The Fruitmarket Gallery
Exhibition Archive

Ellen Gallagher
Orbus

Exhibition 11 December 2004 – 13 February 2005

This exhibition, selected in close collaboration with the artist, brings together a wide range of work which reflects both the diversity and the consistency of her practice. Whether making marks directly on to the Gallery walls, building paintings by weaving together archival material culled from vintage magazines carving imaginative sea-creatures out of watercolour paper or making small-scale 16mm film animations, Ellen Gallagher thinks and speaks of her work in terms of form in motion.

Central to her work is the concept of repetition and revision, as in Jazz or Hip Hop, when a phrase is worked and re-worked with slight alterations. Similarly, by building up layers of imagery, the artist creates a powerful pictorial vocabulary, blending visual histories with highly personal, yet seductively communicable new cultural mythologies to create a series of interlocking imaginary worlds.

The exhibition opens with a group of drawings made this year which explore a new natural history. Fantastical sea-creatures inspired by ones we might find in the real world but imaginatively re-worked into new species are presented as the inhabitants of a strange, under-sea world. The world centres on a mysterious archipelago of islands, seen from the air and carved white on white into the paper of one large drawing. In another, one island has been minutely charted by an unknown explorer, its coves and inlets given strange names – Coquette, Peg Leg, Spiral Lluster – whose origins become clearer as we move around the exhibition.

In an adjoining room, *Watery Ecstatic*, one of a series of film projections made in collaboration with Edgar Cleijne, animates Gallagher's undersea world as a dream-like space, reminiscent perhaps of the mythical Drexciya, a utopian, undersea world populated by women and children who escaped from slave ships during the infamous Middle Passage, the toughest part of the slave journey from Africa to America. Drexciya is similar in some ways to Atlantis and, continuing the musical inferences which run throughout Gallagher's work, its myth has been propagated by a cult underground Detroit band of the same name.

Associations with Drexciya are further developed in *Kabuki Death Dance*, a short animation in which a shoal of bewigged heads move and twist like fish in a downward spiral, and *Blizzard of White*, in which spikier forms made from plasticine claw their way down the screen. Gallagher's films use a variety of techniques, including claymation, stop-frame and scratch animation, the artist continually reworking, revisiting and experimenting, and the films moving backwards and forwards between high-tech digital wizardry and lo-tech manual manipulation of form.

Two of the films stand apart from the *Watery Ecstatic* drawings. *Monster* is a film in which the artist has scratched into, drawn on, slowed down and speeded up footage from the 1950s Cold War Science Fiction film *It Came From Outer Space*, to create a new story of alien visitation and proliferation. *Super Boo*, an animation of an early drawing which takes images of Bruce Lee and Jim Kelly found in Kung Fu advertisements in *Ebony* magazine as its starting point, is projected together with the drawings, disrupting their tranquillity. The film plays games with the audience, jostling its posing men back and forth to a repeated loop of music sampled from UK rap artist Dizzee Rascal, who in turn took it from a recording of Javanese gamelan music.

The film is a complex blend of cultural and visual stereotypes, and sets the tone for the new worlds created in the work in the rest of the exhibition, worlds which are visually stunning and conceptually compelling, but in which things are never quite what they seem. Upstairs, the vast painting *Double Natural* confronts the viewer with a large grid of imagery. Mainly heads, their eyes removed and their hair re-worked in bright yellow plasticine, the images are subject to the kind of repetition and alteration which informs much of Gallagher's work. The heads are culled from a variety of magazines popular from the 1930s to the 1970s, such as *Ebony, Sepia* and *Our World*. In using them, the artist has picked out advertisements for products to remedy a host of perceived ills, and for beauty products, especially wigs, from whose fantastical names she invents characters which in turn act as guides across the grid of the painting and around the rest of the exhibition. The extent of her intervention varies – sometimes she leaves the text of the

advertisements intact, relying on the over-enthusiastic, somewhat archaic language to make her point for her, and sometimes she alters the text, twisting the words to suit her own purpose.

Double Natural is joined by two densely built black paintings, heavily worked in paper, rubber and enamel. *Psychoalphadiscobetabioaquadoloop*, its title taken from a Parliament Funkadelic song from 1973, is a huge head of a woman with an Afro hairstyle, related to a drawing from Gallagher's 2001 series *Preserve*. Again originally sourced from a magazine advertisement, the woman's head is reworked by Gallagher in closely-interlocking forms cut from rubber. The forms are schematically-rendered ephemera from make up used in black face minstrelsy – lips, tongues and eyes. In the woman's own eyes float two small women.

Underneath both of the large dark paintings is a barely-discernable grid, made from sheets of paper applied to the canvas before the artist begins painting. Although completely obliterated, the paper is penmanship paper, a material which has featured in Gallagher's practice since her earliest work, the artist fascinated by a material, itself fugitive and fragile, which seeks to dictate the passage of a hand across it (penmanship paper is designed to teach young children how to write). In the two wall drawings she has made for this exhibition, the artist has rescued the faint and fugitive lines of penmanship paper, hand-printing them in bands around the architecture of the Gallery.

