

American artist Ellen Gallagher (b.1965), whose extraordinary artistic achievements span two decades, is one of the foremost painters of her generation. In her expanded painting practice, she weaves together fragments and ephemera to produce exquisite works that question our contemporary identities. From her early paintings on penmanship paper and collages combining archive materials with plasticine, to intricate drawings, sculptures, animation and film installations, she creates fluid, imaginative realms, which continually shift between abstraction and figuration.

Carol Armstrong is Professor, History of Art, at Yale University.
Robin D.G. Kelley is Gary B. Nash Professor of American History at the University of California, Los Angeles.
Richard Shiff is Effie Marie Cain Regents Chair in Art at the University of Texas at Austin.
Ulrich Wilmes is Chief Curator at Haus der Kunst, Munich.

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'BIRD IN HAND': THE ARISING OF FIGURE OUT OF GROUND

Ellen Gallagher's early painting practice is best known for its post-minimalist look and for its use of units of blank penmanship paper glued onto canvas support.¹ Yet it is also truly remarkable for its fertile hybridisation of medium. In among its many permutations a gradual shift can be traced from the all-over structure reminiscent of a grid to the operations of figure against ground, developing figuration out of abstraction. It is as if the very ground of painting gives birth to figure, materialising into figuration. For example, in *Drexcia* (1997; fig.8) – made of oil, ink and gesso directly on canvas, this time with no glued paper intervening between mark and canvas surface – the canvas begins to sprout free-floating areas of line and dot forming themselves into angular creatures, gyrating all elbows and knees amid speckled swarms of red, black and yellow gnats. Upon closer looking, they turn out to be agglomerations of penmanship-paper-like blue lines that have broken ranks from the sheets they normally inhabit. Flights of tiny little black heads with blonde wigs, red lips and protruding tongues continue around the corner and edge of the canvas as if they had lost their way in their refusal to be corralled. Such initial departures from the all-over pattern of earlier works also announce the fact that, though the potentiality for characters and stories to emerge organically out of a material ground and the fecundity of medium and technical experimentation that accompanies it is a defining feature of Gallagher's practice, at the same time that ground is always inseminated with pre-existing cultural matter.

For 'Drexcia' is one such piece of pre-existent cultural matter, referring at once to a 1990s Detroit techno band² and the myth of a black Atlantis, an underwater mutant population descended from the unborn children of slave women thrown overboard for insurrection during the transatlantic, Middle Passage slave trade. Particularly important for Gallagher's work of the following decade, it constitutes an already fleshed-out piece of iconography, intersecting with those from other sources: hair ads in *Ebony* magazine, minstrelsy and Dada, Sun Ra and Ancient Egypt, evolutionary theory and the prehistoric fossil record, *Moby-Dick* and seventeenth-century female Maroons such as the military leader Aqualtune.³ Gallagher has made all this her own mythopoetics, adapted for and by her own distinctive post-minimalist painting.

The full accomplishment of this process of the arising of figure out of ground and with it the emergence of a fully developed mythopoetics is to be seen in a work such as *Bird in Hand* (2006; fig.9, no.31). *Bird in Hand* is intimately tied to the maritime life of the Atlantic Passage story of Drexcia. At the same time, it resonates with the thematics and materiality of the equally pivotal *DeLuxe* (2004–5; no.86), in its focus on the subject of hair combined with its use of cut-and-glued paper and polymer medium.⁴ Starting, as before, with penmanship paper, stuck on every which way to form its foundations, *Bird in Hand* mines Gallagher's beginnings to demonstrate the sheer fecundity of that substrate in its capacities to make mythic figure arise out of material ground; indeed, it abandons itself rather wildly to that process. Punctuated with areas of blue wash that suggest water, the zigzagging of the penmanship paper unmoors the foundation that it creates from the structure of the minimalist grid and makes it wave-like, while suggesting the potentiality for anarchy that is incipient within structuration itself. Meanwhile the actions of cutting and collaging, of digging into and building up, of subtraction and addition, accretion and layering found elsewhere in Gallagher's paintings and drawings, here manifest their ability not only to spell out the medium-hybridity that is fundamental to her work – its simultaneous recourse to the strategies of drawing, writing, painting, collaging, construction and the sculptural processes of carving and moulding, relief and intaglio

