

EN

WIELS

ELLEN
GALLAGHER
& EDGAR
CLEIJNE

LIQUID
INTELLIGENCE

02.02

28.04

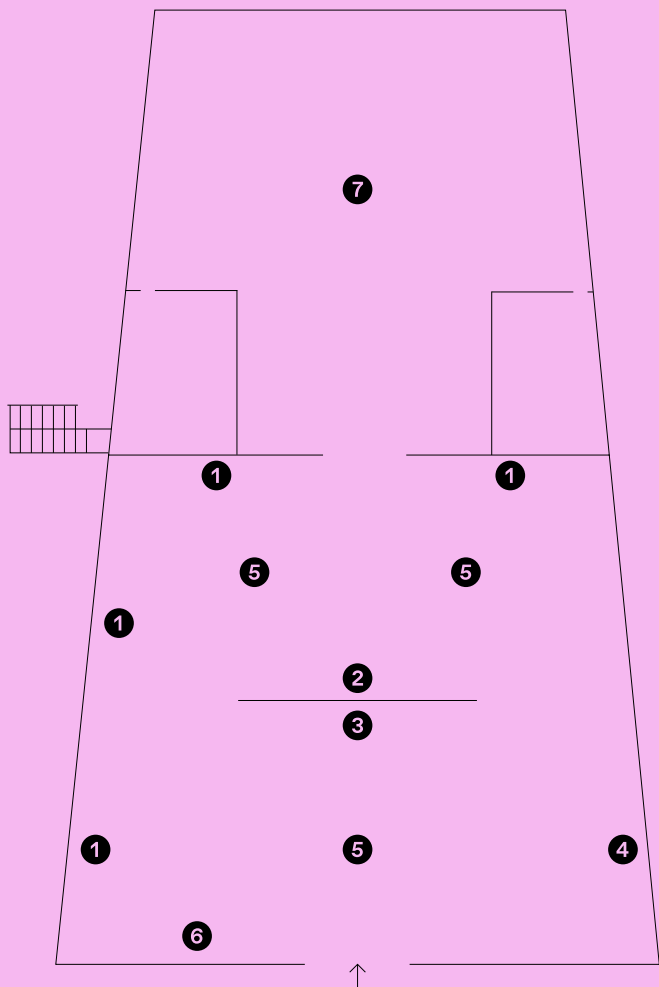
GALLAGHER WORKS THROUGH POPULAR NARRATIVES AND MYTHOLOGIES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORIES WHILE ALSO CHALLENGES PARADIGMS OF MODERNIST PAINTING

Ellen Gallagher is one of today's most prominent artists. She was born in port city of Providence, Rhode Island, USA, in 1965, and works and lives between Rotterdam and New York since 2003.

This exhibition is a first survey in the Lowlands of Gallagher's painterly production in some twenty works, shown together with two of the collaborative film installations made together with Edgar Cleijne. As such, it is a unique moment for the WIELS audiences to discover a practice which is cherished and discussed in the framework of decolonial and Anthropocene debates worldwide. Gallagher works through popular narratives and mythologies of African American histories while also challenges paradigms of modernist painting, such as objecthood, frontality or transparency. She opens them up with techniques of fragmentation, carving and layering which introduce means of perception that address opacity, embodying, memorizing and the fluid interchangeability of materials and beings.

The exhibition's title *Liquid Intelligence* is borrowed from an essay by conceptual artist Jeff Wall. It alludes to the chemical, transformative process of analogue photography, the quasi-controlled process of the darkroom, involving liquids and washing, in opposition to notions of transparency and proof associated with modernist documentary photography. The intelligence of liquid environments and aquatic, marine transformations touch upon the aesthetic of much of Gallagher's work: the biomorphic obscured worlds of the submarine and bio-molecular traces of millennial histories. The film installations by Gallagher & Cleijne capture the disruptions of the technology and engineering that the Anthropocene imposes on the planet.

Check the 😊 if you visit the exhibition with kids



1

Black Paintings:
Dance you Monster I, Dance you Monster II, Untitled, Kapsalon Wonder, Kapsalon Phantasie, Eleganza, Negroes battling in a Cave

Over the course of several years, Gallagher produced monochrome paintings that investigate blackness as a colour and a subjectivity, a selection of these are shown here. Materiality and embeddedness are central to her practice, and the technique she develops to make her work reveal this. She first adheres a loose grid of penmanship paper to the canvas and layers it with torn and painted pages from magazines intended for Black audiences. She incises the surface with a blade and then moulds black rubber over the surface. Finally, she coats the surface with high-gloss enamel where little is immediately revealed apart from the glossed reflection of the viewer consumed into darkness of the surfaces. Gallagher turns rubber, paper and enamel into a black mirror of American materialism, transforming the pictorial gesture into an archaeological or alchemical process of adding, extracting, resurfacing.