Ellen Gallagher's process of art making is deliberate and private. Paintings and drawings are created over intense periods of time, each piece reflecting a concentration of thought and labour. Gallagher's source material is shape and texture: pigment, paper, pencil, watercolour, oil, enamel, plasticine, and rubber. These materials animate her radically encoded visual vocabulary. The beautiful surfaces and abstract plan of Gallagher's painting aligns it with the grid structure of Minimalist artists such as Agnes Martin and Sol Le Witt. Underpinned by this mathematical grid, the surfaces of her paintings are infused with recognisable images (such as eyes, mouths, hair and wigs), her large scale works populated by thousands of these cryptic symbols all crammed obsessively together. Through an accumulation of layers, and a clear use of structure she creates an interplay between abstract and representational form.

I am interested in both a painting's immediate appearance and what it can manifest slowly. And maybe that is what links me to a more modernist sensibility. I am interested in the way materials manifest meaning. In the paint, the lines, the ink, the drawings.

A conversation with Ellen Gallagher by Thyrza Nichols Goodeve, Ikon Gallery, 1998.

Exhibition supported by
Mondriaan Foundation

Ellen Gallagher
Murmur, £49.95

Caoimhin Mac Giolla Léith

A stunning limited-edition artist's book designed by the artist in collaboration with designer Irma Boom, this is an art work in its own right. Five volumes held together by magnets, it provides the opportunity to flip through the artist's recent films and savour her beautiful drawings.

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Talks and Events

Artist's Talk
Ellen Gallagher in conversation
Saturday 11 December, 2pm, Free
Ellen Gallagher discusses the work shown in her exhibition *Orbus* with curator and writer Caoimhin Mac Giolla Leith.

Film Maker's Talk
Thursday 13 January, 6.30pm, Free
Booking advised.
Beverly Hood, artist and Postgraduate Co-ordinator, School of Visual Communication, Edinburgh College of Art discusses the film and animation processes in Ellen Gallagher's films.

New Year's Day
Saturday 1 January, 12–5pm, Free
Come in from the cold to celebrate New Year's Day at the Gallery. Enjoy Ellen Gallagher's exhibition and heart warming food from our café.

Family Workshop
Saturday 22 January, 2–4pm
Tickets £4 per child. Booking essential.
Artist Lindsay Hamilton delivers a fun family workshop inspired by the current exhibition. Try your hand at making paper sculpture sea creatures, taking inspiration from Gallagher's drawings of shrimps, sea-horses and jelly-fish. Suitable for 3–6 year olds and one parent/guardian. 20 places available.

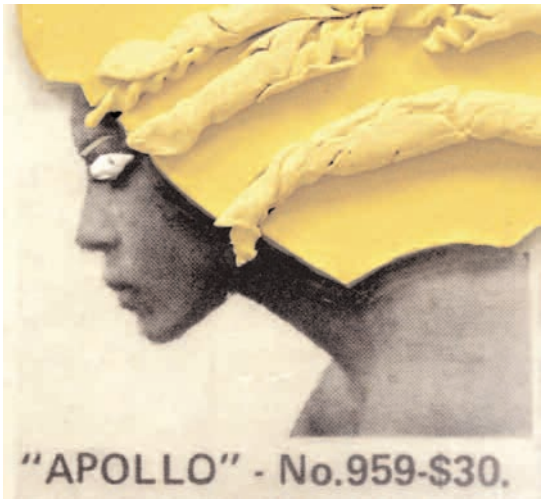
Burns Night at The Fruitmarket Gallery
Tuesday 25 January, 7–10pm.
Tickets £13.50. Booking essential.
New for 2005, celebrate Robert Burns, Scotland's national bard with poetry readings by Valerie Gillies and storytelling by John Fee. The ticket price includes traditional Scottish fare of haggis, neeps and tatties and a dram of whisky. In collaboration with The Scottish Storytelling Centre.

Adult's Workshop
Saturday 5 February, 10am–4pm Tickets £30/£20 conc. Booking essential.
Venue: Stills, 23 Cockburn St Edinburgh.
Taking inspiration from Ellen Gallagher's film series *Murmur*, artist Rachael Bevan Baker will deliver a one day workshop covering an introduction to stop frame animation with an opportunity for participants to create their own short animated films. Organised in collaboration with award-winning Red Kite Animations. 8 places available.

For further information contact
Tracy Morgan, Education Manager
P 0131 226 8183
E education@fruitmarket.co.uk

Booking
The Fruitmarket Gallery welcomes group bookings from all sections of the community. These must be booked two weeks in advance of your visit. The Fruitmarket Gallery is an accessible venue.

To book for talks and events contact the bookshop
P 0131 225 2383
E bookshop@fruitmarket.co.uk



Ellen Gallagher, Installation view