printing, as well as xeroxing and other photo-based, planographic means – but also to produce form and figure. One has only to take the repeated straight lines of the penmanship paper and allow them to waver, by dint of further cutting and gluing and colouring, into undulating strips, cells and other units that suggest streaming hair, seaweed, lace, root, coral, swimming protozoa and submarine animalcules, and, hey presto, one has conjured up an underwater pirate with a fantastical afro, a kind of mutant tree of life, that spreads and grows into a whole botany and zoology. What happens here in this painting, which seems to make such a radical jump from the stripped-down minimalism of the earliest examples to an almost baroque excess of figural potentiality, is the best visual instantiation of what happens everywhere else in this body of work as well. A growing set of external references fecundates an already fertile ground that has its own figural possibilities burgeoning latent within it.

If I were so inclined I could emphasise the semiosis of this: after all, the use of penmanship paper had from the beginning elided the ground of painting and drawing with that of writing. And in works such as *Moon- Glo* (2010; no.13), the simultaneity of the sprouting of little faces and the blooming of letters for the vowel sounds 'e' and 'o' out of the paper ground of the image strongly suggests that language and imagery emerge from a common source, and are more or less the same thing, namely, a sign system. But what I want to do instead is to focus on the materiality of the process of the sprouting and blooming of signs, the inversion of the movement away from imagery that characterised an earlier, Euro- and phallo-centric history of abstract painting, and the organic, even biomorphic generativity, rather than reductivism, of a hybridised conception of medium in the hands of an other-than-white, other-than-male contemporary artist. And at the same time, I want to suggest that there is an anti-illustrational politics at play, which inverts as well the 'normal' priority of text over image and distinguishes Gallagher's labour in the fields of political art from other work of its kind and thematics.

EXCURSUS: NATURAL HISTORY AND THE DISORDERING OF BINARIES

Gathered together first in *Ichthyosaurus* (2005) and *Coral Cities* (2007; no.48) are a series of watercolours that together constitute a kind of natural history of the spotted, striped, undulating, multi-form, rainbow-coloured marine life of the coral seas. Corals themselves, seaweeds, spiny sea urchins, octopus, sea anemones, angelfish, tigerfish, frogfish, lionfish, wolf-fish, rabbitfish, hawkfish, butterfly-fish, clownfish, jellyfish, barracuda, moray eels and the chambered nautilus creature are among those variegated species (whose names describe a wild panoply of zoological hybridity) either represented more or less as themselves or figuring in some kind of mutant variation in that natural history. These began life in 2001, in the larger, ongoing series *Watery Ecstatic* (figs.10, 11, nos.40–2, 54–8, 60–72), which in turn grew out of *Blubber* (2000–1), whose theme had partly to do with the whaling trade summoned up so famously by Herman Melville.⁵ Some of the works are white-on-white, as if to conjure up Melville's stunning verbal riff on 'The Whiteness of the Whale' in *Moby-Dick*.⁶ Others, however, represent the vivid polychromy and variegated patterning of this underwater world in a combination of watercolour wash and cut-and-slice texturing of the paper surface. But these watercolours also recall the fact that as a student, Gallagher spent a semester aboard a research sailing vessel collecting, studying and drawing marine specimens under a microscope. As Gallagher herself recounts:

'My project was studying pteropods – wing-footed snails. I chose this subject [because] it appeared to me that they looked just like butterflies – I thought I would be catching beautiful butterflies in the water. It never occurred to me that they were microscopic...'⁷

The natural-history project that unfolds through *Watery Ecstatic*, *Ichthyosaurus* and *Coral Cities* serves a twofold purpose with regard to the binary logics of race and gender. As it relates to Drexciya's underground-techno storytelling and myth-creation, it

destabilises racial black-and-whiteness by means of the colour- and form-spectrum of a species-proliferating world. But we might also add into the mix an earlier, feminist use of the 'data of biology' to subvert and ambiguate the binary of gender. When, in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir began *The Second Sex* with a chapter of this title, she surveyed the sex lives of plants, protozoa, batrachians (frogs and toads), crustaceans, insects, spiders, fish, birds and mammals (such as guinea pigs, kangaroos, horses and monkeys), in order to argue against the arguments from biology that had marked Western philosophy since Plato (which is to say, white, European, patriarchal philosophy) in its thinking about gender. In writing about the 'innovating aspect' of reproduction in nature, de Beauvoir paid particular attention to the sex life of 'various fishes', 'water as an element in which the eggs and sperms can float about ... fecundation in the aquatic environment' being external and the sex roles of mother and father either reversed or indistinguishable. Not unlike Freud himself, that is, who also expressed a particular interest in marine biology and in the sex lives of the animal kingdom, de Beauvoir acted as a kind of biologist, though hers was a feminist biology that emphasised the potential subversiveness of diversity.⁸