In his text *Poetics of Relation* (1990), the writer and philosopher Edouard Glissant explores the colour black and the notion of opacity as a form of unknowability. For this reason, opacity has the radical potential for social movements to subvert systems of domination. Glissant demands the right to opacity: the oppressed should be allowed to be opaque, to not be completely understood, but to simply exist as different. Gallagher says of these works: "I'm really interested in this idea of a black inscrutable. The black paintings were in a sense a reaction to how people were reading or misreading the work ... I really see the black paintings as a kind of refusal. Even when reading them – if you stand in front of them they go blank and then if you stand at the side you see only a little."¹

Kapsalon Wonder (2015) is comprised of open forms, disembodied braids and clusters of hair. 'Kapsalon' means barbershop in Dutch but is also the name of popular Rotterdam street-food with African and Middle Eastern origins.

The diptych *Dance You Monster* (2000) features abstract forms that are parts of landscapes borrowed from the early-twentieth-century cartoonist George Herriman, whose *Krazy Kat* comics have been a recurrent source of inspiration for Gallagher.

¹ Ellen Gallagher geciteerd in *Morgan*, 2001, p. 26–7.

2

Negroes Battling in a Cave (2016) is a recent group of four paintings. Their provocative title is a citation of handwritten marginalia found during the restoration of one of Kazimir Malevich's iconic Black Square painting. Taking Russian Suprematism as a target, Gallagher challenges early Modernism's self-proclaimed purity with her own take on Malevich's *Black Square*, believed to be the first ever monochrome abstraction.

😊 **How many colours can you see in the works? Is black a colour, according to you?**

😊 **Position yourself at different spots in the room. Do you always see the same thing in the paintings?**

3

DeLuxe (2004-2005)
DeLuxe is a portfolio of sixty individually-framed artworks. They feature advertisements for beauty products taken from magazines from the 1930s to the 1970s aimed at African American consumers, such as *Ebony*, *Our World* and *Sepia*. Gallagher has cut and layered the adverts, adding plasticine to depict the eyes and hairstyles of the models. With the title, she draws ironically on the language of advertising to subvert its original intentions; the word 'deluxe' appears in various spellings and fonts in different places in the work.

4

Watery Ecstatic (2001 – ongoing)
In this delicate series, Gallagher carves into the pulp of thick watercolour paper, a technique that she refers to as her version of scrimshaw: the practice of engraving the bones and teeth of marine mammals by whalers. The art historian Robin D. G. Kelley – who has long followed Gallagher's work and contributes a new text to the forthcoming WIELS catalogue – describes *Watery Ecstatic* thus: "Dream-like, surrealistic drawings evoking exotic fish, submarine creatures and organisms like eels, jellyfish, ancient sea creatures and strange vegetation. We encounter the familiar: disembodied eyes, wigs and lips attached like barnacles, the masked and unmasked faces of African people."²

5

Morphia (2008-2012)
The series *Morphia* combine the intimate with the epic, the urban with the oceanic, the ethereal with the physical. The works emphasize how Gallagher's shape-shifting signs bring materiality to both natural and social histories. These hybrid symbols evolve and mutate in relation to the viewer's perception, resembling organic forms such as cells and marine creatures while also evoking various iconographies from Africa and its diaspora. Gallagher asserts that "a character like a jellyfish can be made up of several bodies, can exist in different times, can be a character that is symbolic".³

6

An Ecstatic Draught of Fishes (2018)
Gallagher's most recent work, made especially for this exhibition, translates the underwater world imagined by the Detroit-based electronic music duo Drexciya, inhabited by the descendants of the Africans who were thrown overboard from slave ships, such as the Zong, during its crossing or 'Middle Passage' of the Atlantic in 1781.

7

Highway Gothic (2017)
This monumental film installation examines the impact of Interstate Highway 10 on humans and nature. The title refers to a standard font used for US road signs. The installation has been exhibited in New Orleans, Stockholm, Toronto and is expanded and adapted for WIELS.

Highway Gothic uses the Claiborne corridor as a physical and conceptual framework through which to consider the loss of history and culture in New Orleans' historic 7th Ward and Treme neighbourhoods; highlighting problematic urban planning practices, such as the development of the Interstate Highway System in the United States in the late 1950s. The implementation of these huge infrastructural overhauls took their toll on urban Black communities, which were often displaced to make room for the highways. Prior to the development

of Interstate 10, the Claiborne neutral ground was a lush, oak canopy-covered corridor lined with Black-owned businesses on either side.

Today, while spliced by the interstate, it is a popular gathering place during Mardi Gras and Second Lines. Cleijne and Gallagher's installation is comprised of a 16mm film created along I-10 in New Orleans and beyond, that traces the highway as it sweeps from Claiborne avenue soaring over and into the Atchafalaya waters near Lafayette, Louisiana; and banners based on 70mm cyanotype celluloid film negatives. These refer simultaneously to early photographic studies of natural history specimens and to the murals that were painted on the highway's support columns by the New Orleans African American Museum's project *Restore the Oaks* (2002).⁴

😊 **How many different materials can you see around you?**

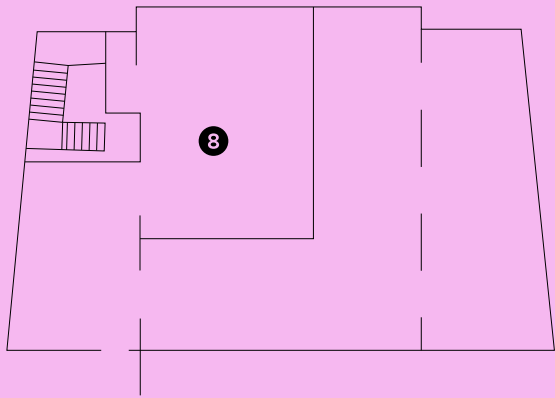
😊 **Are they connected to one another?**

GALLAGHER BRINGS MATERIALITY TO BOTH NATURAL AND SOCIAL HISTORIES

² Robin D. G. Kelley, catalogue Gallagher/Cleijne, WIELS, April 2019.

