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Glenn Ligon

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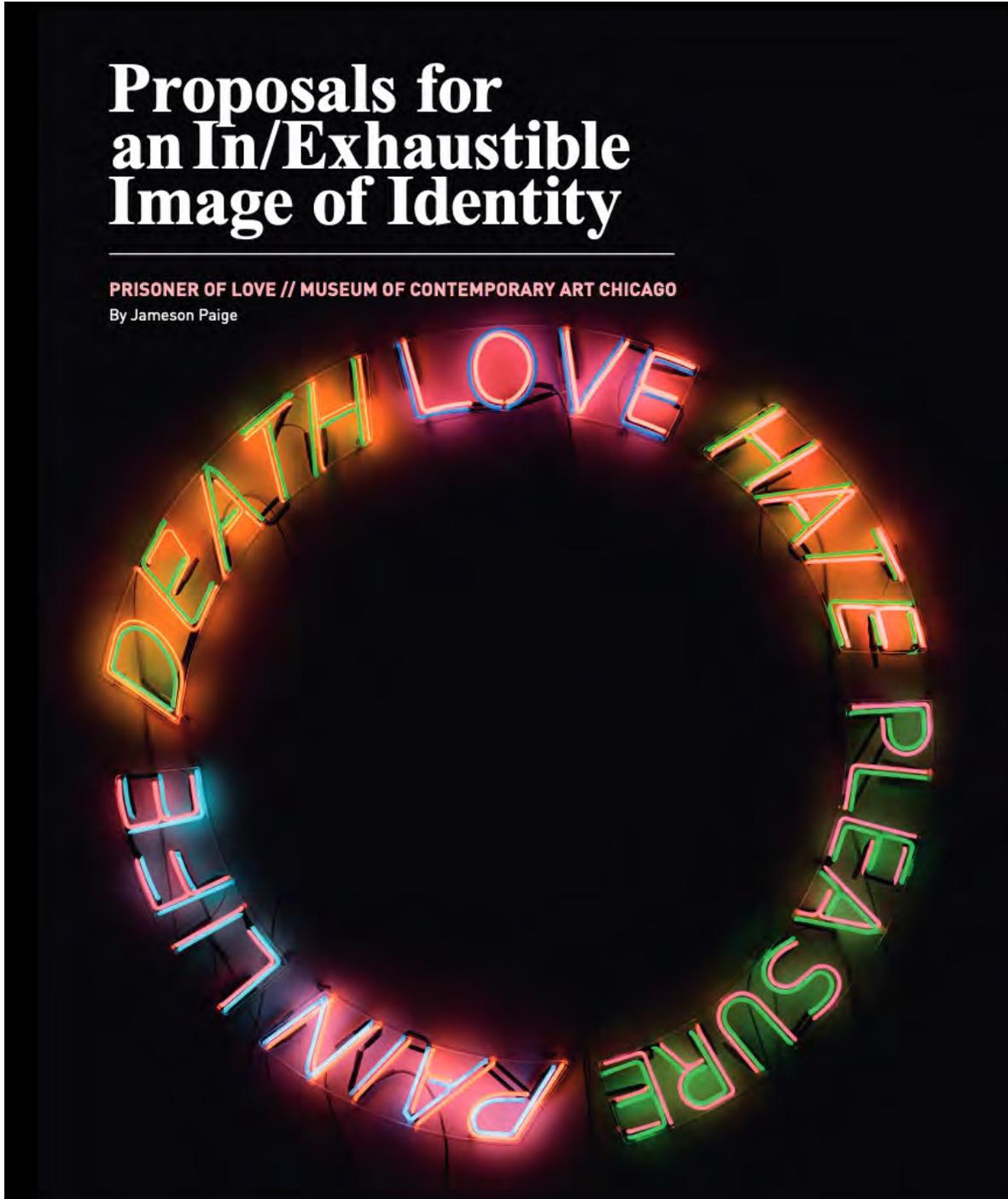
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Proposals for an In/Exhaustible Image of Identity

PRISONER OF LOVE // MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART CHICAGO

By Jameson Paige



Jameson Paige
«Proposals for an In/Exhaustible Image of Identity»
Seen - Issue 08, April 2019

It is challenging to describe an exhibition where the central artwork is so overwhelmingly exhilarating, present, and difficult. Yet, such is the predicament for viewers of *Prisoner of Love* at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) Chicago. Curated by Naomi Beckwith, the show sources its title from Glenn Ligon's piece of the same name. The museum's recent acquisition of Arthur Jafa's acclaimed video piece, *Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death* (2016), acts as the impetus of the show. Though an enormous installation in scale and capacity, Jafa's work is padded by an evolving constellation of artworks that explore the immensities of life and death, love and hate, pleasure and pain—themes pulled from Bruce Nauman's well-known neon piece, *Life, Death, Love, Hate, Pleasure, Pain* (1983), also included within the exhibition. The three chapters of the exhibition move between these dualities, mobilizing a rotating cast of canonical artists, such as Carrie Mae Weems, Catherine Opie, and Doris Salcedo, among others.

Beckwith's curatorial approach spatializes what Krista Thompson has termed the 'sidelong glance'— "sidelong glances at Western art and cultures of vision...[are] a knowing way of looking that is very aware of, and in many regards averting, being seen in overdetermined ways on account of 'color.'"¹¹ As such, one of the permanent fixtures of the exhibition is the opening relationship between Nauman's loud, central, and commercially-cognizant neon work, and Glenn Ligon's shade-throwing, though much quieter painting installed to its right, entitled *Untitled (Study #1 for Prisoner of Love)* (1992). Through the proximity of these two works, the universalism embedded in Nauman's understanding of the human condition is contested by Ligon's racialized use of appropriated text "WE ARE THE INK THAT GIVES THE WHITE PAGE A MEANING," which identifies a reading of blackness hidden in plain sight. This opening axis to the exhibition provokes a productive tension in subjectivity—questioning who is looking, who is feeling, and how these actions are linked.

For viewers, Jafa's central artwork exists just beyond this first dialectic encounter. Similar to his other filmic works, *Love Is The Message...* amasses a series of found, disparate video clips, that convey an ontology of blackness for Jafa, many representing images of black people across time. The single-channel, 7:30 minute video samples materials ranging from university pep rallies, civil rights movement protests, Gospel music concerts, and Jafa's own footage of theorists, such as Hortense Spillers. Rather than distill black life into a narrow search for survival, the sampled images' final collaged form illustrates how "black subjects navigate the afterlife of slavery in moments that span the emotional register—from laughter to refusal to quiet contemplation."¹² In *Love Is The Message...*, Jafa focuses on images and sound to concentrate a combined affective 'volume' that is so dense it brings nightmare and ecstasy into close proximity—retaining a sublime incompressibility that somehow becomes singular.

The rhythm of Jafa's syncopation of images within the film is guided by the soundtrack of Kanye West's "Ultralight Beam"—a song that has been termed a gospel-infused "street parable."¹³ Jafa has remarked on multiple occasions that in his work he aspires "to make a black cinema with 'the power, beauty, and alienation of black music.'"¹⁴ Through Jafa's manipulations of speed, tactful shearing, and incorporation of sound, the varied visual source material congeals into an ever-erupting pulse. The work becomes fragmented, incomplete, and narratively unstable—certainly embodying his aspirations for a black cinema.

Part of the work's ability to stir extreme affect—joy, horror, rage—is designed by its rhythmic hypnotism, which leaves viewers unable to resist complicity in Jafa's peppered images of violence. It is this aspect that forms some of the video's more haunting sequences. One example is a legendary vogue battle between the late Cassandra Ebony and Leiomy Maldonado (known as the "Wonder Woman of Vogue") that curly transitions via a death drop fake out into a woman being smacked across the room and knocked out.

Maldonado's slow motion, gravity-defying stunt recalls *The Matrix* (1999), inspiring exhilaration and joy in viewers—yet that joy quickly evaporates as the infamous death drop seamlessly folds into actual violence. Images continue to leap in content and affective measure—from the skilled scoring of an NFL touchdown, to Okwui Okpokwasili's strained solo choreography—the melding of multiple cultural forms into a single complex schema. This unending compression snowballs into the single video work that is *Love Is The Message...*, focusing Jafa's concept of blackness while sporadically likening its immensity to that of the glaring sun.

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Art historian Huey Copeland connects Jafa's work to black feminist artists before him, such as Renée Green and Lorna Simpson—artists who transgressively imagine how black bodies can be imaged in new configurations. Copeland posits that “Jafa's works can be understood as forms of anti-portraiture that qualify the stilled representation of black figures in order to illuminate the dialectical relation between the self and the social.”¹⁵ This dialectic is woven as a constant spiral throughout *Love Is The Message...*, attuning viewers to one's inability to control how the self is constructed by perceptions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc. at the societal level. Within this context, blackness is shaped by the complexity of these signifiers' interlocution.

— Whereas the act of becoming visible often provides the relief of representation, it subsequently binds a subject in expectation, calculability, and limitation. Jafa's film adheres to this formulation, but pushes further, so that the images envisioning possibilities of blackness are inexhaustible. The cropped condition of these video clips reminds viewers that much has been left out, also pointing to the conceptual and material limits of visibility. Though Jafa's work considers blackness' confrontation with being seen, its fragmentary condition continuously evades seizure.

— There is, however, an inevitable end to the video, signaling a death to the image that simultaneously represents and binds. The ending aptly depicts a collapsing James Brown during a 1964 performance of “Please, Please, Please.”¹⁶ The original version shows Brown being picked back up to his feet and cloaked in blanket, presumably to care for him, but more so to enforce his responsibility to perform. Jafa's appropriation cuts earlier, where Brown is still on his knees pulling away from his impending and unwilling resurrection. The screen and music abruptly drown out as Brown exhaustingly screams.

— Following Jafa's complex piece, viewers encounter two surprisingly disappointing works by David Hammons and Lynda Benglis, which lazily appropriate Buddhist iconography and the Hindi language respectively. These pieces unfortunately undermine the complex embodiment of identity in *Love Is The Message* by perpetuating the shortsighted notion that Eastern spiritual practices can ‘heal’ the wounds the West has inflicted, illustrating a reductive Eastern essentialism in tow. The remainder of the “life and death” iteration of the exhibition expands upon Jafa's emotionally raucous film into quieter territory. Melvin Edwards's *Off and Gone* (1992) welds together volatile and aged metal fragments like chains and hooks to constrict a much more pristine water faucet. Here, the heaviness of history chokes life's flow. Catherine Opie's melancholic photograph of a demure, veiled, and empty armchair that floats before a blue drenched backdrop is utterly arresting when viewers note its title, *In Memory/Leigh Bowery* (2000). Anyone aware of Bowery's exuberance for bright color, wild forms, and outlandish fashions will instantly become cognizant of the deep reaching feeling of loss registering on the body. The residual impression left on the empty chair longingly conjures the beautifully complex, warm fullness of Bowery's persona, yet is unable to materialize an image for us to grasp. Though much of this exhibition confronts the limits that images impose on us as human subjects, Opie's work demonstrates that sometimes all we want is just one more photograph to hold onto.

As the exhibition cycles through its remaining two chapters—entitled “Love and Hate” and “Pleasure and Pain”—younger artists, such as Paul Mpagi Sepuya, Deana Lawson, and Michael Armitage bring further dimension to black figuration. The show’s central grounding of blackness causes a ripple through the imagistic strictures that configure identity’s appearance within the cultural field. However, one wonders if any image—singular, moving, abstract, or collaged—can match Jafa’s reflective use of the sun to depict the immense, astronomical feelings that one life can contain.

