

ELLEN

GALLAGHER

DELUXE

Ellen Gallagher (American, born 1965), whose diverse body of work has mined topics from cultural identity and Afro-Futurism to American literature and history, challenged the traditional notion of what a print could be with her tour de force, *DeLuxe* (2004–05). Consisting of sixty prints, shown in a grid five images high and twelve wide, the project combines a veritable riot of mediums that span printmaking's history. Gallagher experimented with everything from the favored Victorian technique of photogravure to recent developments in digital printing and laser-cutting. She also employed unorthodox tools, including tattoo machines and scalpels, and incorporated elements such as cut velvet, gold leaf, slicks of greasy pomade, plastic ice cubes, googly eyeballs, and crystals.

On the heels of her 2002 exhibition *Preserve* at The Drawing Center in New York, David Lasry invited Gallagher to collaborate with his workshop, Two Palms Press. In its first decade, Two Palms had developed a reputation for innovation and experimentation, producing unusually sculptural, multi-dimensional prints on its massive hydraulic press and introducing digital laser-cutters for woodblocks and polymer plates. At the same time, they maintained close ties to printmaking's traditions, through specialists like photogravure master Craig Zammiello, who worked closely with Gallagher to help her achieve her vision. Given its scope and ambition, *DeLuxe* demanded new strategies from artist and print workshop alike, which Two Palms provided through its wholehearted embrace of technologies and approaches both old and new.

The appeal of printmaking to Gallagher is multifold. She has spoken about the unique rhythm of working on *DeLuxe*, describing the call-and-response that is inherently built into the workshop process. Ideas of distribution also underlie her interest: "I get really excited by this idea that printed material can be so widely distributed. The history of the black press is radically connected to ideas of distribution and there is a great American history of manifestos. I was always jealous of writers because their story could be in so many different hands . . . There is a possibility for distribution and freedom."¹

In fact, it was Gallagher's personal collection of vintage lifestyle magazines, particularly photo journals targeted toward African-American audiences like *Our World* and *Ebony*, that became the base layer for *DeLuxe*. Gallagher cut these magazines apart and then collaged them back together, reinventing their pages as her own layouts. These collages were then translated into photogravure, collapsing the three-dimensional maquettes back into two-dimensional surfaces. At this point, Gallagher realized the final images "could not remain flat if I was going to construct them into a larger grid. I was going to need another layer of intervention. I was going to have to elongate that process between the plate and the printed image, elongate my building."² So she built on top of the photogravures, further scratching into plates, painting in her signature eyeballs or adding Plasticine cut-outs that resemble superhero masks, helmets, and wigs. This process of compressing and expanding both form and content is a central leitmotif in the project.

Beyond its technical complexity, *DeLuxe* offers a dense, multivalent constellation of the ideas that permeate Gallagher's work. Functioning as a kind of exploded book, it offers a cast of characters, strands of narratives that are both tangential and intersecting, and a weaving together of historical and contemporary concerns. For the individual plates, Gallagher often focuses on the commerce of the "new Negro" period, using advertisements that offered consumers the chance to project a new or altered identity: a better career through nursing school, a slimmer figure through girdles, an improved complexion through acne products and skin-lightening cream, and, most frequently, a recast appearance through a vast array of wigs. Gallagher modified the advertisements—editing them and changing their scale—before she began, so that even her starting point was alienated from the original. "Just like the disembodied eyes and lips refer to performance, to bodies you cannot see, floating hostage in the electric black of the minstrel stage, the wigs are fugitives, conscripts from another time and place, liberated from the 'race' magazines of the past. I have



The riots in Harlem last August left scenes like this after many violent nights. Police personnel, such as Captain Lloyd Sealy, were found to be heroes in helping maintain law and order in the strife-torn Harlem 28th Precinct.

