of slavery that the present generation must repair and offset': she does this through the rigour and beauty of her work.

Gallagher takes us on a captivating visual quest, where she is a lone dreamcatcher, moving in time and space. As she creates jewel-like order from the chaos of our collective memories, her gaze is critical, selective, and most of all one firmly grounded in the house of change.

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