Sheila Gallagher
Ravishing Far/Near

Essay by
Richard Kearney
RAVISHING FAR/NEAR
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*Ravishing Far/Near* is about what is furthest away being closest at hand. The play of transcendence in immanence. The extraordinary in the ordinary. The infinite in the infinitesimal.

For fifteen years Sheila Gallagher has been making art, which is a form of theological inquiry. Her work moves boldly between matter and metaphor. Plastic gardens and talking plants, smoke animals and edible hosts, glorified detritus and impossible perspectives, seduce through their materiality and solicit our senses in the metamorphosis of meaning. In her new show, we see Gallagher wittily reshaping the sacred images that shaped her.

Gallagher’s works call for relational sensibility. Her art stages interactions between people and things that go beyond discreet objects. In Gallagher’s ingenious phantasmagoria, things become infra-things and we, viewers, become infra-bodies playing between the various works. Our normal sense of space is radically challenged and converted so that we experience far as near and near as far. We are invited to see and sense otherwise.

‘Ravishing Far/Near’ is how certain women mystics of the middle ages described ultimate love. They sought to touch the untouchable, to embrace something further than the sky yet closer than the eye. Gallagher impishly adapts the term of Marguerite Porete, a mystic poet of the thirteenth century, condemned for imagining that the soul becomes one with God in sacred eros. That which is higher than our highest being becomes more intimate than our most intimate being. And this collision of far and near is one of ‘ravishing’ combustion. Porete described this experience of divine rapture as an explosion of fire – ‘an opening swift as a lightning flash’. Her only crime was to have written a love poem about a woman and God. She played with fire and was burned by the Inquisition in Paris in 1310.

Gallagher, too, is a creature touched by fire. To walk through her most recent exhibition is to pass through an incendiary rite. Each burnt offering replaces its predecessor as we move from flaming gold halos and ladders made from cigarette butts to smoke paintings of animals, videos of erotic oblation and a series of melted plastic gardens where human, vegetal and divine creatures consume each other in love play.

The passage through flames is itself a journey. Neither pilgrim nor voyeur, the visitor is invited to wander through a series of quasi-sacred traces. I say *quasi* (as if) because we are not stepping here through an actual temple, synagogue, chapel or mosque. We are walking through a space and time of art: a playroom of as-if where different icons of three major wisdom traditions – Judeo-Christian, Hindu and Muslim – collide and ignite in alarming and daring ways. This is an odyssey of imagination and empathy. Drawing upon treasures of different religious traditions, Gallagher re-sacramentalizes the world through the transformation of quotidian objects. After secular disenchantment there are hints of re-enchantment. ‘After Church’ —to cite the title of an earlier work — there are epiphanies of the profane. After theist and atheist dogmas, there are ana-theist imaginings of divine desire (*Ana* = back, again, anew). Gallagher’s aesthetic of reinvention is deeply interreligious, particularly in its refashioning of icons of sacred eros in such disparate texts as *The Song of Songs*, the Gita Govinda and Hafiz’s Sufi love poetry.
In Gallagher’s work we are not just seeing visible objects in a ‘show’, we are engaged in an interplay of reverie and revelry, of reflection and ravishing which breaches our normal codes of perception. Or to put it Aristotle’s words, in the De Anima: we are invited to experience the medium (metaxu) of seeing which itself is never seen as an object. We are challenged to see ‘through’ everyday things by sensing the sublime at the pit of the mundane.

Looking at the works themselves, we immediately sense a delight in the manipulation of materials and metaphors. We witness everywhere the mixing of sacred and profane. In Pneuma Hostis, a flaming halo is composed of gold-leafed cigarette butts. The gold is iconic even as the butts are toxic. The highest rubs shoulders with the lowest the celestial with the terrestrial. The titular Pneuma—air, breath, spirit—engages the sub-titular ‘Hostis’ with its etymological ambiguity of host and guest, friend and enemy. We see entre-les-deux. Holy butts brazenly splayed in the form of a commercial Lasco window fan. The breath that lives and the breath that dies. Inhalation and exhalation of Eros-Thanatos. Adoration-addiction. We move along the hyphen. We play in between.