THE MAN WHO KEPT HARLEM COOL





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HAIR GROWING OUT OF HEAD.
LOOKS LIKE
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BRUSH AND COMB
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FIT

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in ONE
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STYLE You Want

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PERMA-STYLED WASH & WEAR
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Stretch Wig. Perma-styled, per-
ma-styled. Fresh new sexy
look. High quality—low price.
No. TST-69—LOW PRICE \$16.99



PRETTY BABY AFRO—Cool. Capless
Stretch Wig. Latest Afro Rage.
Instant New Love exciting You.
No. PRA-88 \$18.99



FREEDOM PUFFS—Latest Fashion
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or one on top. Just pin on for
love and Beauty. No. 5-Pair \$5.00



Brown Skin Beauty Page Boy. Full cap
Stretch Wig with SKINATU-
RAL Top. Wear with or with-
out part. Washable. Perma-
styled. No. SKPB-109 \$9.99



CAPLESS CURLY Soul Wig. Cool and
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able. Beautiful Sexy You. \$9.99
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☐ Medium Brown ☐ Light Brown ☐ Dark Auburn

☐ Light Auburn ☐ Honey Blend ☐ Golden Blend

☐ Platinum ☐ Light Frosted ☐ Dark Frosted

☐ Mixed Black & Gray ☐ Mixed Brown & Gray

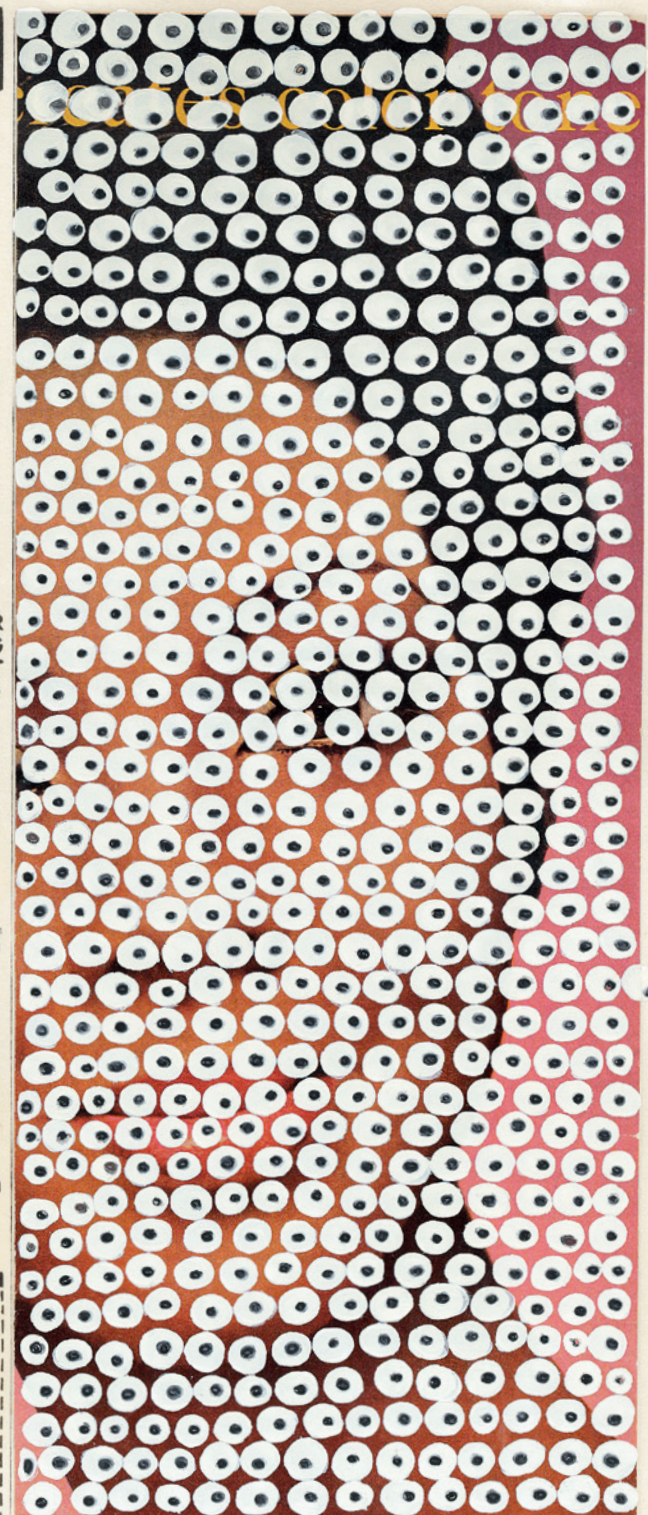
☐ Send C.O.D. I'll pay postman amount plus postage.