Later, in this alternative story of 'Genesis' according to the encyclopaedia of natural history rather than the Judeo-Christian biblical tradition, de Beauvoir concluded 'In nature nothing is ever perfectly clear. The two types, male and female, are not always sharply distinguished; while they sometimes exhibit a dimorphism – in coat colour or in arrangement of spotting or mottling – that seems distinctive, yet it may happen, on the contrary, that they are indistinguishable, and that even their functions are hardly differentiated, as in many fishes.'⁹ In short, de Beauvoir used her natural history to 'imagine a parthenogenetic or hermaphroditic society', to suggest that we should try to understand a range of sexualities and reproductive systems by studying their 'concrete manifestations' in nature rather than 'universalizing specific life processes' according to some 'a priori' principle, and finally to argue that the 'allegory [of biology] should not be pushed too far'.¹⁰

What is fascinating about de Beauvoir's 'data of biology' – and, I would argue, eminently applicable to Gallagher's emphasis upon diversity, both at the level of facture and technique and at that of marine biology – is that it finds in nature, rather than culture, a liberatory potentiality. Furthermore, it identifies a principle of 'creative' generativity, and in the empirical study of the former, rather than the ideological dictates of the latter, an inductive logic of the open series, as opposed to the deductive (and reductive) reasoning from hidden a prioris that have put such destructive pressure on human ideas about sexual and racial difference, in which such difference is reduced to the black-and-white binaries of good and bad, higher and lower, same and other. This feminist interpretation of species variation offers a contrary model to that kind of thinking. Striking as well in this account are the ways of marine animals – 'various fishes' – and the role of water as a (pro)creative medium.¹¹

DRAWINGS: THE TWO-SIDEDNESS OF PAPER

What is the difference between a drawing and a painting? Numerous answers, all of them conventional and institutional – categorical and departmental – suggest themselves. For example: a drawing is made by line, which divides a surface into figure and ground, while a painting is made by the application of substance to a surface, which must create a ground before and while it creates figures; a drawing is preparatory, small, private and 'minor', while a painting is final, large, public and 'major'; a drawing acknowledges its surface while a painting does not (or vice versa); a drawing is conceptual (as in 'dessin', 'disegno' or 'design', all of which are terms for drawing which suggest conceiving, planning, organising and intending – doing something by deliberate design), while a painting is pictorial and perceptual and/or sensually embodied; a drawing can be hybrid, as in a papier collé, while a painting is unitary; and finally a drawing is a 'work on paper',



Fig.8
Drexciya 1997
 Oil, ink and gesso on canvas
 304.8 x 243.6
 Courtesy the artist and
 Gagosian Gallery



Fig.8

Fig.9
Bird in Hand 2006
 Oil, ink, paper, polymer, salt and
 gold leaf on canvas
 238,3 x 307,2 x 4.5
 Tate, Presented anonymously 2007