³ Ellen Gallagher, geciteerd door het Art Institute of Chicago, tentoonstellingsgids 'Are We Obsidian?', 2018

⁴ Edgar Cleijne, 2017



8

Osedax (2010)

The centre of this installation is a 16mm film projection, which opens with a shot of a recent shipwreck off of the coast of Rhode Island. The wreck appears to have been abandoned to slowly dissolve into the sea. As the force of the elements takes hold of the ship, it becomes an intermediary zone. Cormorants alight on the ship's stays to dry their wings in the air. For them the ship is an extended landscape rather than a gruesome end. Gallagher and Cleijne draw into the existing film stock using analogue and 3D animation to extend the breaking point where the birds enter the water, transforming the cormorants into electric sea creatures. The basic model or skeleton for the film is cyclical. The ship exists in three realms: the visible realm of the ship above water, the air surface split by the water, and the descent into the ocean depths. This moment of shifting from one realm to another exists as a kind of interlude. Here the artists take as inspiration the episodic chapter headings that American romantic novelist Herman Melville sequenced for his novel about the white whale, *Moby Dick* (1851). However, rather than introducing narrative, the interludes are abstract. They serve to elongate the dissolution of air into water, or concentrate upon the touching point between ocean and air.

The work evokes whale fall – the scientific term for dead whales that have fallen to the ocean floor and are consumed by scavengers – and flows between the film and the painted glass slides. Edgar Cleijne evokes the fluid, multi-layered references to *Moby Dick* in the work: “The dark surrounding walls of the projection room are milled with marks that map the descent of the whaleship The Pequod into the ocean depths. The markings also recall the Polynesian reed mapping, Queequeg’s engraved coffin, and the scars that mar the skin of the whale. These excavations into the pulpy body of the black MDF (a processed wood product made up of paper particles) foreground the leitmotifs of the slide and film projection, including the fluidity and cryptic nature of symbolic systems that have become indecipherable, either through obsolescence or loss.”⁵

😊 **Where are we? Underwater?
Inside a fish? In outer space?**

⁵ Edgar Cleijne, unpublished project-document, 2017

ELLEN GALLAGHER & EDGAR CLEIJNE LIQUID INTELLIGENCE 02.02 - 28.04.2019

PUBLICATION

A catalogue will be published during the exhibition with contributions of Dirk Snauwaert (Director of WIELS), Elvan Zabunyan (historian, art critic and professor at Université Rennes 2, France), and Robin Kelley (historian and professor of History at UCLA, USA). Published in collaboration with König Books, London, with the generous support of Gagosian Gallery.

Launch in April 2019

BIOGRAPHIES OF THE ARTISTS

Ellen Gallagher is an African - American artist born in 1965 in Providence, Rhode Island. She attended Oberlin College, Ohio (1982-84); Studio 70, Fort Thomas, Kentucky (1989); School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts (1992); and Skowhegan School of Art, Maine (1993).

Her work has been shown in numerous solo and group exhibitions globally and is included in the permanent collections of many major museums.

Her chosen media include painting, works on paper and video, and she has produced several film installations in close collaboration with Dutch filmmaker Edgar Cleijne. Gallagher lives and works in Rotterdam (the Netherlands) and New York (USA). She is represented by Gagosian Gallery and Hauser & Wirth.

Edgar Cleijne is a Dutch artist born 1963 in Eindhoven (the Netherlands). He lives in Rotterdam (the Netherlands) and New York (USA). Cleijne works in photography and film. Merging the opposite ends of traditional and digital imaging, Cleijne looks at the effects of our Anthropocene era in the crossing points of nature and culture. He is known for documentary photographic and filmic reportages in which he focusses on large-scale interventions in the urban landscape, enforced by negotiations between the individual and the state.

#LIQUIDINTELLIGENCE

The exhibition is organized with the special support of Gagosian Gallery and Hauser & Wirth Gallery

GAGOSIAN HAUSER & WIRTH

EVENTS

ELLEN GALLAGHER
& EDGAR CLEIJNE
LIQUID INTELLIGENCE

- 20.03 at 20:00
Lecture of two texts by authors Dalila Hermans and Melat Nigussie, commissioned by Vlaams-Nederlands Huis deBuren
- Screening projections of *Wan Pipel* (1976) by Dutch-Suriname film director Pim de la Parra
- Look Who's Talking:
Guided tours in the exhibition with special guests

Discover the details
on WIELS.ORG
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design by: oilinwater.be