Prisoner of Love at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago runs through October 27, 2019.

MARIE-CLAUDE BEAUD CHOISIT *DES PARISIENS NOIRS* DE GLENN LIGON

La directrice du Nouveau Musée national de Monaco (NMNM) raconte ses années new-yorkaises où elle partit à la rencontre de l'art africain-américain, en particulier celui de Glenn Ligon, qui expose au musée d'Orsay, à Paris, ce printemps.



Image préparatoire des *Parisiens noirs*
de Glenn Ligon. Néon et peinture, 2019.
Courtesy de l'artiste et galerie Chantal Crousel

PARIS. Douze néons géants consignant les noms de figures, illustres ou anonymes, présentes dans quelques œuvres-clés de la peinture française du XIX^e siècle: Marie-Claude Beaud s'attache à une nouvelle installation de l'artiste américain Glenn Ligon, *Des Parisiens noirs*, visible au musée d'Orsay, à Paris, sur une invitation de Donatien Grau, dans le cadre de la grande exposition « Le Modèle noir – De Géricault à Matisse ». Sans avoir encore vu l'œuvre de ses propres yeux au moment où nous la rencontrons, elle confesse son irrésistible envie de la découvrir, par attachement à la démarche générale de l'artiste, qu'elle a accompagné en 2007 dans une exposition monographique au Mudam (musée d'Art moderne Grand-Duc Jean), au Luxembourg. « *Face à ce genre d'artistes, on est toujours en attente d'un autre moment du travail* », confesse-t-elle.

Le choix de Marie-Claude Beaud traduit autant une vraie fidélité aux artistes qu'elle aime qu'une douce perfidie à défendre l'incertitude de la nouveauté. Toujours en attente d'autre chose, postée aux avant-postes de la création contemporaine, ne se reposant jamais sur un savoir constitué, elle incarne une certaine idée de la vitalité dans le paysage de l'art. Spécialiste reconnue de l'histoire de l'art moderne et contemporain depuis plus de quarante ans, de Grenoble à Monaco, de Toulon à Luxembourg, de New York à Paris, elle pourrait facilement se fixer sur des œuvres qui ont marqué son existence voyageuse.

Mais plutôt que ce confort des souvenirs, dans lesquels on se réfugie parfois de manière conformiste, elle préfère assumer la prise de risque d'un choix sur l'avenir, sur ce qu'elle attend secrètement, sur l'inspiration qui vient. Comme si l'amour de l'art se conjugait d'abord au futur, dans un geste de projection et de confiance dans la promesse des artistes vivants. « *J'ai*

toujours pensé à l'œuvre qui vient après, celle qui me tombe dessus, celle du futur », reconnaît-elle, comme une manière de définir une partie de son engagement : son statut de « *passer* », auquel elle tient tant, et qui exige une attention toujours vive à ce qui affleure ici et là, dans les ateliers qu'elle aime visiter, dans une circulation continue tout autour du monde.

« UNE GRANDE CONNAISSANCE DE L'HISTOIRE AMÉRICAINE »

Ce qui la séduit dans le travail de Glenn Ligon rejoint son intérêt ancien pour les cultures africaines-américaines. À New York, où elle vécut quelques années, elle côtoya de nombreux créateurs soucieux, comme Glenn Ligon, né en 1960 dans le Bronx, de creuser les enjeux esthétiques et politiques de la race et de la stigmatisation des cultures noires. Un travail qui préfigurait déjà la vigueur des débats actuels sur leur reconnaissance, à l'heure du télescopage électrique entre le président Trump et le mouvement Black Lives Matter. « *Je me souviens qu'on ne prenait à l'époque pour une fille car j'allais toute seule à Harlem ou dans le Bronx en métro rencontrer des artistes dans leurs ateliers, s'amuse-t-elle. Grâce à mes amis Lou Reed et Laurie Anderson, j'ai été initiée à la musique d'Ornette Coleman par exemple, que j'ai vu à l'Apollo Theater, et à de nombreux artistes africains-américains.* »

Depuis le début des années 1990, l'œuvre de Glenn Ligon convoque divers médiums – peinture, sculpture, gravure, installation, vidéo –, en intégrant des sources issues de textes littéraires, notamment ceux de James Baldwin, considéré aujourd'hui par les intellectuels, artistes et activistes noirs comme une figure de référence des combats pour leurs droits. Les shows des années 1970 du comique Richard Pryor traversent aussi l'œuvre hantée de Ligon, qui puise des res-

sources narratives dans une cohorte de gestes plus ou moins militants, comme si son travail plastique procédait d'abord d'une méditation sur la citation et la réactivation du passé permettant de mieux se repérer dans le présent.

« J'ai toujours pensé à l'œuvre qui vient après, celle qui me tombe dessus, celle du futur. »

« *Quand je suis allée voir Glenn à Harlem, se souvient Marie-Claude Beaud, j'ai été frappée par sa grande connaissance de l'histoire américaine. Son écriture artistique m'a impressionnée, notamment ses sérigraphies et ses pièces à néon. Sa manière d'insérer ses textes en blanc sur du noir.* » À l'image de ces *Parisiens noirs*, dont les douze néons, montés sur des supports d'aluminium d'après l'écriture manuscrite d'amis, évoquent ces noms, familiers ou secrets, de figures noires présentes dans la peinture française : Joséphine Baker, Alexandre Dumas, Chocolat, mais aussi Jeanne Duval, muse de Charles Baudelaire, Maria, Joseph ou Laure, qui posa pour la servante de l'*Olympia* d'Édouard Manet. Une manière de mettre en lumière des « noms » par le prisme du « néon » : des noms échappant soudainement à l'invisibilisation dont ils furent l'objet, selon des mécanismes de domination ancrés dans l'histoire sociale et culturelle. « *Glenn est un artiste politique, mais qui ne prêche pas, qui ne dénigre pas, qui parle des faits en activant les consciences* », résume Marie-Claude Beaud. Sensible à cet enjeu de l'art africain-américain, qui fut longtemps minoré aux États-Unis, elle reconnaît que « *le Studio Museum in Harlem et le Whitney Museum [à New York] ont fait ces dernières années un gros travail pour la reconnaissance de cette scène.* »

CON JURER LES BLESSURES DU PASSÉ

Le goût du contemporain, la prise en compte de l'histoire politique, l'ouverture culturelle... Au Nouveau Musée national de Monaco, qu'elle dirige depuis dix ans, on retrouve la trace de ses obsessions. « *Le contemporain est là pour éclairer les collections d'une autre manière, explique-t-elle. Mon cercle d'amis et de connaissances a toujours été très international, toutes générations confondues, mais aussi ouvert à toutes les pratiques, de la peinture à la mode, de l'architecture au design, de la performance à la musique.* » Si ce tropisme international et transdisciplinaire va de soi aujourd'hui, comme un geste forcément ajusté à notre époque, Marie-Claude Beaud en préfigura à elle seule l'avènement. Il faut imaginer un paysage muséal encore figé dans la tradition des Beaux-Arts au début des années 1970, au moment où elle démarra au musée de Grenoble et où elle comprit la nécessité d'ouvrir le monde de l'art à des pratiques émergentes comme le graphisme, la bande dessinée, la mode, le design

ou les musiques contemporaines. Ce goût pour la transdisciplinarité, sans volonté de hiérarchiser les types de création entre eux, n'a cessé de caractériser son propre « style ».

À la Fondation Cartier, qu'elle dirigea d'une main de fer dans un gant de velours de 1984 à 1994, elle permit, à l'occasion d'une rétrospective Warhol, la reconstitution du Velvet Underground dans les jardins de Jouy-en-Josas. Lou Reed, John Cale, Sterling Morrison, Moe Tucker, jouant ensemble *Heroin* après avoir rendu un hommage à leur ami Andy: un moment dont les spectateurs se souviennent encore la larme à l'œil, comme un shoot d'adrénaline puissant à défaut d'un miracle de la résurrection! De ce moment parisien de réconciliation post-Warhol à ce nouvel événement artistique révélant à Orsay l'art français à ses propres angles morts historiques, les fils tirés par Marie-Claude Beaud traduisent toujours un désir de conjurer les blessures du passé, de se rappeler d'où l'on vient pour imaginer de nouveaux chemins ouverts par l'art.

JEAN-MARIE DURAND

« **Le Modèle noir - De Géricault à Matisse** », 26 mars-21 juillet 2019, musée d'Orsay, 1, rue de la Légion-d'Honneur, 75007 Paris, musee-orsay.fr

^{les}**Inrockuptibles**

REGARDS BLANCS, PEAUX NOIRES

Au musée d'Orsay, à Paris,
**LE MODÈLE NOIR – DE GÉRICAUT
À MATISSE** se penche sur deux
siècles de représentation des Noirs
dans l'art. Ou comment la relation
entre artiste et modèle révèle
un imaginaire social et politique.

TEXTE Ingrid Luquet-Gad



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**COMMENT RÉVÉLER L'INDIVIDU
DERRIÈRE LE STÉRÉOTYPE?
L'INTERROGATION EST AU CŒUR
DE L'EXPOSITION *Le Modèle noir* –**

De Géricault à Matisse qui vient d'ouvrir ses portes au musée d'Orsay, à Paris. Soit une relecture de l'histoire de l'art et de la culture visuelle sur près de deux siècles, qui interroge frontalement la manière dont les choix de représentation relayent la construction coloniale du regard occidental. Liant l'aventure des avant-gardes à la vie des modèles non-blancs ayant croisé la trajectoire des peintres, sculpteurs, poètes et photographes, le volet parisien adapte et amplifie la première étape de l'exposition accueillie à l'automne à la Wallach Art Gallery de l'université de Columbia (New York).

Intitulée *Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today*, celle-ci se concentrait sur les enjeux d'un tableau spécifique: *Olympia* que peint Edouard Manet en 1863. Pour Denise Murrell, commissaire de l'exposition et auteure en 2013 d'une thèse à l'université de Columbia sur le sujet, le tableau conservé au musée d'Orsay marque un tournant majeur dans l'iconographie du modèle noir. Laure, représentée sous les traits de la domestique au second plan, n'est plus figurée selon le schéma sexualisant de l'orientalisme – ce trait étant transféré à la courtisane Olympia au premier plan. Plutôt que de simplement symboliser l'“autre” exotique sans substance véritable, elle apparaît en tant que participante à part entière de la vie quotidienne.

“Présenter cette exposition au musée d’Orsay, un établissement classique, et non par exemple au Centre Pompidou, est une petite révolution. L’acte est évidemment très politique et le champ d’étude inédit en France”, raconte Cécile Debray, conservatrice générale du patrimoine et directrice du musée de l’Orangerie. “Par rapport au contexte américain, l’étude de communautés ethniques est quelque chose de très compliquée. En France, le régime d’universalité hérité de la Révolution française prévaut. Comme il n’y a pas de comptabilité des origines ethniques, les archives sont moins directement exploitables. Nous avons dû mener un véritable travail d’enquête pour retrouver les sources et la trace de ces modèles noirs.”