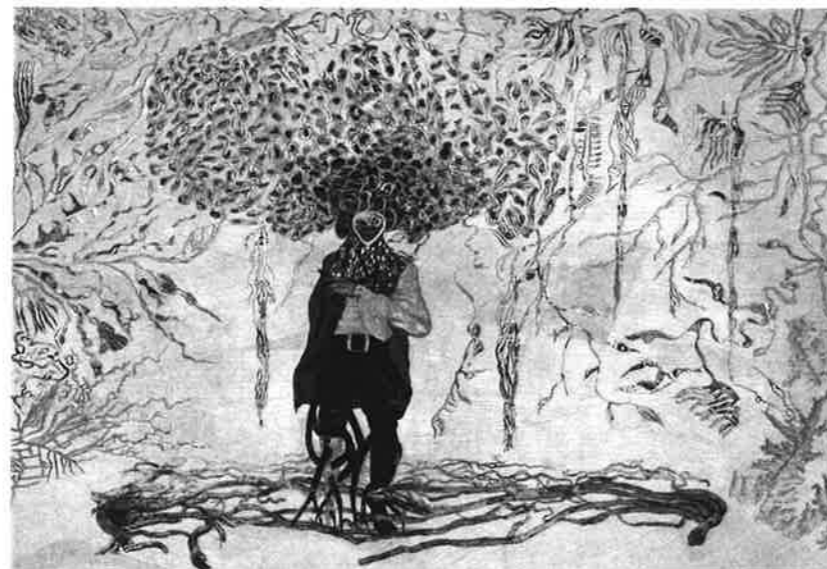


Fig.9

Fig.10
Watery Ecstatic 2001
 Ink, oil, pencil and cut paper on
 paper
 56.5 x 76.2
 The Museum of Modern Art,
 New York. The Judith Rothschild
 Foundation Contemporary Drawings
 Collection Gift



Fig.10

Fig.11
Watery Ecstatic 2004
 Watercolour, ink, oil, plasticine,
 pencil and cut paper on paper
 77.5 x 101.6
 Courtesy Gagosian Gallery

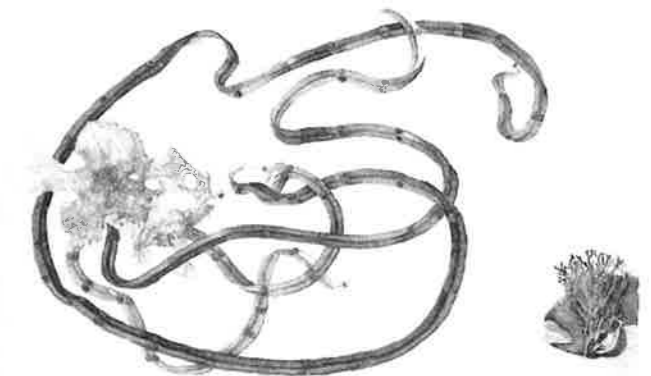


Fig.11

Figs.12, 13
Morphia (recto/verso) 2012
 Ink, watercolour, egg tempera,
 pencil and collage on cut paper
 Frame structure: steel and glass
 Frame: 79.5 x 65.6; table: 206.5 x 90
 Private collection. Courtesy the
 artist and Hauser & Wirth

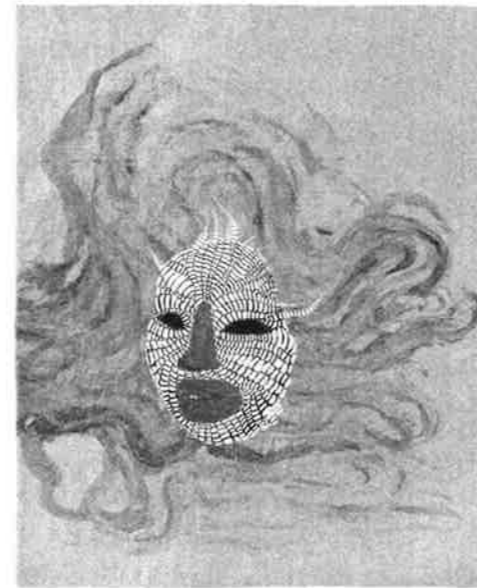


Fig.12



Fig.13



Fig.16



Fig.14

Figs.14, 15
Morphia (recto/verso) 2008-12
 Ink, pencil, watercolour, varnish,
 oil, gesso, gouache, egg tempera,
 polymer medium and cut paper
 on paper. Presented in a steel
 frame on a standing steel table
 209 x 126.5 x 59
 Courtesy the artist and Gagosian
 Gallery

Fig.16
**An Experiment of Unusual
 Opportunity** 2008
 Ink, pencil, oil, varnish and cut paper
 on canvas
 201.9 x 188
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
 New York. Promised gift of
 Larry Gagosian

and assigned to museum departments that are prepared to conserve such works, while a painting is typically a work on canvas, and usually assigned to a museum's primary department, which is prepared to conserve and curate such primary works.¹²