In Jacob’s Ladder Gallagher pursues her tinkering with used cigarettes to create a golden ladder of 108 rungs.1 Lines criss-cross, ascending and descending. Jacob’s vision of angels climbing the rungs between heaven and earth is dreamed by a wanderer lying on the ground–head firmly planted on a rock. Sky and earth commingle in a slippery game of chutes and ladders.

1 108 is a highly significant number in Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. In Islam the number 108 is used to refer to God. In Hinduism it is said that there are 108 different lies that people tell, 108 desires, 108 Indian goddess names, and 108 gopis or cowherd girlfriends of Krishna. Buddhists refer to the 108 defilements to avoid and virtues to cultivate. There are also 108 mantra counting beads on a mala.
Plastic Glenstal re-imagines The Song of Songs in an Irish monastic garden. It is composed of everyday detritus—bottle caps, detergent bottles, hypodermic needles, credit cards—all torched, melted and recombined to embody a sacred herbarium. In 2012, Gallagher was a guest of Glenstal Abbey, a Benedictine monastery in Ireland where monks for decades have been cultivating the plant material mentioned in the Bible within an ancient enclosed garden. In The Song of Songs—a book praised by the great Jewish Talmudist, Rashi, as the holiest text in the Bible, though repeatedly censored by purist clerics—the female lover self-identifies as a walled garden, a *hortus inclusus* where amorous love is celebrated and protected. In a bold act of sacred-profane alchemy, Gallagher reconfigures the garden adding a number of erotic feminine flowers—lilies, roses of Sharon—mentioned in the biblical canticle. The piece blazes with holy eros as nature ignites into multi-colored flora made from bits and pieces of throw-away junk. Here Gallagher expands her exploration of the garden as site of theo-erotic encounter, (see also *Lila Hadeeka, Paradisus*).

In *Out of the Marvelous*, inspired by a Seamus Heaney poem, Gallagher presents a laser-etched communion wafer with the imago of a motor boat attached to stalks of fake cherry blossoms descending to a large anchor. Standing at the foot of the painted rock—recalling Jacob’s dream pillar—we are reminded that the marvelous is in the grappling between the air above and the ocean floor, where our beings are ultimately anchored. The stone and cheap plastic cherry blossoms are tangible matter while the edible host embodies verticality in depth, once again echoing the up-down movement of Jacob’s ladder, suspended between the trashy and the divine.

Sheila Gallagher

*Plastic Glenstal (Detail)*

2012-2013

Melted plastic mounted on armature

48 × 81 inches

Full image, pages 10-11

Gallagher’s work inscribes itself into an important feminist-mystical-aesthetic movement which includes the pioneering work of Julia Kristeva on St Teresa of Avila and the Song of Songs, Anne Carson on Margarete Porete and Sapho, Fanny Howe on St Claire, Jennifer Frazier on Radha, Virginia Burrus and Shelly Rambo on Macrina (sister of Gregory of Nyssa) and others. Irigaray typifies this position in the following statement: ‘Who is the other if the divine is excluded from the carnal act?... Is not mysticism not linked to the flesh in its sexual dimension? But outside of mysticism, who is God? What is God? What is the point of flesh without mysticism?... What happens to seeing, to flesh... if God does not continue to dwell in the flesh of the other in order to illuminate it, to offer up to the look the other’s flesh as divine, as the locus of a divine to be shared? For this exchange, do not figurative writing and art represent necessary articulations?... The Song of Songs bears the trace of the woman as lover, for it says, and repeats: “do not awaken my love until she please”. She, the lover, remains a subject in the act of love’ (‘On the Divinity of Love: Questions to Emmanuel Levinas’ in *Re-Reading Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, Indiana UP, Bloomington, Indianapolis, 1991, p 116-117.)
Brigid brings us, with deepening humor, to Saint Brigid. This video, projected in a public toilet with a pile of cow paddies surrounded by flowers, combines three faces of the ancient Irish saint: Brigid, the healer (herbalist and patron of wells), Brigid, the artist (poet and fire forger), and Brigid, the singer (who sang the first keen, the mournful song of lament). The video re-inscribes three faces of contemporary Irish women—a healer, a poet and a singer—in a triptych of sacred-profane comedy set to the words of the poet Fanny Howe. One moment Brigid eats flowers, the next she plucks a trout from a lake, the next her hair is circled in flames. The repeated water imagery in a water closet speaks to the fact that Brigid was celebrated in a plethora of holy wells once flourishing throughout Ireland though now virtually abandoned. Brigid was de-canonized in the 1960s by the Church for ‘lack of evidence of her sanctity’ (namely, fear of her feminine power). In her role of alchemical trickster, Gallagher brings Brigid back to life in a spry interplay of words, sounds and images. Brigid mischievously reminds us that Brigid was not only a Christian saint but also a Celtic goddess said to return to the earth again and again.

