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, \textit{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 \textit{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, multidimensional 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, \textit{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 \textit{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.”

In fact, it was Gallagher’s personal collection of vintage lifestyle magazines, particularly photo journals targeted toward African-American audiences like \textit{Our World} and \textit{Ebony}, that became the base layer for \textit{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.” So she built on top of the photogravures, further scratching into plates, painting in her signature eyeballs or adding Plasticine cutouts 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, \textit{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 Man Who Kept Harlem Cool

The state in Harlem last August left scars like this after many violent nights. Police personnel, such as Captain Lloyd Early, were praised for their efforts in helping maintain law and order in the neighborhood. Harlem 2003 Precinct.

THE MAN
WHO KEPT
HARLEM COOL
DeLuxe. 2004-05
Ellen Gallagher’s chart for Printin’, 2011

An exhibition organized by Ellen Gallagher and Sarah Suzuki


Martha Rosler (American, born 1943). Details from *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*, 1974–75. Series of forty-five gelatin silver prints on twenty-four backing boards, each 10 × 22" (25.4 × 55.9 cm). Collection the artist

loopy goggy boozy
tight steamed up bent
folded floopy

stewed boiled potted
corned pickled preserved
canned fried to the hat
transformed them, here on the pages that once held them captive."

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. 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.”

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
4 Ellen Gallagher, conversation with the author, October 15, 2011.
5 Ibid.