De fait, le volet français de l’exposition, qui sera ensuite accueillie au Mémorial ACTe – Centre caribéen d’expressions et de mémoire de la traite et de l’esclavage, à Pointe-à-Pitre (Guadeloupe), élargit le champ chronologique tout en ouvrant également aux modèles masculins. A partir de l’étude de Denise Murrell sur les modèles féminins chez Edouard Manet et Henri Matisse, le musée d’Orsay s’est adjoint le concours de trois autres commissaires (Cécile Debray, Stéphane Guégan et Isolde Pludermacher) et de quatre conseillers scientifiques (David Bindman, Anne Higonnet, Anne Lafont et Pap Ndiaye). *“Denise Murrell parlait bien de l’art français, ce qui nous a interpellés. Nous en avons raconté l’histoire en partant de la période révolutionnaire, qui a marqué la première abolition de l’esclavage en 1794, vite remise en cause sous Bonaparte en 1802, avant d’être finalement décrétée en 1848.”*

L’exposition procède à partir de l’étude de cas de chefs-d’œuvre de l’art moderne. Il n’empêche, face à ces tableaux phares, mille fois vus, cent fois analysés, le regard, lui, est sans cesse à réactualiser. *“L’histoire de l’art moderne est encore pleine de non-dits. Face à Olympia, le constat est frappant. Pour les yeux du public blanc, la domestique noire est invisible. Pour prendre un autre exemple, peu de gens savent qu’Alexandre Dumas était créole, alors que tout le monde ou presque a lu ses livres. Il en va de même avec le voyage qu’effectue Henri Matisse aux Etats-Unis, un épisode crucial de sa vie relativement peu étudié. En pleine crise créatrice en 1930, il se rend à Tahiti et fait une halte à New York. Grand amateur de jazz, c’est à Harlem qu’il souhaite se rendre. Là, il découvre les artistes du mouvement du Harlem Renaissance, comme Charles Alston ou William H. Johnson, qui dépeignent la vie de la classe moyenne noire urbaine. De retour en France, les modèles de Matisse seront haïtiens ou martiniquais, bénéficiant du même traitement pictural que ses autres modèles : selon l’universel féminin, au sein de portraits qu’il souhaite éternels. Le parcours de l’exposition se clôt avec sa Danseuse créole de 1950.”* Les non-dits de l’histoire, mais également le cas plus spécifique de la nomination, sont au cœur de l’exposition française. Celle-ci s’ouvre sur un portrait d’une femme noire de la peintre Marie-Guillemine Benoist, le même que l’on aperçoit furtivement dans le fameux clip *Apeshit* des époux Carter (Beyoncé et Jay-Z, donc), rendu public en juin 2018 et tourné au Louvre où le tableau est conservé.

“En 1800, le tableau est présenté au Salon. Il s’appelle alors Portrait d’une négresse. En soi, le titre est ambivalent, puisqu’un portrait est par définition individuel alors que le terme négresse est générique”, explique Isolde Pludermacher, conservatrice en chef au musée d’Orsay. “Depuis un certain nombre d’années, le cartel du tableau au Louvre indiquait un second titre : Portrait d’une femme noire. A Orsay, nous en utiliserons encore un troisième : Portrait de Madeleine. Comme le retrace l’historienne de l’art Anne Lafont dans l’ouvrage qu’elle vient de publier, L’Art et la race – L’Africain (tout) contre l’œil des Lumières, l’identité de la jeune femme a en effet pu être retrouvée.” Parmi les modèles que l’on croise au cours

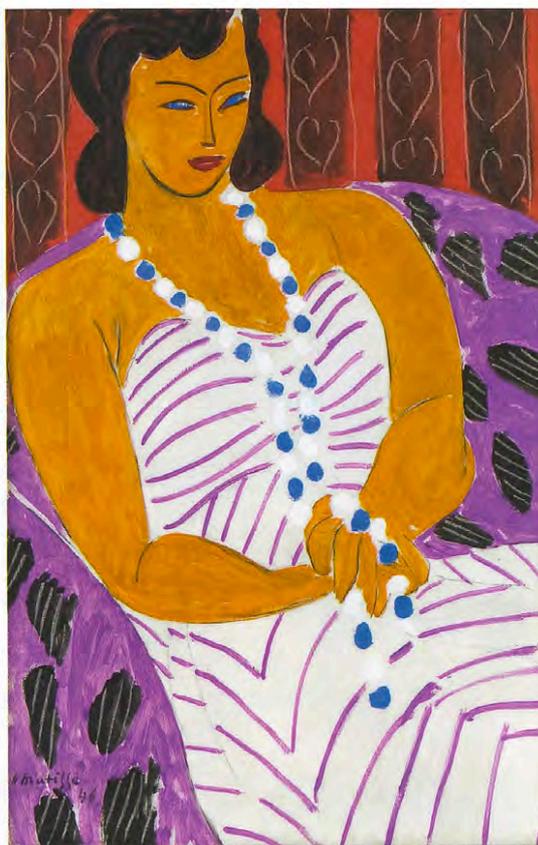
de l’exposition, il y a encore, pour les plus connus, Joséphine Baker ou encore Jeanne Duval, la maîtresse métisse de Charles Beaudelaire. Celui-ci la dessine, Manet la peint, Nadar la photographiera. Il y a encore Joseph, Delmonico, Miss Lala, Chocolat, Féral Benga, Aïcha, Adrienne Fidelin, Mme Van Hyfte, Carmen ou encore Maria Martinez.

A cette dernière, Marie Ndiaye consacre un livre à paraître début avril. Avec *Un pas de chat sauvage*, l’écrivaine se penche sur la vie du modèle qui pose alanguie, le regard lointain, pour le portrait du photographe Nadar connu sous le nom de *Maria l’Antillaise*. A Orsay,



Paris, Musée d'Orsay, PHO 1981.36, Photo Patrice Schmidt/Musée d'Orsay, Dist. RMN-Grand-Palais/Service presse/Musée d'Orsay

Maria, l'Antillaise,
entre 1856 et 1859, par
Félix Nadar (1802-1910)



Des Moines, Des Moines Art Center, 1959/0, don de M. John et Mrs. Elizabeth Bates Cowles
© Succession H. Matisse, Photo Rich Sanders, Des Moines, IA

Dame à la robe blanche
(femme en blanc), 1946,
par Henri Matisse (1869-1954)

elle apparaît quatre fois sous son objectif.
Or cette Maria, telle est la thèse de Marie

**“La question
de la nomination
renvoie
directement
à l’histoire
de l’esclavage,
qui interdisait
alors aux esclaves
le port d’un
patronyme”**

ISOLDE PLUDERMACHER,
COMMISSAIRE
DE L’EXPOSITION

Ndiaye, n’est autre que Maria Martinez, chanteuse à succès originaire de La Havane. A son arrivée en France, elle fréquentera les artistes de l’époque : Nadar certes, mais également Théophile Gauthier ou Charles Baudelaire, qui dans ses lettres se désolera du peu d’estime dont elle jouit, forcée de se produire dans des cafés-concerts miteux.

“La question de la nomination renvoie directement à l’histoire de l’esclavage, qui interdisait alors aux esclaves le port d’un patronyme”, précise Isolde Pludermacher. L’approche permet également d’ancrer le sujet dans l’écriture de l’histoire de l’art.
“Nous montrons les choses en tant

qu’historiens, attachés à la restitution biographique. Il ne nous appartient pas de tirer des conclusions, souligne à son tour Cécile Debray. En nous concentrant sur l’atelier, nous voulions à tout prix éviter les écueils de la monstration accusatoire ou du voyeurisme inhérent notamment aux expositions universelles. Nous évoquons évidemment le climat colonial et le racisme scientifique, mais il s’agit d’une toile de fond que nous avons voulue discrète. L’exposition suscitera certainement des débats, des prises de parole, et tant mieux – mais il s’agira alors d’un second temps, celui de la réception et non du cœur scientifique du projet.”

En point d’orgue, l’exposition ouvre sur un corpus d’œuvres contemporaines, en retraçant notamment les usages de la référence à *Olympia* chez des artistes afro-américains de la seconde moitié du XX^e siècle : Romare Bearden, Faith Ringgold, Mickalene Thomas ou encore Ellen Gallagher. Quant à Glenn Ligon, il présente dans la nef centrale une installation dont les douze néons rendent hommage aux noms de modèles de l’exposition, mais également à ceux de ses amis artistes d’aujourd’hui. Une ultime manière d’amplifier l’impulsion qui porte, pour reprendre un titre de la philosophe Hourya Bentouhami, “*du corps doublure au corps propre*”. ●

Le Modèle noir – De Géricault à Matisse
Jusqu’au 21 juillet, Musée d’Orsay, Paris VII^e

connaissance|des|arts



Dans une exposition inédite en France, le musée d'Orsay s'interroge sur la place, dans l'histoire de la modernité, du modèle noir qui, de Géricault à Matisse, est passé de personnage secondaire et anonyme à sujet à part entière.

/ Texte Valérie Bougault



LES PARISIENS NOIRS DE GLENN LIGON

Étrange destin que celui des « modèles noirs », parfois aussi célèbres que Joséphine Baker, le plus souvent parfaitement anonymes, incarnés par la muette servante d'Olympia... Questionner cette « invisibilité si visible », voici ce qu'a demandé le musée d'Orsay à Glenn Ligon, artiste américain né en 1960 dont le travail explore la mémoire de l'histoire américaine et le legs de la peinture moderne. Dans sa peinture incluant des textes d'écrivains ou, plus récemment, dans ses œuvres conceptuelles, néons (ill. : *Notes for a Poem on The Third World (chapter two)*, 2018, 211 x 141 cm. Courtesy de l'artiste et de la galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. ©F. Kleinfenn), installations ou vidéos, il a souvent convoqué des noms connus – Jean Genet – et des visages inconnus. Aujourd'hui, il installe au fond de la nef centrale douze « noms-néons » blancs, ceux des modèles sortis de l'oubli, dont l'identité est enfin reconnue. Douze « Parisiens noirs » mis en lumière, plus un, au-dessus d'eux : « nom inconnu »... V. B.

BLOUINARTINFO

In Paris, Glenn Ligon Reframes Black Models

BY DEVORAH LAUTER | APRIL 04, 2019



Marie-Guillemine Benoist's "Portrait of Madeleine," a painting done in 1800 of a statuesque, beautiful black woman bearing one breast, can be seen today in a temporary exhibit at the Musée d'Orsay. But historically, the piece went by a different name: "Portrait d'une negresse." So when the American artist [Glenn Ligon](#) asked Orsay curators when the title had changed, he was struck by their answer: "For this show," they said.

"Black Models: From Géricault to Matisse," on view at the Musée d'Orsay until July 21, is the product of new scholarship, which has unearthed the names and fragmented stories of previously unknown black models seen in masterpieces, as well as lesser-known works from 1794 until 20th-century avant-gardists. In light of its findings, the museum decided to rename several of the paintings in the exhibition (including works on loan from the Louvre), while still providing historic titles as background.

Devorah Lauter

"In Paris, Glenn Ligon Reframes Black Models"

Blouin Art Info- 04/04/2019

<https://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/3616911/in-paris-glenn-ligon-reframes-black-models>

Naming previously unacknowledged black models in these works, “was a kind of intervention in art history,” said Ligon in a recent talk about his new work in dialogue with the Orsay show: an installation within the museum, titled “Some Black Parisians.” It consists of 12 of some of the names of the black models central to the Orsay exhibit, blown up in white neon lights, and written as scattered signatures on the two towers at the end of the museum’s central nave, as though they were two pages in a giant, open book.