The same spirit of comic traversal, of witty slippage between the human and divine, the historical and fantastical, informs several other works in the exhibition. Plastic Lila performs the sacred love play (*Lila*) between Krishna and Radha, Hinduism’s amorous deities. But the first thing we notice about the divine lovers is that they are not there. There are lotuses, a magic flute, eyes, a mandorla – but
no paramours. Only carnal traces smoldering in their wake. What we have is not Krishna but the desire for Krishna, the desire of Krishna, the desire between Krishna and his equally absent consort, Radha. The lovers are not nouns but prepositional relations. And the play of presence in absence mimes the viewer’s experience of being invited to reimagine what is far in what is near.

In Gallagher’s work the boundaries between art, philosophy and religion become intriguingly porous. In Hindu culture, even today, common objects, places and people can be seen as embodying divinity. Material images do not simply designate meaning; they participate in it; they are it. Art is less about imitation than initiation, involving a lived hermeneutic practiced by body as much as mind. Gallagher’s ‘aesthetics of presence’—witnessed throughout the show—deploys this incarnational reading of the mystical in ingeniously concrete ways. Nothing material—no matter how damaged or discarded—is alien to the artist’s sacramental imagination.

In works like Plastic Lila and Rasa, Gallagher draws liberally from the Hindu practice of darshan—where divine and human seeing are interchangeable. The eyes which stare back at us in Plastic Lila and 108 Attempts at Smoke Eyes featuring Krishna’s gopis (cow-herd girlfriends) powerfully enact this play of giving and receiving. And this kind of visual theology chimes nicely with Gallagher’s frequent invocation of Eucharistic and iconic practices from her own Catholic background. The Word is present in the most basic of things—tiny cut up pieces of yogurt containers, Mardi Gras dreck,

3 The mandorla plays a critical role here as symbol of the liminal space in which Gallagher invites us to ‘remain’. A mandorla is technically the shape that is formed when two circles come together, overlapping to create an almond shape in the middle. It is evident, for instance, in the area which radiates around the famous Virgin of Guadalupe. Mandorla means almond, and we find this shape both in the center of Plastic Lila as well as in the circle of almonds and stones adjacent to Rasa. The mandorla signals the interdependency of opposing forces and worlds, and describes the chiasmic crossing of the human and the divine. The space opened up in the ‘middle’ mirrors the space where one arrives from one room before entering another. As with Brigid’s threshold, it is a space of transition and transformation, suspending certainty and presumption in favor of imagination. Drawing from both Eastern and Western traditions, Gallagher cites the Mandorla as a mystical tension of complementary opposites - subject and object, light and darkness.

burnt hotel cards—drawing the metaphysically far and unfathomable into the ordinary world of thisness.\(^5\)

Gallagher’s art is inter-relational and inter-sensorial. Visual and material cross-referencing is evident throughout the exhibition. Witness the interaction of flower motifs (some fake, some real, some edible, some exploding); the multi-coding of hosts and orbs as Eucharist, halo or fan; the semantic saturation of stones as monastic anchors (Out of the Marvelous), Hebrew pillars (Jacob’s Ladder) or Vaishnavite shilas (Rasa); the elephant, which appears in both smoke image and video, evoking both Ganesha, the Hindu deity who removes all obstacles, and Hafiz’s Sufi vision of God as a “divine rogue elephant with swollen balls”; the smoky bovine points to both Brigid’s sustaining cow with red ears and Hinduism’s Kamadhenu (from kama desire, wish + dhenu milk cow), the animal that grants all wishes. This is neither facile syncretism nor dialectical synthesis but a carnal hermeneutic of sacred synesthesia.