☐ I enclose full amount—Company pays postage.

NAME _____ Box _____

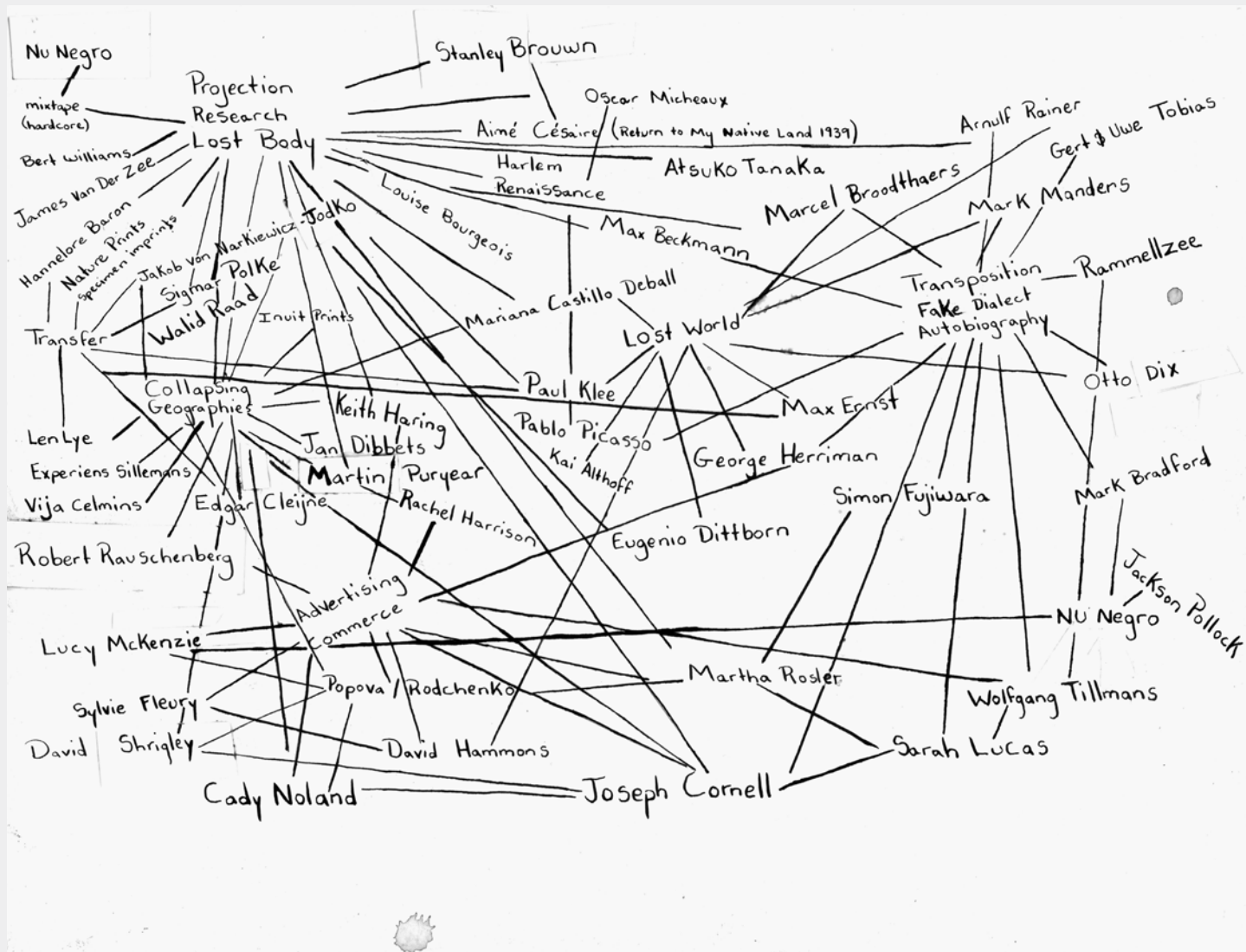
Address _____ RFD _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____