The extraordinary act of renaming historic paintings as portraits of newly-discovered individual identities, “marks that painting from now on. You can’t go back to the old titles now that it’s been in an exhibition like this,” said Ligon in response to questions during the opening of his installation. “It’s a very big gesture, and a very small gesture, but what is important is: one has to from now on deal with that gesture, even if the painting doesn’t belong to the Orsay. What will it go back to at the Louvre?”

The Paris show is a broader follow-up to an earlier Wallach Art Gallery exhibit in New York, curated by Denise Murrell, that shed light on black figures whose very presence in works such as Edouard Manet’s iconic “Olympia” — a central piece for both shows — have been historically brushed aside, even rendered invisible.

This idea of the “highly visible invisibility” of black figures is also fundamental to Glenn Ligon’s latest installation, in which he chose to put “up in lights” the names of the black and mixed race models — several of whom were artists and performers — in “a gesture of a kind of new visibility.”

In so doing, these once allegorical figures are not only brought to life by the paintings, stories and names revealed in the larger exhibit, but are also given an added, celebratory platform in Ligon’s installation, where they evoke the personal signatures, touch — even tag — of their namesakes, as if to remind that they too, were here. (Most are not the original signatures of the models, some were based on documents in which the names appear, and several were written by friends and colleagues of the artist.)

Interestingly, though the piece looms over the museum’s central aisle, the text shown in pure, white script doesn’t pop out of the surrounding, tan-washed museum interior the way bright neon colors might. Displayed some distance from the temporary exhibit on the same subject, many visitors seem to even miss Ligon’s installation all together — not unlike the way black figures can go unnoticed in works of art created in the dominant white culture.

“Part of the piece is about this unmistakable presence that is either seen or not seen,” said Ligon.

Having their names up in lights, is therefore no simple, culminating act. Rather, Ligon and the Orsay exhibit offer a new perspective, and with it, a new set of questions.

“The exhibition is about beginning a dialogue or highlighting new thinking about how to talk about this work ... It is about a kind of unfinished conversation, which is art history,” said Ligon. “Bringing the model’s point of view into this art history, I think is new, and it’s kind of exciting, because the funny thing about Manet’s ‘Olympia,’” and all these paintings, is that they’re not new, they’ve been there. It’s just that they’re being viewed differently because of exhibitions like that.”

“Des Parisiens Noirs,” (Some Black Parisians), is on view at the Musee d’Orsay in Paris until July 21. More information: <https://m.musee-orsay.fr/fr/expositions/article/des-parisiens-noirs-glenn-ligon-49284.html>

Devorah Lauter

"In Paris, Glenn Ligon Reframes Black Models"

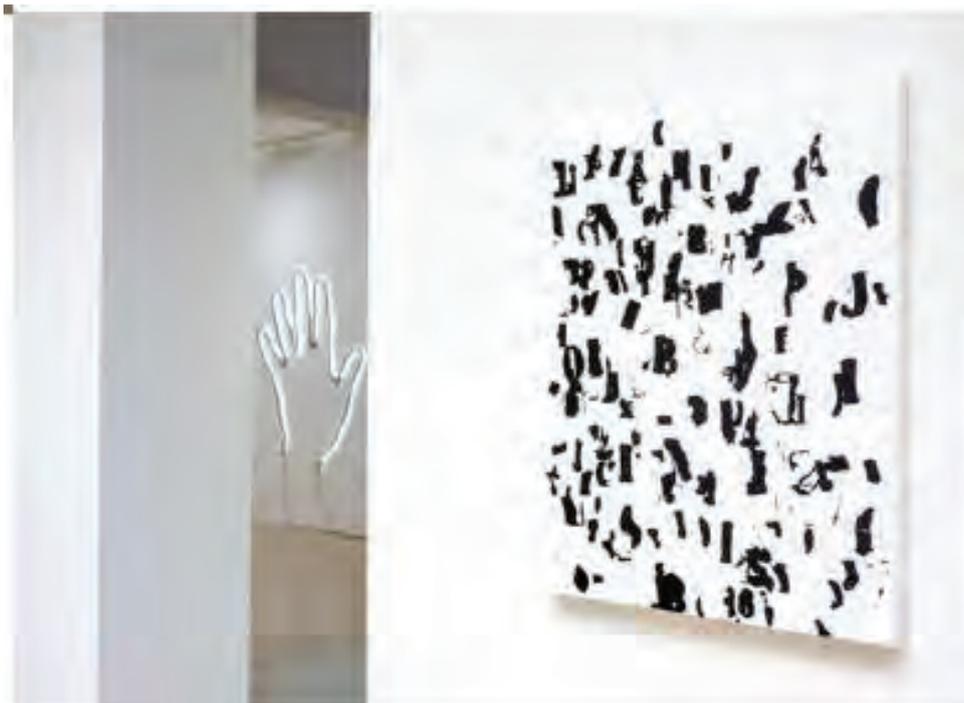
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POST-PERFORMANCE PAINTING

Following the concept of "Post-Performance Future" published in *Mousse* 63 —which deals with ideas of dematerialization, power, and production in the time of invisible work—this article examines approaches toward painting practices, intended not only as the residue of different activities, nor as simply the outcome of the activities, but as the symbiotic coexistence of these two dimensions.

BY MARIE DE BRUGEROLLE



Glenn Ligon, *Debris Field/Notes for a Poem on the Third World/Soleil Nègre* installation view at Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Photo : Florian Kleinfenn

"Post-Performance Painting"

Marie de Brugerolle.

Mousse Magazine - Issue 66 Winter 2018-2019



Clément Rodzielski, *Untitled*, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Photo: Florian Kleinemann

In this third chapter titled “Post-Performance Painting,” I’d like to target paintings that develop out of an artist’s performative practice. For the group of artists I will focus on, painting is a script, painting is a stage, painting is a character, painting is a curtain, painting is a prop, painting is a performative sketch. Theirs are paintings that have to be read in relation to the enacting body that gives rise to them: the act of painting as a starting point (Simon Bergala) or as a destination (Manon Vargas), an ongoing process (John Baldessari) or a critical tool (Anne Imhof). After decades of Postmodernism and post-media theories, some artists have made their way back to studio practice. Sometimes they use their studio as a stage (Guy de Cointet) or as a backdrop (Stephen Prina) where painting can extend to the wall, ceiling, or ground and create a physical effect on the audience. The painting is not the residue of an activity, nor is the activity simply the means of producing the painting—both coexist symbiotically.

In fact, many of these artists have a strong separate performative practice or engagement with performative forms, as in the case of Charlie Hamish Jeffery. Anne Imhof says that she composes her performances “as images,” and that she draws “post-performance” at a later time, after actions.

Looking at Imhof’s still images as frozen moments from the 2017 Venice Biennale, and the positions of the performers and public over and under a glass grid, I’ve wondered about the status of images in our “screen time” moment. Watching the public taking pictures with their iPhones, I wondered what types of images were sharing the same time and space: the *tableaux vivants* in real time, or the snapshots taken loosely? Are the printed screens still images or stimuli?

The activity of painting instantiates a resistance to the flow of scopopic desire, by means of the here and now of looking at pigments, traces. Painting is a series of actions whose result is matter-of-fact: an evidence of being, standing still, in front of the screens, with time. And seeing the Yellow Vests’ demonstrations in France, especially the way they build installations at the roundabouts, I’ve starting to wonder what would be the great historical painting of today.

A BREACH IN THE CANVAS, CANVAS AS A BLANKET, CANVAS AS A MATTRESS

Modernity opened with a painting beyond canvas. Whereas *Le Serment des Horaces* (1784) by Jacques-Louis David is like the fixed memory of a *tableau vivant*, a suspended moment of the ancient world, and *Le Serment du Jeu de Paume* (1790-1794) marks the unfinished aspect of modernity, *La Mort de Marat* (1793) is one step further toward the instantaneity of the “event”: it is painted as a snapshot of a news story, with the crudity of a police report. It is said that David, whose studio was installed in the Louvre, had the public paying to look at the huge *Enlèvement des Sabines* (1799) with curtains and mirror. In such a way they could be included in the painting, which became a backdrop.¹

This evokes Dan Graham's *Performance Audience Mirror* (1975). Thinking about the Yellow Vests as *tableaux vivants* and visual events, the environments were outcomes of the fact that the protests settled especially at a point that avoids the city and makes the cars turning without stopping (non-sites), participating in the same ideology of control, erasing the public common spaces, and furniture, like the benches. The settlement reenacts a forum, and citizenship arises from this "monument" transformed into "momentum." Looking at the colors, uses of cardboard, and paint, I wonder about the death of painting announced in the 1980s and its survival or new visibilities. I've thought about Thomas Hirschhorn's use of cardboard and his *Musée précaire Albinet* in the Paris suburbs in 2004, but also Allan Kaprow's environments with his *Hysteria* (1956), a painting including cardboard, fabric collage and letters (AHAHA) as material. The first happening-environments created forums, spaces outside of traditional frames.

The idea of togetherness was typical for the American 1950s. Dan Graham, in a discussion we had recently, remembered that the slogan of Dwight Eisenhower's presidential campaign was "I Like Ike," and that his was the first presidential campaign to commission animated TV spots.² What interests me are marginalized historical narratives and stories that have not already been written. Once Kaprow told me, "Art history is not in books, it is in gossips." And later: "Performance is what we did between two paintings to seduce girls."³ Another unexpected gossip was Pierre Restany, who kept telling me stories about artists' relationships. Regarding Yves Klein, he had a special theory about why he used women's bodies as paintbrushes: to avoid touching them. Yves Klein's memory and impact is a true thread between France and California.

KLEIN STORIES, CONCATENATION

Camila Oliveira Fairclough and Karina Bisch both recently re-enacted Klein's *Anthropometries* (1960), in different ways. Fairclough's *Klein d'oeil* (2013) consists of a series of five canvases stretched over Transat chairs. Arranged in a line or group, they create a conversation piece in green, brown, and dark red. It is much more physical and incarnated than the Klein blue. The way Klein used female bodies was dematerialized, the women serving mostly as objects in the sense of sponges or brushes. Fairclough's series, with its traces of different colors (yellow, brown, violet, red) and the imperfection of the folds, enhances the furniture status of the piece. As I mentioned in my earlier article about "Post-Performance Future," one aspect of its etymology stands in the *perfournir*, the question of furniture.⁴ The artist works with language and letters, and creates a grammar of signs in which the body is a character, a real person, not idealized.

In Bisch's recent exhibition at Kunstverein Langenhagen, Germany, three elements embody the post-performance painting effect and form a concatenated structure involving the costume, the props, and the immersion of the artist's body. The general title, *Le Marabout*, has a double meaning in French. It is the name of the African witch doctor, and a word game in which the end of each word is the beginning of the next. The three pieces—*The Armchair*, *The Painter*, and *The Painting*—are colored objects that have names and functions. A seat dressed with a colorful textile, the Wink Chair by Kita, is a metaphor for a human

1. J. C. Milner, *Malaise dans la peinture, à propos de la mort de Marat* (Paris: INHA, éditions Orphys, 2012), 28.
2. Conversation with the author, October 2018. "There is a performance piece of mine, *Performance Audience Mirror*, which deals with the politician or the politician-artist, like [Joseph] Beuys, who describes both the audience and himself the artist-performer to the mirror and the audience's projection—identification of themselves onto the performer. The performer's description of himself, and the audience as a group, as a play-by-play description, I wanted it to be phenomenological and also the description of a baseball or soccer match on the radio."
3. Conversation with the author, 1994.
4. Marie de Brugerolle, "Post Performance Future," (*Mousse Magazine* 63, April-May 2018), 266.

figure. The applied body on the canvas looks like Klein's anthropometries, with generous curves. It appears as a fragmented body, which has a unique presence. The nipples are highlighted with different colors and the belly button is quite high. It is the artist's self-portrait as an imprinted Venus. It is not a canonized body but a real cast made with a painted body. From a distance, the body looks like a large mask. Indeed, it recalls Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914).