I will take the last of these binary oppositions, which is the most arbitrary and merely conventional of all, as my rationale for dividing up Gallagher's work. That last example – works on paper as opposed to works on canvas – is useful to me because it is the one that most emphasises the material substrate of mark-making and figure-ground relations. I am even tempted to say that it suggests the possibility of a mythopoetic conversion of conventionally reductive, formalist notions of medium – paper versus canvas, drawing versus painting – into biologically generative notions of medium, or 'menstruum', as it used sometimes to be called – water versus dry land, liquid versus solid, a 'mechanics of fluids' versus the phallogocentrism of hard-and-fast borders, boundaries, nations, gestalts, hierarchies, the ownership and domination of one by another.¹³

Let me start with the whiteness of paper, and what Melville called his 'incantation' on the 'whiteness of the whale', his 'white-lead chapter about whiteness'. 'It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me', he wrote, developing a whole bestiary associated with the double meaning – the simultaneous purity and ghastliness – of the colour white, which in addition to the white man and the 'Albino whale', included the white bear, the white shark, the white albatross and the 'White Steed'. He concluded his white chapter with ruminations on the colourlessness of the colour white:

Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color; and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows – a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink? And when we consider that other theory of the natural philosophers, that all other earthly hues – every stately or lovely emblazoning – the sweet tinges of sunset skies and woods; yea, and the gilded velvets of butterflies, and the butterfly cheeks of young girls; all these are but subtle deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without; so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within; and when we proceed further, and consider that the mystical cosmetic which produces every one of her hues, the great principle of light, for ever remains white or colorless in itself, and if operating without medium upon matter, would touch all objects, even tulips and roses, with its own blank tinge – pondering all this, the palsied universe lies before us a leper; and ... so the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him. And of all these things the Albino whale was the symbol.¹⁴

Writing as one who frankly adores the varied spectrum of the 'palsied universe' that 'Nature ... paints like the harlot,' it is with a certain counter-horror that I read Melville's chromophobic paean to whiteness. At the same time, it is useful to read because of its exposing of a bias deep within the Western philosophical and cultural tradition – against colour, and thus against both colour's femininity and people 'of colour'.¹⁵ But most important of all, for my purposes, is the double-sidedness of white: at once all colours and colourless, the utmost of both the absent and the concrete, nothing and the potentiality of everything, white is, in short, something like uninscribed handwriting paper, 'a dumb blankness, full of meaning'.

And it is in precisely this way that Gallagher uses the white of paper, as a blankness always already inscribed with meanings aplenty, perhaps most particularly that of the 'Albino whale'; and as a layered, double-sided material ground that can be handled in an astonishingly multifarious fashion, though it is never simply drawn upon with a pencil. Stained and sullied into not-whiteness, frayed, abraded and sliced, often with a surgeon's

scalpel, the already-textured white of the watercolour paper that Gallagher prefers is made to matter, both as a fully material ground, and as 'the visible absence ... and at the same time the concrete of all colors'. But more than that, when it is cut into, sometimes sliced through to the other side, sometimes cut less deeply, one sees that it has more than one side to it, indeed that it is made of several pulpy layers, strata that can be uncovered, as if archaeologically, by the blade. The ramifications of this are manifold, as Gallagher herself must have discovered, in both drawing and texturing with the knife.

In the drawings that constitute Watery Ecstatic, for example, the sculpting of the paper surface – producing the scales of a fish, the strands of hair that undulate and coil outwards from the tiny heads that float everywhere, as well as the waves of the watery world that these beings inhabit – transforms the optical figures that these biomorphic forms make into tactile surfaces that can actually be felt, and which stand in for the real biological surfaces that they render, while equating watery with paper medium, fictional biosphere with the generativity of material facture. In addition, the manifest two-sidedness of the paper is shown to possess the same potentiality for the doubling and splitting of meaning that are yielded up by Melville's white words: blank and replete, clean and dirty, good and bad, Utopia and dystopia, creation and destruction, assimilation and expulsion (as in the white monster-fish, as toothy as the white paper of which he is made, who simultaneously devours and defecates the little black heads that have accreted to the paper surface). In very fundamental ways these moves alter the definition of a medium such as drawing, moving away from the radical reductionism of modernism's history towards a celebration of proliferation, away from an opposition between the literal, the illusionistic and the representational, towards their joining and eliding, and away from a rigid conception of the singleness of a medium towards a multiplicity inhering in materials and their potentialities.