PRINTIN'

An exhibition organized by Ellen Gallagher and Sarah Suzuki





Sarah Lucas (British, born 1962). *Smoking*. 1998. Black-and-white photograph, 6' x 48" (183 x 122 cm). Edition: 6. Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London

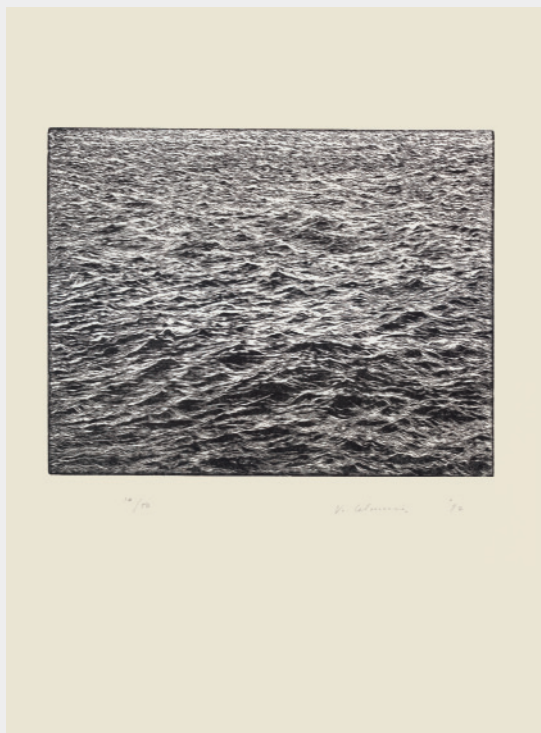


Experiens Sillemans (Dutch, 1613-1653). *Ships with Salt Collectors on the Shore*. c. 1650. Oil on panel, 11 3/8 x 15 3/4" (29 x 40 cm). Het Scheepvaartmuseum, The National Maritime Museum, Amsterdam

James Van Der Zee (American, 1886-1983). *Baptism Celebration to Maria Warma Mercado*. 1927. Gelatin silver print, 7 5/8 x 9 1/2" (19.4 x 24.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of Harriette and Noel Levine

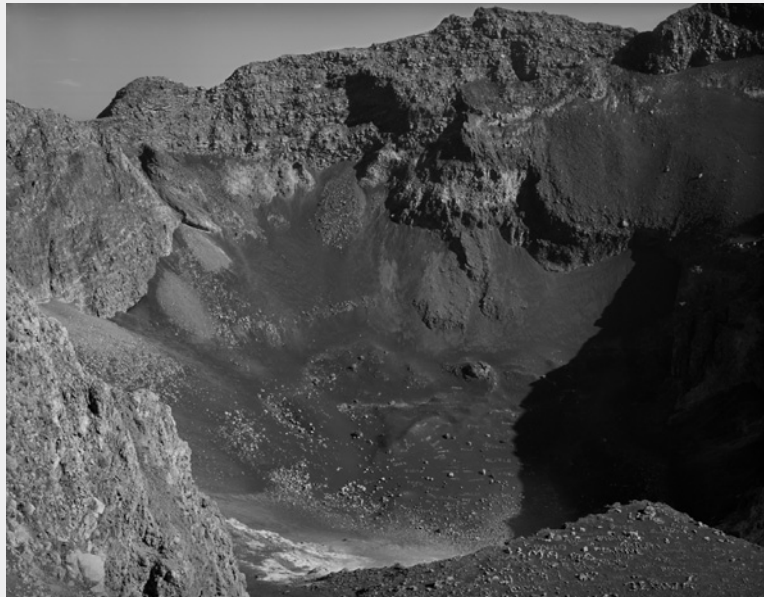


George Herriman (American, 1880-1944). *Krazy Kat and friends discussing Agathelan in Monument Valley*. c. 1925. Ink and watercolor on paper, 9 x 12" (22.9 x 30.5 cm). Collection of Arthur Wood, Jr.