Both artists address the question of femininity and feminism, with the subtle and sharp weapon of humor. The feminine shapes that they use are anti-canonizations of bodies controlled by fashion norms. Performativity is also how we consider objecthood and the status of human beings, in a civilization that treats objects as persons. Isn't the reverse a possibility? Performance in work, being performative in function, turns people into furniture. Bisch speaks about "animated paintings," a term we could use to describe her use of fabric. It is sometimes the blouse of the painter, her working cloth. In a time where body pressure has become part of the global violence against subjectivity, Bisch and Fairclough's works stand up as generous flags.

Klein, like Jackson Pollock, was a reader of Gutai. Eugen Herrigel's *Zen and the Art of Archery* (1948) was a book that any young artist would read.

ZEN AND THE ART OF ARCHERY, THE EGO IS
THE TARGET, DRAW A LINE AND FOLLOW IT:
BALANCE YOUR PAINT

The strong connection between Gutai and California's performance practices might be a good angle from which to look at Hiro Kosaka, very close to Saburo Murakami, who is a key part of this history, from Wolfgang Stoerchle up to Naotaka Hiro. Gutai is linked to notions of concreteness and incarnation, the real and the body. If the German and the Japanese immigrants in California became best friends in the post-war area, they also participated in inventing a new body language going beyond the borders of what Modernism defined strictly as painting. The question of the liminal, and space-time as material, became as much a form as a canvas on a frame, and beyond. Kosaka made films and actions, and used painted targets as a set, like a *sfumato* atmosphere.⁵

Today Hiro says, "Painting is the result of performance."⁶ The body of the artist is a tool and the painting looks like a target. Sometimes the artist paints in an immersive way, inside the fabric taken as a bag or cloth, but also as he films his body spraying and splashing pink all over, like in a womb. Both the film and color action are the painting, not just the remaining canvas hanging like a nest from the ceiling. Hiro literally performs the painting. He makes a parallel between his process and casting in sculpture.

In the early 1970s Stoerchle was the first artist to hold a hybrid performance-video class at California Institute of the Arts, mixing musicians and sculptors and using video to record performance. Stoerchle was best friends with Kosaka, knew Klein, and was a reader of *Zen and the Art of Archery*. Sculpture and painting were the basis of his work, especially his series of *Mattress Paintings* (1968-1970). They look spray painted but were painted in a quite traditional manner, playing with the dots and spots on the surface. Not only because of their illusionism, but also because of the quite intestinal and organic pink colors, the early paintings relate to Stoerchle's very last performance in 1975. This famous *Untitled (Last Performance)* happened in John Baldessari's studio and there was a mattress used by the artist, too, on which a person from the audience made him an unfinished "blow job," after his public coming out. From the very first mattresses used as a fake pattern until this very last one, the canvas had become a prop. Pollock's drippings became waste semen on a fabric surface.

DO WE STILL NEED TO BURN PAINTING?

If the ongoing motto of the 1980s was about painting as a dead art, a dead end, we can say that it had a long agony. When John Baldessari did his *Cremation Project* in 1970, it was not to claim the end of painting. As he expressed, it's like when you're on a diet, you need to express it out loud, make a statement, so that if someone sees you eating chocolate, they will stop you: "Hey, you said you were on a diet." But he named his dog Giotto, knowing that painting always comes back.

Six Colorful Inside Jobs (1977), a video piece by Baldessari, was a key point in the retrospective I organized at Carré d'art, Nîmes, in 2005. In it a man dressed in a worker's outfit paints and repaints the walls of a white cube from floor to ceiling. The film is a delegated performance, as painting is a daily job. The year 1977 was also that of Douglas Crimp's *Pictures* exhibition. In its aftermath, the term "appropriation" emerged. "Making an image" could also mean "taking an image;" re-photography, readymade images, and the simulation era started. In the performances of Guy de Cointet, paintings are used as props but also as paintings, albeit paintings that make people feel hot or cold, or that tell stories. In the play *Tell Me* (1979), one character describes a painting first as comfortable and finally as "beautiful to look at." Cointet's objects were paintings in volumes, themselves used as props, texts, and characters. They performed a function. His studio was made like a set; he would say that if a table worked on stage, it could be used in the studio.

I recently discovered a key piece in Cointet's oeuvre.⁷ I'd been told about this work by Jeffrey Perkins and Larry Bell, his early friends. It became a "gossip," a grail that any art historian would look for, like the artist's film *I Dream, (Old Woman)* (1968-1970), which was the masterpiece I found in 2010. *Untitled (Sticks)* (ca. 1966) was probably made when Cointet was in New York, and he brought it to Los Angeles in 1966 or 1967. It consists of a series of colored wooden sticks (originally in bright primary colors of red, yellow, blue) hung vertically in a square frame. It is a link between the "ping pong" paintings that he made just before moving to the United States and the object-props that he created for his first performances of the mid-1970s. The former works integrat-

for his first performances of the mid-1970s. The former works integrated heterogeneous objects into the canvas. Cointet was moving from the letter toward the object. His work was dealing with the status of things and getting beyond objecthood. As the letter was growing out of the page, and the book becoming a three-dimensional shape, the character (letter) evolved toward the Character (protagonist).

The seriality and systematic order of the piece is totally relevant to the structuralist ontology of Cointet's work. The relation is obvious as well, with the permutation principle of André Cadere's colorful "sticks." The circular wooden pieces systematically used by the Romanian artist who migrated to France are dated 1973; his early paintings, including the wooden sticks currently on view at the MNAM-Pompidou Center, are from 1968-1970. We note the evolution from a composite board with wooden sticks, *Quatre mètres quatre-vingt quatre noir Citroën (Panneau noir Citroën)* (1969), to a cylindrical combined object, *Six barres de bois ronds* (1975). Not only mobile but actually walkable paintings, Cadere's sticks have an anthropomorphic aspect. They are visual events, like Cointet's props or actresses. He confirms that they are paintings and not minimal sculptures.⁸

The artists knew each other and corresponded. They both worked against Minimalist hegemony, creating a personal mythology—Cadere maybe addressing Joseph Beuys, and Cointet as the “Duchamp of Los Angeles.” If the elements of Cointet’s performances are props, they function also as actors, director, and, as Mike Kelley expressed it, phonemes. We can say that they exemplify the “message as the medium” announced by Marshall McLuhan. They are painting in volume when not activated. This ambivalent status, depending on the use of the forms, distinguished it from the “one concept, one form” straight definition of conceptual art. They are painting performing painting—an animated discourse, a *tableau vivant*, literally. Often the table becomes a painting from the horizontal

5. Hiro Kosaka, email to the author, 2017. “My archery target is called *Kasumi mato* [Hazy Target]. Full moon is cast by passing clouds.”
6. Naotaka Hiro, email to the author, December 2018. “My works (paintings, drawings, video and life-cast sculptures) are a documentation of time and process, my action and proof of existence, yes.”
7. The moment was June 2018. I’d like to thank Tim Johnson, the poet who owns Marfa’s bookstore, for having contacted me in 2012 and put me in contact with Kathryn Bogie, early friend of Guy de Cointet and owner of this piece.
8. André Cadere in conversation with Linda Morris, 1976, reprinted in André Cadere, *Peinture sans fin [Unfinished painting]* (Paris: Musée d’art moderne de la ville de Paris, 2008), 27: “Does it worry you that the object, your round bar of wood, is just a piece of Minimal Art?” AD: “Yes, it is like a painting and can be shown like a painting, and I think it is always necessary to show it exactly like a painting. It is not Minimalist because if you show my work to a real minimalist artist my round bar of wood would never be seen as a minimalist work of art. They have a very abstract idea about their work. If we speak about the work itself we have to think about the structure. There is a relationship between order and mistake. In Minimalism the mistake is excluded, you cannot make a mistake. Minimalist is completely idealistic thinking.”

flatness standing against a wall or hung on it. In *A NEW LIFE* (1981), the poet René Ricard sits on the “Preparation H,” a yellow armchair in the shape of this mute letter (in French it is not pronounced, but is a white space, a silence in a score).

HOW DOES PAINTING POST-PERFORMANCE PERFORM ITS FUNCTION TODAY?

Michael Zahn captures images on his mobile that are framed by the iconography of the device. The way Zahn employs these “default” signs marks an intention, which requires making the “whole” as a painting: “W. Benjamin is of the opinion that advanced art either destroys genre or creates a new one of its own.”⁹ In the large work in the gallery at OMI Contemporary, Hudson, the emoji paintings, hung flatly on the wall, appear even more flat and definitively “painted” in relation to the *trompe l’oeil* cardboard boxes on the floor in front of them. These volumes are decoys placed by the artist in a performative act. They are not “real” objects but props, and the whole in itself may therefore be understood as a set. In doing so, Zahn deludes our senses: Which is the actual, and which is representation? This plays with the consciousness of being in or out of representation, and instills a doubt between what we think belongs to the digital image and what to the analog image. “Perhaps in addressing the ‘whole’ I can find a new genre... and open a door onto what you are calling a ‘post-performative’ type of painting,” the artist says.¹⁰

As we know, for the believer, icons are not representations but incarnations. Zahn’s boxes play as the detail that reveals the fact of the painting as a painting; in a way, it acts this very fact. This points

to the basic economy of painting as a whole. That is what Pollock's dripping broke in the late 1940s and what Donald Judd considered in his 1967 text "Jackson Pollock": "I think that it's clear that Pollock created the large scale, wholeness and simplicity that have become common to almost all good work... The dripped paint in most of Pollock's paintings is dripped paint. It's that sensation, completely immediate and specific, and nothing modifies it."¹¹

I broke my teeth and head trying to get at what was "specific" in the "Specific Object" when I was a student in the mid-1990s. When I visited Judd's foundation and especially saw how he arranged his works always with a bed nearby to be able to look and think, how he collected Indian blankets and how he organized his kitchen and library, always with stones taken from outside and a relation to the horizon line, I got it. This work needs to be set. It might be the crucial point of setting that is at stake here, in the post-performance painting moment.

SETTING A PAINTING AS SETTING A TABLE

The very light brush movement on the surface of Kate Spencer Stewart's paintings and her squarish dimensions look at first glance like a backdrop of an Edouard Manet or other nineteenth-century modern painting. The work is hung quite low, lower than normal eye level, which creates a sense of strangeness and discomfort for the viewer. We need to be quite close to it, and it makes us part of the set in an ambiguous, uncanny manner. In her installation at Michael's Gallery, Santa Monica, which is in fact a restaurant, the paintings create a set effect, as if the tables, chairs, and fireplace are the artifice and the paintings the "real furniture."