From Watery Ecstatic to Morphia (figs.12–15, nos.75–85), Gallagher has moved towards an even fuller embracing of the two-sidedness of paper as a material/medium. All of the operations that produce her drawings are also to be found in her later paintings, as in the dark An Experiment of Unusual Opportunity (2008; fig.16, no.51) and the white Greasy (2011; no.38). Even more than the techno-galactic Neptune of Greasy, the deep-sea creature of An Experiment of Unusual Opportunity is made by a dizzying array of material actions: paper that is first stained with ink, then cut into strips, either straight-ruled after the fashion of the handwriting paper with which Gallagher began her practice, or undulating and coiling into the central figure of the piece, that are glued down in intricate patterns of inlay, then sliced again in various depths to reveal the layers of colour, largely blue-black and pink-to-red, beneath them, and then covered in oil and varnish.¹⁶ The result of all this labour-intensive work is an image that has to be seen 'in the flesh' to be made out at all, and that begs to be touched to be believed, in which figure and ground cannot be separated from one another – one is in the other – as if one were peering through the medium of the dark water of the deepest depths of the ocean, in search of the barest outlines of the bio-luminescent creature that one senses lurking there. Again, while ground constantly mutates into figure and vice versa, facture creates its own biosphere, in an incessant mimicry of the bio-logics of the underwater world that it represents: in which diversity and plurality, generativity and variation, rather than unchanging conformity and reduction to a single standard, rule the day.

But if painting creates its own bio-medium in works such as An Experiment of Unusual Opportunity, the Morphia drawings do even more than that. From one side to the other, recto to verso, each figure quite literally morphs into another, by dint of first building up layers of paper, and then, not only cutting through those layers as before, but also allowing ink and other materials to seep and stain through to the verso side, and jazz-like, suggest a further riff on whatever shape was created on the recto side. It is a process that continues to the point that there is then no first or second side, but simply the constantly

flipping and reversing double-sidedness of both the paper and the figures that are created in it. Much like the Mobius-strip twisting and turning of green-watercolour seaweed in some of the Watery Ecstatic drawings, so looping strands of hair on one side turn and twist into inky waves of water on the other side, or lacy cutwork patterns, or the organic involutions of brain or entrails; or alternatively a head of hair involutes into a jellyfish trailing its stingers behind it, or braids of Celtic knots; or an invertebrate insectoid spirals into some kind of helmet or skeletal system; or a ram-like beast evolves into an upright fish-like form; and through it all, over and over, black turns into white and back again, male into female, head into body, human into animal, figure into ground or environment or medium, and the scissor cut into the polymer projection, a subtraction into an addition and vice versa. Thus one is led by the hand to the realisation that this is material thought that represents the ruination of all prejudicial binaries by their infinitely varied conversion into a language of open-ended propagation. In short, Gallagher uses the two-sidedness of paper to transform whiteness into the birthing of a whole counter-cultural world, and with it a mythopoetics of endless mutation.

NOTES

1 For discussions of Gallagher's early work, see Claire Doherty, 'Infection in the Sentence', in Claire Doherty (ed.), *Ellen Gallagher*, exh. cat., Ikon Gallery, Birmingham 1998; Greg Tate, 'Rewind', and Robert Storr, 'A funny thing happened...', in Jessica Morgan (ed.), *Ellen Gallagher*, exh. cat., Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston 2001; the essay by Thyrsa Nichols Goodeve in *Ellen Gallagher*, exh. cat., Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London 2001; and Jeff Fleming (ed.), *Ellen Gallagher: Preserve*, exh. cat., Des Moines Art Center 2001. As for myself, I first wrote, very briefly, about some pieces of Gallagher's *Watery Ecstatic* (which I first saw in an exhibition at the Gagolian Gallery, New York, in autumn 2004): Carol Armstrong, 'Women on Paper', in Cornelia Butler, Alexandra Schwartz and Griselda Pollock (eds.), *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*, New York 2010, pp.104–23.

2 Drexciya was the name of the Detroit underground techno band, consisting mainly of the duo James Stinson and Gerald Donald, which was active primarily between 1992 and 2002, with a resurgence of compilations in 2011. Its discography is as follows: *Deep Sea Dweller* (1992), Shockwave Records; *Drexciya 2: Bubble Metropolis* (1993), Underground Resistance; *Aquatic Invasion* (1994); *Drexciya 3: Molecular Enhancement* (1994), Rephlex Submerge; *Drexciya 4: The Unknown Aquazone* (1994), Submerge; *The Journey Home* (1995), Warp Records; *The Return Of Drexciya* (1996), Underground Resistance; and compilations *The Quest* (1997), *Submerge* and *Journey of the Deep Sea Dweller I-III* (2011–12), Clone. See www.discogs.com/artist/Drexciya. Gallagher's *Watery Ecstatic* series predicts the iconography of the 'Drexciya' cult: in particular two fan videos from 2011, each deploying footage from the BBC 'Blue Planet' television series of 2001, when *Watery Ecstatic* itself began, accompanying Drexciya's 'Hydro Theory' and 'Return to Bubble'.