19/92

V. Celmins 1992



David Hammons (American, born 1943). *Untitled (Kool-Aid drawing)*. 2003. Mixed mediums on paper, terry cloth, and silk, 40 1/2 x 25 3/4" (102.9 x 65.4 cm). Collection of Alice Kosmin, New York

Vija Celmins (American, born Latvia 1938). *Ocean Surface Woodcut* 1992. 1992. Woodcut, 19 5/16 x 15 7/16" (49 x 39.2 cm). Publisher and printer: The Grenfell Press, New York. Edition: 50. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Johanna and Leslie J. Garfield Fund

Edgar Cleijne (Dutch, born 1963). *Crater*. 2010. Photogravure, 29 x 36 1/4" (73.7 x 92.1 cm). Publisher and printer: Two Palms Press, New York. Edition: 25. Collection the artist



loopy groggy boozy
tight steamed up bent
folded flooey



stewed
boiled
potted
corned
pickled
preserved
canned
fried to the hat

transformed them, here on the pages that once held them captive.”³

Specific historical figures are also conscripted into Gallagher’s pages, from well-known personalities like vaudeville performer Bert Williams to Lloyd Sealy, the first African-American New York City police precinct commander, portrayed in *The Man Who Kept Harlem Cool*. The inspiration for this work came from a story on the 1964 Harlem riots, accompanied by an image of a burnt-out street corner. Excising that image, leaving only the descriptive caption, Gallagher turned the headline into her title and replaced devastated urban landscape with an aquatint portrait, crowned with a gray Plasticine Afro of swirls and rivulets that offers an “Afro-aerial view” of the city streets, fantastically rendered as fire hydrants and hoses.⁴ Gallagher has described this spatial recontextualization as “collapsing the Nu-Negro geographies of urban centers like Harlem and Detroit into blank relocated space. Not so much a portrait of body but of space negotiated. The way characters move from being inside and outside their bodies.”⁵

This kind of disruption, translation, and recasting of space hovers over the exhibition *Printin’*, organized by Gallagher and this author as a focused section within *Print/Out*. Offering a kind of technical dissection and conceptual unpacking of *DeLuxe*, *Printin’* brings together work by more than fifty artists from multiple disciplines. The works presented, some of which can be seen on the preceding pages, offer a free-flowing yet incisive web of associations that are reflected in *DeLuxe*, touching on themes of portraiture, identity, history, advertising, and commodity, among others. Like Gallagher, many of artists in *Printin’* operate as translators or documentarians of the transposed geographies they create. Experiens Sillemans’s (c. 1611–1653) landscapes and seascapes offer variations on *penschildering* (pen paintings) that, like *DeLuxe*, defy traditional medium-based categorization. Hybrids of print, drawing, and painting, they employ a self-invented process that uses an offset technique to deposit engraved and abraded forms onto a prepared oil ground. In *Ships with*

Salt Collectors on the Shore (c. 1650), Sillemans depicts Dutch traders collecting salt for import from Cape Verde—seen here as a rocky moonscape incongruously dotted with European architecture—offering an invented vision of an African geography, while also charting the beginning of a complex transnational trade network. Likewise, George Herriman conflates geographies in his comic strip *Krazy Kat*. Merging the foreboding and arid landscape of Monument Valley, Utah, with Arizona’s verdant Coconino County, Herriman animates this imagined habitat with a cast of cartoon characters and their jazz age, Creole dialect. Through the work of these and other artists, *Printin’* offers a rich, sliding timeline that collapses past and present, forming a dense weave of formal, technical, and conceptual connections and intersections.

—Sarah Suzuki

Notes

- 1 “‘eXelento’ & ‘DeLuxe,’” interview with Ellen Gallagher, Art21, accessed September 22, 2011, <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/gallagher/clip1.html>.
- 2 Ellen Gallagher, conversation with the author, May 7, 2007.
- 3 Ellen Gallagher, quoted in Suzanne P. Hudson, “Ellen Gallagher Talks about Pomp-Bang, 2003,” *Artforum* 42, no. 8 (April 2004): 131.
- 4 Ellen Gallagher, conversation with the author, October 15, 2011.
- 5 Ibid.