

The New York Times

Art in Review; Ellen Gallagher

By Holland Cotter

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'DeLuxe' Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, at 75th Street, Through May 15

Some people have trouble with Ellen Gallagher's work. Is it the combination of prettiness and politics that make it suspect? I reacted that way to her collage pieces in the early 1990's, with their Agnes Martinish grids peppered with bug-eyed racial caricatures. The idea seemed too neat, too ingratiating. It let art-world racism off the hook by delivering an indictment of it, if that's what it was, as an easy-sell package.

Then the work grew and changed, not the formal mechanics so much as what Ms. Gallagher did with them. Her first show at Gagosian in Chelsea was really fine. Antagonizingly slippery, it was a monumental riff on "Moby Dick," and specifically on the chapter titled "The Whiteness of the Whale," Melville's obsessive, visionary, punched-out, raplike paean to the color that is all colors and no color, the color of sex, sin, light, race, God, blankness, the end. Ms. Gallagher's paintings, with their filigrees of drips and spatters, their sperm-shaped forms, minstrel references and built-up, Braille-esque surfaces got it all. It was great American painting, painting for the blind.

The 60 new prints from the portfolio titled "DeLuxe," produced by Two Palms Press, are even more intensely tactile, which focuses attention right off on their formal complexity, drawing as they do on a dozen different techniques from straightforward etching, to laser-cutting and tattoo-machine engraving. Only a little later do you realize that the themes of race and gender embedded in the earlier work are here pulled right to the surface, as they were in her Gagosian show last fall.

Most of the prints are based on advertisements for hair-styling, skin-lightening and feminine hygiene, all found in 1950's and 60's issues of African-American magazines like *Ebony* and *Sepia*, in the days before Black Power. Like most advertising, they play the personal transformation card, telling you how you can look better, act better, smell better, be better, which really means not be offensive, which, naturally, you are.

In Ms. Gallagher hands, these ideals of beauty turn grotesque, but with a kind of celebratory élan. White face and black face are interchangeable. Eyes are gouged out or pop out. Black hair turns into blond hair that sits on the prints' surfaces like cake icing or chewing gum. Commerce is about consumption? O.K., eat this. It's plastic? Eat it anyway.

Racial politics is "out" at the moment in art, and with the Basquiat show at the Brooklyn Museum the art establishment is suddenly sounding terribly self-congratulatory: you see, we put him there, right at the top. "Subversive" is the acceptable new term for "political," and, of course, it can mean anything or nothing. I thought of Ms. Gallagher's early work as "subversive." What you would call these new prints in the Whitney show -- organized by David Kiehl, a curator at the museum -- I honestly don't know. But with a virtuosic flash they sure are dissing something, and spreading the acid in many directions.