This almost choreographic movement is also at stake in Ron Amstutz's recent large paintings. *Bluetape* (2018), and *Grey* (2018) came out of the experience of *RE:ENACT* (2014), a performance that took place in his studio for more than a year and became a stop-motion film. The paintings are taped strips on large canvases. If presented as vertical panels, their dimensions are the same as the large studio windows. This element has been the set of the ongoing performance that animated the body of the artist for months, creating a global work with costume, floor and wall paintings, and music. The set changed according to the light, from sunrise to sunset. Twelve hours became the rays of lines on the ceiling, walls, floor, and from the studio box the artist created a post-performance film and then a post-film painting series.

This opens a new perspective to the strip line pattern (the abstract painting history from action expressionist to Color Field painting), and the zip line—in reference to Barnett Newman "zips" made with

tape—is actually the gaffer’s work in the studio. It wouldn’t exist without all the process of acting out a space, creating an ongoing work-opera. Here the painting is a post-score, which wouldn’t have existed without the enactment. It is a choreography of light on a wall that has shaped the canvas, as a dance score. Here again, each prop is handmade and as for Cointet, they are “volume paintings”. Through this pop-up ongoing grammar, Amstutz reenacts the initial lines and post-performs the painting, which becomes a performed film.

Each sequence is a painting in action.

MOBILE STATION OWNER AS CURATOR, PAINT THAT SUCKS, OOPS, I DID IT AGAIN

Kirsten Mosher is an artist I have been following and inviting to many exhibitions since we first met when I was at New York’s Museum of Modern Art in 1995. One hour and ten minutes from the Big Apple and you are out of the gallery world. Mosher built a large corpus of works under the generic title *Gumhead* (2010-ongoing). The brightly colored gums that she chews become part of poetical and sharp tableaux set in the streets of Beacon, New York, where she also performed wearing cardboard outfits. Her posters and paintings are made from the fluids issued from the chewing activity, and objects. The Mobil gas station in Beacon became her experimental performing place. She undertook an ongoing negotiation with the manager as her personal curator. This act of transforming her domestic place into her studio and then a very public place (a gas station) into her gallery correspond to the radical critique of using the body (saliva as aesthetic fluid, organic pictorial binder) and performs the yellow home Post-Its in larger post-performance paintings.

Baldessari enacted his *Cremation Project* so that he would never go back to the painting he was making before. The legalistic, notarized act states that all his paintings made before 1970 have been burned. All? Not exactly, as his sister found some early ones from the 1960s in her garage some years after. The return of the paintings was poetically expressed by Baldessari as “Paint is like toilet paper, it sticks to your sole whenever you try to drop it.”¹² Some students in art schools seem to apologize when they present their paintings. It sounds like a sin. Julien Bismuth’s *OOPS Paintings* (2014) are scores to be reenacted. They are made using the “Oops” paint cans that some stores sell for a bargain price. They are errors made products again. Bismuth perverts the capitalist performativity, bringing back the paint as an art tool.

PAINTING AS (RE)ENACTEMENT OF BODY
KNOWLEDGE, PAINTING AS A BREACH OF REALITY,
LETTERS AS SILHOUETTES IN THE BODY OF PAINTING

Glenn Ligon's 2018 exhibition at Galerie Chantal Crousel in Paris, *Debris/fields*, enacted our invisible history through the embodiment of words inside the skin of the canvas. *Debris* is a French word for a remaining fragment, left apart, junk. The anagrammatic effect of the black letters embodied in the white field like a skin drove me back to my first encounter with Ligon's work in 1995. I went to the Whitney Museum of American Art and saw the exhibition *Black Male*, which included Ligon and Byron Kim's piece *Rumble Young Man, Rumble (Version #2)* (1993): a punching bag imprinted with black oil-stick letters. It was what I call an "epiphany of the real"—an encounter of real and imaginary on a surface. Serigraphy and paint are like scars on a body, embodied memory. We, viewers, are in the active position to struggle with texts' (James Baldwin, Gertrude Stein) own body and memory. There is no escape: we are part of the problem. As Felix Gonzalez-Torres puts

9. Michael Zahn, email to the author, December 2018.
10. Michael Zahn, email to the author, December 2018. He went on to say: "In general, much of this recent work is related to Friedrich Kittler's sense of 'media' as that which is made by humankind, be it music, a photograph, architecture, a boat, the tools that produce these things, or what have you. This question, taken together with Niklas Luhmann's understanding of social systems, gives me a solid position from which to view the heterogeneous appearance of contemporary culture. Kittler has allowed me to understand genre in a completely new way, and has opened a door onto what you are calling a 'post-performative' type of painting."
11. Judd Donald, *Writings*, edited by Flavin Judd and Caitlin Murray (Marfa, TX: Donald Judd Foundation, 2016), 191–92.
12. Conversation with the author, 2005.

it: "Aesthetics are politics, they are not even about politics, they are politics."¹³ This use of beauty as a weapon is at stake also in the work of Clément Rodzielski. *Untitled* (2018) is a part of a new series of images in which the artist's method mimics the model's attitude. With his eyes closed, the artist applies the paint in a blind way. The green color is the one of arsenic, which can be related to the Pharmakon.¹⁴ This act maintains the ambivalence as toxic and fascinating. The paint's handmade maculation blinds the flat surface and restores a sensuality to it, forcing us to have a real experience. Nick Oberthaler's text paintings (*EX, AHAH, S.O.S.*) embody language in the action of painting. The text is not a pattern or flat composition, but as in his recent profile *Untitled (Topology)* (2018), a colored shadow. This orange silhouette-like mask projects the artist's face on the canvas grid, marking a breach in the decades-long tradition of postmodernist nonrepresentational dogma.

PAINTING AS SHOOTING, PAINTING AS A COMBAT SPORT, ANTI-PERFORMATIVE PAINTING AS POST- PERFORMANCE, ERASING MANET AND PERFORMING

Richard Jackson uses the canvas as a shooting exercise. The first time I met him in his studio in Los Angeles, he held a rifle. Reenacting Georges Seurat's *A Sunday on la Grande Jatte* (1884-1886), each dot became a painted bullet. Jackson applies his hunting skills to paint. Works like *La Palette* (2017) and *Paintings* (2018) are demonstrations of post-performing acts. For the first he had the eponymous restaurant remade inside a gallery as a set for an evening performance where the artist transformed the bar draughts of beer as paint containers and tools. In the latter case, the canvas pieces became also the props of

their own setting. They performed themselves: paintings as paintings.

The one-to-one scale is a stage effect. Stephen Prina's practice is a rock 'n' roll attitude. The 2012 performance at Maureen Paley, London, was an example of his constant restaging of parts of the ongoing series *Exquisite Corpse: The Complete Paintings of Manet* (1988-ongoing), and *Blinds* (2006-ongoing). The first series consists of two framed papers, forming a diptych. One is an erased work of Manet, following the exact shape and size, with an applied sepia ink solution, and the second is a lithograph of the entire work reduced to a structural grid. Prina erases and reveals at the same time a painting that via this performed gesture becomes part of a common history. The *Blinds* are printed, brush-like gestures on mass-produced canvas, combining red, yellow, and blue and can be rolled according to the set necessities. Since 1999, the artist has signed his presence by emptying the contents of a can of spray paint, spattering like blood on the floor.

The overall title is meant to be a provocation: just as Giorgione or Francisco de Goya is in Manet, so Manet is in me. Artists are collaborators with history. “When I first studied neoclassical art and learned, for instance, what was at stake in Jacques-Louis David’s painting—that if he’d spoken directly he’d risk censorship or death—I felt a shock of recognition. As a queer boy and man, I’d been living allegory all my life.”¹⁵ Prina embodies a history and makes us think about what we don’t want to see behind the curtain. If modernity opened with a framed canvas, with David, contemporary art started in 1917 with *Parade*, an opera for which Pablo Picasso made a large curtain. It was the time of one of the largest massacres in world history, World War I.

What is it that we don’t want to see today?

It seems that the young generation of painters, as Manon Vargas, Hugo Ferreto, Floris Dutoit, and Pierre Masclef for example, address us a look that performs the work of the painter as a witness of his or her time, which alerts the audience and makes them part of it. Behind the glass wall of the private president’s salon, they stood, watching. It was the occasion of the *Salon Discret*, celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the Centre Pompidou in Paris. In France the history of the museum is linked to the history of the Revolution. In 1977, the utopia was to open the museum to the city as a modern-day forum. Today the doors are closed and we are scanned before entering because of the terrorist threat. Were we surprised that in Act III of the Yellow Vests demonstrations, a plaster mold of a woman’s head, part of François Rude’s high relief of La Marseille, was destroyed by fascist vandals? In Act VI of the Yellow Vests theater of actions, the museums were on alert, Le Musée de l’Orangerie potentially attacked? Maybe the better answer are Simon Bergala’s paintings, which are made on recycled

outfits to be actually walked around in, in the streets. “They are traditional framed paintings which canvas is the actual jacket’s or sweater’s fabric. Performance builds these paintings in the sense that they are conceived for several situations, the one of the exhibition like a painting on the wall, worn as clothes, in the city. The object contains both options,” explains the artist.¹⁶

February 28, 2013: the recent “poncho” conceived by Bergala with Paul Desravines is like the colorful Harlequin outfit, combining fragments of “readymade” found paintings (as the artists take the canvas from used outfits). Like film editing, the fragmented painting can be worn as a cape, spread on the floor like a carpet, or hung on the wall like an Indian blanket or a painting. The philosopher Michel Serres used the Harlequin costume as a metaphor for the “instructed third” who is the Métis in our post-human times.¹⁷ It is also, dealing in and out of the architectural walls of museums, a way to pollinate the city: painting as a moving structure, a third way in between horizontal and vertical powers.

SNAPSHOTS: AFTERIMAGE, POST-PERFORMANCE, OVERLAPPING SPACES

“I have always been conscious that the material on which the paint is placed can be extended to the space in which the action happens... I always like to photograph what’s just been made... At certain points, these views become more interesting than the individual works. Things overlap, are hidden or relieved, works and tools in the same plane of vision. There is an energy of the situation that can be interesting in the photos of the studio and the works within,” ex-

presses Charlie Hamish Jeffery.¹⁸ Like Constantin Brâncuși's studio photos, which are sculptures made of shadows and light, Jeffery's still images are instant performances. They proceed from an understanding of art technologies as poison and cure, and a turning point that is not archive, but maybe a sketch after a masterpiece. Overlapping studio and exhibition spaces, they exceed the frame of support definition, making the medium a polysemic practice.

This is a revolution, a transformation in process, like a mutation or change of clothes. Turning again to the Yellow Vests, we must beware that they are not black inside, and that the safety vest doesn't become a uniform. In *Ecran Total* (1997), Jean Baudrillard writes: "When there is a collective loss of immune defenses or loss of symbolic defenses, then some societies become vulnerable to terrorism, drugs, violence, fascism."¹⁹

That is why thinking the question of painting as a post-performative act is linked to thinking the context in which a practice has emerged from the post-Cold War moment to post-human times. As our history is made of symbols and by symbolic actions, we need to see the new drippings on our monument walls. Considering them as post-performative painting is a way to avoid their transformation into "fatal screens" a tragic issue in a period of "screen times". Painting, in this context, is a possible future.