3 On the subject of female 'marronage' (from Aimé Césaire's neologism, 'marronner', meaning, in the Caribbean/Creole context, 'an inventive, subversive, and liberating' literary rebellion), see Kathleen M. Balutansky, 'Of Female Maroons and Literary Rebellions: Plotting the End of Caribbean Master-Narratives', *Journal of West Indian Literature*, vol.7, no.2, April 1998, pp.12–24; as well as Kathleen M. Balutansky and Marie-Agnès Sourieau, *Caribbean Creolization: Reflections on the Cultural Dynamics of Language, Literature, and Identity*, Gainesville, FL 1998; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London 1993; John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the*

Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800, Cambridge 1992; and John Thornton, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa, 1500–1800*, London 1999.

4 In fact, these themes and material practices go back to *Preserve*, and what Gallagher calls her 'yellow paintings' (2001–4), all of which feature plasticine, which first appeared in an *Untitled* painting of 1998.

5 See Lisa Kim (ed.), *Ellen Gallagher: Blubber*, exh. cat., Gagolian Gallery, New York 2001; and *Ellen Gallagher: Coral Cities*, exh. cat., Tate Liverpool 2007, which, after the *Ichthyosaurus* exhibition at the Freud Museum in London in 2005, represented the most comprehensive installation of the *Watery Ecstatic* drawings to date.

6 Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or The Whale* (1851), New York 1961, chapter 42, 'The Whiteness of the Whale', pp.189–97.

7 See Ellen Gallagher, 'Interview' (by Jessica Morgan), in Morgan 2001, p.17.

8 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949), trans. H.M. Parshley, New York 1989, pp.19–20 (in part I, chapter I, 'The Data of Biology').

9 *Ibid.*, p.24 (my italics).

10 *Ibid.*, pp.7, 9, 12. See the Freud Museum's account of Freud's interest in marine biology: www.freud.org.uk/exhibitions/10539/ichthyosaurus/.

11 According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a 'medium' is 'Any intervening substance through which a force acts on objects at a distance or through which impressions are conveyed to the senses: applied [to] any substance considered with regard to its properties as a vehicle of light or sound ... Pervading or enveloping substance; the substance or 'element' in which an organism lives ... An intermediate agency, means or channel ...

Painting. Any liquid vehicle with which pigments (as oil, water, albumen, etc.) are mixed ... Also, any of the varieties of painting as determined by the nature of the vehicle employed, as oil-painting, watercolour, tempera, fresco, etc. ...

Medium, the menstruum, or liquid vehicle, with which the dry pigments are ground and made ready for the artist's use... These are definitions, new and old, that suggest a broader notion of medium than that assumed in the old modernist conceptions of medium-specificity, *pace* Clement Greenberg in 'Towards a Newer Laocöon', *Partisan Review*, vol.7, July–August 1940, pp.296–310.

12 For a much opened-up definition of the 'medium' of drawing, see Cornelia H. Butler and Catherine de Zegher, *On Line: Drawing through the Twentieth Century*, exh. cat., The Museum of Modern Art, New York 2010.

13 Many of my ideas about the 'feminine' splitting and doubling of form and materiality ultimately derive from Luce Irigaray, *Ce sexe qui n'est pas un*, Paris 1977, published in

English as *This Sex which is not One*, trans. Catherine Porter, Ithaca, NY 1985.

14 Melville 1961, pp.196–7.

15 More than a matter of mere aesthetics, this bias lies deep in the Western philosophical tradition, which argues that colour is inessential and therefore secondary and inferior – at once decorative and artificial, superficial and supplemental, and feminine. On the question of this 'chromophobic' tradition, see David Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, London 2000.

16 The title of this painting refers to the infamous syphilis experiment that the US Public Health Service conducted on black men in rural Alabama between 1932 and 1972.