Gallagher’s interreligious aesthetics are embodied in a multi-sensing of divine desire in three meanings of sense: 1) as sensation; 2) as meaning; and 3) as orientation in space, as in the French sens. The visitor to Gallagher’s exhibition is invited to navigate the five bodily senses as sacramentally coded by the different wisdom traditions. Words traverse flesh, concepts traverse sensibility, hinting at Simone Weil’s dream of an ‘eternal beatitude where to look is to eat’. Recall the flower-devouring scene in Brigid.

This strategy of carnal instantiation is continued in Gallagher’s video Tired of Speaking Sweetly, inspired by a Persian poem by Hafiz of Shiraz, a 14\(^\text{th}\) century Sufi mystic, and again in her smoke drawings where fire returns as an idiom of ritual purgation and devotion. In the case of the smoke eyes, Gallagher’s own practice of making the 108 eyes in an almost ritualistic action, repeated privately and obsessively, is potentially rehearsed by each viewer-participant. Our eyes looking at eyes becomes an intersubjective rite of repetition. Indeed it is telling that traditionally, the eyes of the deities were left until last so they could be painted in at a special celebration called ‘opening the eyes’. In Gallagher’s drawings, smoke gets in your eyes so that you can see again.

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\(^5\) Gallagher’s optical epiphanies of everyday things approximates in visual form to Gerard Manly Hopkins’s poetics of ‘inscape’, inspired by Dun Scotus’ medieval philosophy of haecceitas (singular thisness), in contrast to the mainstream scholastic doctrine of universal essences. One finds echoes here also of her friend, James Wood’s, celebration of ‘thisness’ and ‘liteness’ in How Fiction Works and other writings.
"In Hafiz’s universe, God plays variously the role of guest and host, and invites us to do likewise. And if God has invited many different people to celebrate in his house, ‘we must respect them no matter how strange their games’. We may not even know from time to time who is the divine lover and who the human? Who the friend and who the trickster? There is always a risk in the game of love; and the divine lover needs us, it seems, as much as we need him/her. Hafiz’s God is a ‘voyaging friend’ who comes and goes, calling and courting his creatures: ‘God has made love with you and the whole universe is germinating inside your belly’. God consummates his desire in the love between humans, as they mutually and endlessly exchange the roles of guest and stranger, giver and receiver, lover and beloved. In Hafiz’s world of mystical poetics the sacred and profane go hand in glove."