Marie de Brugerolle is independent curator, writer, professor (France, Czech Republic, Los Angeles). She organized the first retrospectives of Allen Ruppersberg, CNAC, Magasin, Grenoble (1996), John Baldessari, Carrée d'art, Nîmes (2005) and Larry Bell, Carré d'art, Nîmes (2010). She rediscovered Guy de Cointet (1934-1983) and curated Guy de Cointet's first global exhibition *Who's That Guy?*, MAMCO, Geneva (2004) and *Faire des choses avec des mots/Making Words With Things*, CRAC Sète (2006). She co-curated with Dora García *I was a Male Yvonne de Carlo*, MUSAC, Léon (2011–12), *LA EXISTANCIAL*, LACE, Los Angeles (2013), *ALL THAT FALLS*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2014), *RIDEAUX/blinds*, IAC, Villeurbanne, (2015), *Le Petit A de O*, a tribute to a "A" by Olivier Mosset and Cody Choi, Culture Cuts, MAC, Marseille (2016), and *Le Salon Discret*, Centre Pompidou, Paris (2017).

13. Glenn Ligon and Marie de Brugerolle, "Get the Picture," in *Documents sur l'art*, no. 7 (1995): 26–29, reprinted in Glenn Ligon, *Yourself in the World*, ed. Scott Rothkopf (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2011), 85–86. Ligon concluded our conversation like this: "There's a lot of talk about painting being regressive, because it's related to the history and the language of a certain class. I primarily consider myself a painter. No form is fixed as regressive or progressive. I'm interested in works that know their limitations. Painting is so much about beauty and seduction. That's part of the aesthetics. It calls attention to itself in ways that other forms don't. The most successful works understand that and use it to get messages across and get people to think."
14. As Derrida puts it in his analysis of Plato's medicine and poison in *La Dissémination* (2003): artificial color, make-up. In ancient Greece, *pharmakon* had three meanings: the medicine, the poison, and the scapegoat. Any technical object is pharmacology: both poison and cure. Rodzielski's use of magazines points to the alienation potential of images today.
15. Stephen Prina, conversation with Steel Stillman, *Art in America*, April 26, 2013.
16. E-mail conversation with the author, 2018.
17. Michel Serres, *Le Tiers-Instruit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992).
18. Conversation with the author, October 2018.
19. Jean Baudrillard, *Ecran Total* (Paris: Galilée, 1997), 112.

Glenn Ligon

8 Sep — 4 Oct 2018 at the Galerie Chantal Crousel in Paris, France

24 SEPTEMBER 2018



Glenn Ligon. Courtesy of Galerie Chantal Crousel

For his first solo exhibition at Galerie Chantal Crousel, Glenn Ligon will present a new series of large and small silkscreen and ink marker paintings, based on abstracted letter forms; two figurative neon installations inspired by an uncompleted project of Pier Paolo Pasolini; ten oil stick and coal dust paintings on paper quoting a Gertrude Stein text.

Since the 1990s, Glenn Ligon has been exploring American history, literature and society by turning focusing on words, their meaning and illegibility. Relying on various literary sources such as texts by James Baldwin, Gertrude Stein, Walt Whitman or Jean Genet to name only a few, his approach gives palpable density and weight to the word.

With this new body of work presented in Paris, Ligon takes text to an even more abstract level.

A catalogue will accompany the exhibition, with an essay by Sara Nadal-Melsió, professor, writer, curator, poems by Gregg Bordowitz, artist, writer and scholar. It will be published in October 2018. A panel talk with the artist and Sara Nadal-Melsió will take place at the gallery on September 11.

Glenn Ligon opened his studio to Sara Nadal-Melsió during the whole preparation of the show. As a result, the author explores Ligon's presented works relying on three ideas: improvisation, frontality, opacity.

Glenn Ligon

8 sept. — 4 oct. 2018 à la Galerie Chantal Crousel à Paris, France

24 SEPTEMBRE 2018



Glenn Ligon. Courtesy of Galerie Chantal Crousel

Pour sa première exposition personnelle à la Galerie Chantal Crousel, Glenn Ligon présente une nouvelle série de peintures sérigraphiées sur toile, en grands et petits formats, basée sur des formes abstraites de lettres ; deux néons aux motifs figuratifs, inspirés d'un projet non-réalisé de Pier Paolo Pasolini ; dix peintures à l'huile et à la poussière de charbon sur papier, réalisées à partir d'un texte de Gertrude Stein.

Depuis les années 90, Glenn Ligon explore l'histoire des États-Unis, la littérature et les questions de société en se concentrant sur les mots, leurs sens et leur illisibilité. En se référant à diverses sources littéraires telles que les écrits de James Baldwin, Gertrude Stein, Walt Whitman ou Jean Genet pour ne citer qu'eux, son approche confère au mot un poids et une densité presque palpable.

Dans cette nouvelle série d'œuvres présentée à Paris, Ligon conduit le texte vers une dimension encore plus abstraite. Un catalogue accompagnera l'exposition. Il contiendra un texte de Sara Nadal-Melsió, commissaire d'exposition, écrivain et enseignante, ainsi que les poèmes de Gregg Bordowitz, artiste, écrivain et professeur. Il sera publié en octobre 2018. Une conversation aura lieu à la galerie entre l'artiste et Sara Nadal-Melsió le mardi 11 septembre.

Glenn Ligon a ouvert les portes de son studio à Sara Nadal-Melsió durant la préparation de cette exposition. Ainsi, l'auteur décrypte les œuvres présentées à travers trois notions : improvisation, frontalité, opacité. La version complète de ce texte est également disponible en ligne.

Glenn Ligon : du noir, du blanc et des néons pour penser le racisme

Par [Elvan Zabunyan](#)

À travers son œuvre, l'artiste Glenn Ligon analyse avec précision le racisme endémique des États-Unis. Les débris sur toiles, les mains levées lumineuses et les hommages projetés qui sont exposés à la Galerie Chantal Crousel invitent ainsi à une méditation active, à un moment où les mots ne suffisent plus à définir la violence de ce qui se joue entre les lignes.

On dit souvent que les œuvres d'art s'expriment d'elles-mêmes, que l'on peut y projeter de nombreux imaginaires et que des explications ne sont pas toujours nécessaires. Néanmoins, écouter l'artiste parler de son travail engage à une compréhension que l'on pourrait appeler « élargie » du processus privilégié, de la recherche menée et du résultat escompté. La clarté des propos de Glenn Ligon lors de la conversation qui était proposée par la [Galerie Chantal Crousel à Paris où il expose](#) pour la première fois, permettait d'appréhender des productions inédites à la lumière de ses références historiques, littéraires et artistiques.

L'artiste américain (né en 1960 dans le Bronx à New York) revenait notamment sur l'une de ses peintures iconiques *Untitled (I Am a Man)* réalisée en 1988. Cette huile et émail sur toile (d'un format de 101.6 par 63.5 centimètres) est la première qu'il réalise en s'appropriant un texte existant, ici celui de la pancarte portée par les agents de nettoyage en grève dans la ville de Memphis en 1968. Sur un fond blanc, les lettres se détachent en noir et en capitales **I AM A MAN**. Le verbe souligné accentue le statut revendiqué dans un contexte où ces travailleurs africains-américains exploités et moins payés que leurs collègues blancs affirment leur nature humaine. Dans la continuité de l'ouvrage publié par Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952), ils confirment leur visible dignité. On apprend par Glenn Ligon qu'à l'origine, cette toile était un monochrome noir qu'il a choisi de recouvrir de blanc et de ces mots. De façon générale, cette notion de strates est importante dans son travail, les couches sont autant celles d'une matérialité picturale que celles d'une généalogie à déployer pour penser les discriminations aux États-Unis.

C'est à l'hiver 1968 que la grève commence à Memphis dans l'état du Tennessee ; des années de salaires de misère et de conditions de travail dangereuses font éclater la contestation onze jours après la mort, le 1^{er} février, de deux éboueurs écrasés par un camion défectueux. Le mépris de la municipalité envers les travailleurs et le peu d'attention porté au drame sont à l'origine de la grève portée par 1300 agents de nettoyage. L'absence de dialogue et l'impossibilité de toute négociation enveniment le conflit dans un contexte défini par des revendications sociales et économiques au sein même du mouvement des droits civiques. La grève dure plusieurs mois et c'est pour soutenir le mouvement que Martin Luther King Jr se rend dans la ville à deux reprises. La seconde est le 3 avril 1968, c'est là, au lendemain de son fameux discours « Je suis allé jusqu'au sommet de la montagne » qu'il est tué au balcon du motel où il loge.

Dans le film *King, de Montgomery à Memphis* réalisé en 1970 par Ely Landau à partir de documents visuels et sonores sélectionnés entre 1955 et 1968 (le film n'avait encore jamais été projeté au cinéma en France avant

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ce mois d'août, il est actuellement sur les écrans), on voit les manifestations où les travailleurs portent les pancartes *I AM A MAN* comme autant de signes ponctuant l'espace urbain. Les violences que l'on distingue sur les images lorsque les assemblées de grévistes sont dispersées par la police se soldent par des rues jonchées de débris et de pancartes abandonnées, aplaties par la pluie. Le noir et blanc de l'image brille d'une lumière argentée, la détresse est visible dans ce simple contraste visuel.

Glenn Ligon explique que cette série est née du trouble créé par la présente situation politique des États-Unis, conséquence directe de la gouvernance actuelle

C'est ce dernier que Glenn Ligon travaille depuis trente ans, faisant du noir et du blanc les repères majeurs de ses compositions. Il choisit de reproduire au pochoir dès la fin des années 1980 des fragments de textes empruntés à James Baldwin ou à Zora Neale Hurston. Il pose les lettres sur une toile et fait qu'un texte connu se transforme et s'épaissit au fur et à mesure des passages de peinture : si la première phrase subsiste, la texture peu à peu s'opacifie et se densifiant tend à l'abstraction. De James Baldwin, il reprend un extrait de *Stranger in the Village* (1953) et choisit dans *How it Feels To Be Colored Me* (1928) de Zora Neale Hurston la phrase « Là où je me sens la plus colorée est quand je suis projetée sur un mur blanc ». Cette citation adhère avec force tant aux réalités du racisme qu'aux lettres noires tapées sur une page blanche ou aux paradoxes d'un art contemporain exposé dans un *white cube*.

L'œuvre de Ligon, *I AM A MAN*, a été acquise de façon précipitée par la National Gallery of Art de Washington DC lors des derniers mois de l'administration Obama. Depuis, comme un rappel à l'humanité, le musée situé à vingt minutes à pied de la Maison Blanche le maintient en veille sur ses murs quels que soient les accrochages de sa collection.

La nouvelle série réalisée par Glenn Ligon s'intitule *Debris Field* (2018), elle se compose de toiles où les pochoirs n'aboutissent plus à des lettres distinctes mais produisent des formes gravées décalées. *Debris* a le même sens en anglais et en français. Les traces sur la surface du tableau représentent, au sens propre comme au sens figuré, un champ fragmenté de débris, autant de signes blancs et noirs raccordés entre eux au marqueur noir comme un coloriage qui viendrait remplir les failles. Tels des signes flottants ou des lucioles désorientées, ces lettres-taches cherchent leur chemin sur la toile devenue vue aérienne d'une manifestation qui aurait été dispersée et dont les restes recouvriraient le sol, semblables à ces images de Memphis où les hommes derrière les pancartes sont redevenus invisibles. Glenn Ligon explique que cette série est née du trouble créé par la présente situation politique des États-Unis, conséquence directe de la gouvernance actuelle.