Richard Kearney, Anatheism: Returning to God After God, pg. 36.
We find a similar dialectic of vision and blindness in the video *Rasa*. (*Rasa* is Sanskrit for “essence”, “juice” or “spiritual rapture”; but it also refers, in Hindu aesthetics, to the emotional response of a viewer evoked by a work of art). There are no figures present in the video’s carefully constructed interior, which we witness while sitting on cushions and surrounded by sugar flowers and a smoking hookah. Material objects are laid before us, tangibly in the viewing space of the gallery, as well as virtually in the viewed space of the video. But here, as in *Plastic Lila, Plastic Paradisus* and *Plastic Glenstal*, there are no lovers. There is no sign of the amorous couple — Krishna and Radha—in their temple love bower. So we have a love scene without lovers. Or more accurately we have the love of the lovers witnessed by the viewer as participant or voyeur: the choice is ours.
But what do we see? We see a model of a 19th century miniature Kangra painting, “Revelry by Night”, which originally portrayed secular lovers reenacting the passion of Krishna and Radha. The space occupied by the couple in the original painting is recognizable as a domestic interior. The video opens with a billowing canopy from the Radha Ramana Temple in Vrindvan (visited by Gallagher in January 2013). However, in the video the three-dimensional environment has clearly been subordinated to the aesthetic priorities of a two-dimensional composition. The space is not bound by the rules of Euclidean space as we know it, where the vanishing points of parallel lines converge and the mechanics of representation are mathematically derived. Gallagher’s physical transformation of the painting to the sculptural model is more properly described as an act of incarnation, where the ideal, with all of its paradoxes, incongruities and logic-defying wonder, is made “flesh.” In order to recreate the two-dimensional image in a physical model as viewed through a camera lens, Gallagher angled walls, tilted floors and created anamorphic paintings. Background objects occupy the foreground. The conceit of this geometrically tortured stage set is slowly revealed as the set is engulfed in flames to soundtrack samples of sex scenes from Western films. Krishna and Radha’s theo-erotic play—evoked but not seen—echoes the sensual breathing of lovers in contemporary movies like Mulholland Drive, Lust Caution, Betty Blue, Heartbeats and Basic Instinct. And as Indian temple music melts into Jim Morrison’s Come on Baby Light my Fire, the film set bursts into flames before our eyes...until a black hand crosses the lens, blocking our vision and bringing the passion to an end. The pornographic is deprived of its graphic allure — exposed as lure. The theatre of desire is denied its theatricality of showing and seeing (theatros = spectator in Greek). The barring hand maintains desire by refusing consumption. Deferred desire is divine desire. Or as Lacan put it, ‘il ne faut pas céder sur son désir’. Krishna and Radha are eternal lovers because they refuse to be fixed or possessed. This is art as divine foreplay.

Sheila Gallagher
Rasa
2013
Single channel video
5 minutes, 3 seconds
Ravishing Far/Near is a show which invites us, again and again, to join a game in which love, lover and beloved court but never consummate. In work after work we find ourselves transformed from passive voyeurs into co-creators of an ‘affect’ (rasa) which plays between absence and presence, imaginary and real, deity and devotee, far and near. And so doing we experience the keen separation, which precedes, accompanies and follows every bliss of encounter. Hence Gallagher’s repeated insistence on distance, deferral, frustrated fulfillment. No matter how ‘exciting’ the flames, the scents, the scenes, the sex cries—the black hand says no. We find ourselves back in a burned-out bomb shelter, as in the scene from After the Affair whose erotic sound affects echo in Rasa. Or back in gardens where the lovers are gone, and only plastic flowers remain. No more than hints and guesses. No matter how near the incarnational deities come they are still far off. Traces, ashes, ciphers, allusions.

Ravishing Far/Near hovers in the ante-chamber of as-if. Inviting us to suspend both belief and disbelief, the work opens a topos where we can enjoy a moment of what John Keats’ called ‘negative capability’: namely, the aesthetic capacity to dwell in the midst of ‘mystery, uncertainty and doubt, without the irritable reaching after fact and reason’. That’s as far as Gallagher’s sacramental poetics can go. For it is an affair of art, not a profession of creed. No matter how much imagination and religion may flirt, seduce, dance and converse, they are not the same. Ultimately, Gallagher’s work is not about fusion but play. It is a liaison dangereuse. Passion without consummation. Desire without end.
Further Reading

Luce Irigaray, ‘The Fecundity of the Caress – Phenomenology of Eros’ in An Ethics of Sexual Difference, Cornell University Press, 1003
Traversing the Heart: Journeys in Interreligious Imagination, ed Richard Kearney and Eileen Rizo-Patron, Brill, Leiden, 2010
Richard Kearney, Anatheism: Returning to God After God, Columbia UP, New York, 2010
Noirin ni Riain, Thesony: Towards a Theology of Listening, Columbia Press, Dublin, 2011
Jean-Luc Nancy, Noli me Tangere, Fordham University press, New York
Mark-Patrick Hederman, Anchoring the Altar, Veritas, Dublin, 2002

Sheila Gallagher
Plastic Hadeeka
2012
Melted plastic mounted on armature
70 × 60 inches
Sheila Gallagher  
*Daily Calendar Mandala*  

2009  
Digital mandala on water resistant satin cloth  
74 inch diameter