Pour lui qui, de façon érudite, analyse avec précision le racisme endémique de la société américaine depuis plusieurs décennies, il y a un dérèglement de taille qu'il choisit de représenter par ces champs de débris, symptômes d'un moment où les mots ne suffisent plus à définir la violence de ce qui se joue entre les lignes. Conservé dans ses archives au Schomburg Center for Black Culture de Harlem, un texte manuscrit et inédit de James Baldwin évoque cette idée : « le langage alors – ou plus précisément le vocabulaire du langage, n'est pas simplement le mot mais l'intonation, la cadence. Le battement du silence entre le son. [...] le poids donné à un mot par ce qui lui précède ou le suit [...] Un langage est créé et les règles du langage sont dictées par ce que le langage ne peut pas véhiculer ».

Par ces mains en néon et la gestuelle qu'elles symbolisent, l'artiste raccorde l'histoire de cette violence à une forme conceptuelle et propose un langage qui serait devenu langue des signes.

En parallèle à sa série picturale, l'artiste propose deux néons, représentations monumentales de mains aux doigts écartés (213 x 394 cm et 210,8 x 141 cm) dont les parties visibles sont peintes en noir alors que la partie qui fait face au mur crée un halo de lumière venant doubler la forme. Les deux œuvres datent de 2018 et sont respectivement intitulées :

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Notes for a Poem on The Third World (chapter one) et *Notes for a Poem on The Third World (chapter two)*. Le « premier chapitre » a été créé en référence aux gestes repris par les militants de Black Lives Matter à l'issue du meurtre de Michael Brown à Ferguson en 2014. Le jeune homme de dix-huit ans aurait levé les mains en précisant au policier qui l'a tué « Don't shoot ». Depuis, le slogan « Hands Up ! Don't Shoot ! » exprime le leitmotiv d'un acte de résistance pacifique face à l'injustice. Par ces mains en néon et la gestuelle qu'elles symbolisent, l'artiste raccorde l'histoire de cette violence à une forme conceptuelle et propose un langage qui serait devenu langue des signes.

Dès le début des années 1990, les attaques racistes contre la jeunesse des zones urbaines où prévaut la précarité sont au cœur de son travail. Avec *Victim Study (Yusef Hawkins)* (1990) ou *Picky* (1993), Glenn Ligon cartographie déjà le déplacement limité et surveillé des jeunes africains-américains qui risquent menaces et agressions en raison de la couleur de leur peau. Dans la partie qu'il lui consacre dans son livre *Bound to Appear* (2013), l'historien d'art Huey Copeland (qui sera professeur invité à l'EHESS en novembre 2018) écrit : « Être un piéton noir sur cette carte et souffrir des expériences qui y sont décrites, c'est être un marqueur de frontière, c'est porter la peur du « ghetto » dans toutes ses menaces stéréotypées, d'endurer le processus d'« épidermalisation », qui, comme le montre le philosophe Frantz Fanon, constitue le sujet noir tel un *texte transparent* des anxiétés qui lui sont jetées à la peau ».

Glenn Ligon emprunte littéralement le titre de ses néons à Pier Paolo Pasolini. *Appunti per un poema sul terzo mondo (Notes pour un poème sur le tiers-monde)* est un projet inabouti du cinéaste qu'il envisage de réaliser en 1968 dans la volonté de réfléchir au monde dans son ensemble à partir d'études de cas et de pays. Cinq épisodes représenteraient respectivement « l'Inde », « l'Afrique noire », « les pays arabes », « l'Amérique latine » et « un ghetto noir des États-Unis ». Sous la forme d'un documentaire qui n'en serait pas un, il souhaite filmer et monter des fragments de façon à révéler des éléments représentatifs de différentes sociétés selon une perspective globale, sociale, culturelle, économique et politique.

Pour son épisode dans les « ghettos noirs », Pasolini parle du « thème spécifique du *dropping out* où l'exclusion et l'auto-exclusion sont deux moments autant dramatiques l'un que l'autre du racisme et de la violence comme réaction ». Il précise qu'il prendrait pour figure principale Malcolm X en s'appuyant notamment sur l'autobiographie du leader tué trois ans auparavant. La façon dont Glenn Ligon raccorde toutes ces références est passionnante car il révèle par ce biais certaines de ces strates dont la superposition pourrait aussi, dans un contexte politique, être le résultat d'une forme de clandestinité subtile où l'art jouerait le rôle de transmetteur secret.

L'exposition de Glenn Ligon est comme une méditation sur le monde qui ne se veut pas de tout repos.

L'exposition parisienne de Glenn Ligon s'intitule *Debris Field/Notes for a Poem on the Third World/Soleil nègre*. La traduction anglaise du dernier tronçon de ce titre est « negro sunshine » et renvoie à Gertrude Stein, en particulier à *Trois vies*, son premier ouvrage publié en 1909. Le second récit d'une des trois vies est celui de Melanctha, une femme métisse dont les origines noires et blanches orientent son existence duelle. Ligon interroge l'ambivalence de cette expression et le contraste créé par l'image d'un soleil noir en apposant les mots écrits à la peinture à huile et à la poussière de charbon sur dix petites surfaces accrochées juste en face des deux mains en néon. La lumière diffusée par ce soleil est-elle également noire ? *Negro Sunshine* est précisément le titre du premier travail en néon que l'artiste a réalisé en 2011, produisant par ce geste la fusion physique de deux éléments pensés comme contraires.

Par le souhait de partager ses sources, l'artiste a placé dans un coin de la galerie un carrousel Kodak qui projette en boucle vingt diapositives : d'un sol en mosaïque à Herculaneum en Italie à un mur en mosaïque de La Havane à Cuba, en passant par un poème de Henri Michaux ou un feuillet de l'album *Muragga* réalisé en Iran et datant des XVI^e-XVII^e siècles, les images se succèdent. Parmi elles, *Concerto in Black and Blue* (2002) de

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David Hammons où on distingue un homme dans un espace sombre éclairé d'une lumière bleue.

Sans doute ici un hommage que Ligon souhaite rendre à un artiste qui a réussi à rester insaisissable dans le monde de l'art contemporain malgré sa célébrité (Hammons est né en 1943 dans l'Illinois, il est considéré aujourd'hui comme l'un des plus grands artistes américains). *Concerto in Black and Blue* était une exposition que Hammons avait réalisé à New York dans la Ace Gallery de Soho : les visiteurs entraient dans un espace entièrement noir et une petite torche avec une lumière bleue leur était remise, ils et elles devaient ensuite s'avancer à l'aveugle dans l'obscurité d'une galerie gigantesque s'orientant uniquement grâce aux lueurs éphémères des autres torches portées par des silhouettes fantomatiques. Le pied de nez était ici complet pour un système marchand n'ayant rien à se mettre sous la dent.

En pendant à cette diapositive, Ligon choisit de projeter un travail de Jean-Michel Basquiat *To Repel Ghosts* où sur un fond bleu les lettres blanches « TO REPEL GHOSTS » se détachent barrées d'un trait noir fait au pinceau. L'œuvre date de 1986, année où Basquiat a fait son premier et dernier voyage africain en se rendant en Côte d'Ivoire dans le cadre d'une exposition que lui consacre le Centre culturel français d'Abidjan. « Repousser les fantômes » mais préserver à tout prix les esprits protecteurs, telle pourrait être ici la devise. L'exposition de Glenn Ligon est comme un voyage dans des terres proches et lointaines, des contextes politiques et poétiques, des images mentales et sensorielles, des références historiques et actuelles. Une méditation sur le monde qui ne se veut pas de tout repos.

L'exposition de Glenn Ligon « Debris Field/Notes for a Poem on the Third World/Soleil nègre » est présentée à la Galerie Chantal Crousel, 10 rue Charlot 75003 Paris, jusqu'au 4 octobre 2018.

Elvan Zabunyan

Historienne de l'art contemporain, Professeure à l'Université Rennes 2 et critique d'art

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GLENN LIGON — GALERIE CHANTAL CROUSEL

📌 Critique Le 19 septembre 2018 — Par Guillaume Benoit

La galerie Chantal Crousel propose, du 8 septembre au 4 octobre, une exposition sobre qui parvient à mettre en valeur le travail profond et beau de Glenn Ligon. Figure de la scène artistique new-yorkaise, il développe depuis plus de vingt ans un œuvre empreint de peinture, de littérature et de graphisme qui questionne les déterminations sociales et la concrétude de la langue dans l'expression artistique.

« *Debris Field/Notes for a Poem on the Third World/Soleil Nègre* », Galerie Chantal Crousel du 8 septembre au 4 octobre. *En savoir plus*

Ce natif du Bronx, amoureux éconduit par ses professeurs d'alors de peinture abstraite (il cite volontiers ses idoles : De Kooning, Pollock et Kline), aura ainsi entamé sa carrière d'artiste de biais, délaissant une place en cabinet d'avocats à la faveur d'une bourse artistique qui le conduira à « assumer » sa vocation de créateur. Sexualité et homosexualité, statut de l'homme noir dans la société, les questions qui taraudent son œuvre sont celles d'un temps et d'une biographie qui se mêle à sa pratique. Comme une évidence, les mots qu'il avait coutume d'accoler à ses compositions deviendront eux-mêmes la matière

picturale de son œuvre, l'événement tangible d'une création qui prolongera l'acte de l'inscription jusqu'à l'invention de formes matérielles, de précipités de signes et de lettres comme autant de trames d'un motif inédit, d'un sujet indicible composé de signes intelligibles.



Vue de l'exposition *Debris Field/Notes for a Poem on the Third World/Soleil Nègre*
Photo : Florian Kleinfenn

Benoit, Guillaume

« *Glenn Ligon - Galerie Chantal Crousel* »

Slash September 19, 2018.

<https://slash-paris.com/articles/glenn-ligon-galerie-chantal-crousel>

Un mouvement que l'on retrouve dans les trois séries présentées dans l'exposition qui se complètent et évoquent entre elles la puissance esthétique de l'écriture. De la force plastique des courbes typographiques en passant par le plaisir sensuel de l'encre liquide dont les reflets sont magnifiés par ses recherches picturales sur le noir. Même ses néons noirs, dessinant des mains d'un trait hésitant rejoignent, à la manière de motifs répétables, la question de l'écrit en ouvrant encore ses significations. Variation symbolique de son œuvre, les différentes implémentations de tube de peinture sur les caractères répétant la locution « Soleil nègre » jusqu'à disparaître totalement, s'émancipant totalement dans l'oxymore symbolique qu'il représente.

Dans ses grandes toiles, véritables pièces majeures de l'exposition, Ligon libère le caractère typographique de sa signification originelle vers des compositions audacieuses et étranges, retrouvant, à travers leurs formes, une essence organique intrigante et dont la profondeur fabuleuse du noir qui se cuivre marque sa différence avec les traces de signes qui le parsèment.



*Vue de l'exposition Debris Field/Notes for a Poem on the Third World/Soleil Nègre
Photo : Florian Kleinferrn*

En ce sens, la présentation qu'en propose Chantal Crousel respecte au plus près l'évidence, la frontalité qui a toujours caractérisé sa démarche et lui a assuré une reconnaissance dépassant largement le public spécialisé (ses peintures atteignent depuis quelques années des sommets en salles des ventes). Ici encore, Glenn Ligon défie le sens premier pour laisser vivre un sous-texte qui engage le regardeur.

Quelle position tenir face à la répétition lascive et presque industrielle, de par son usage de capitales d'imprimerie délestées de signes de ponctuation ? Quelle empathie, quelle colère partager face à un geste de peintre éminemment subjectif qui aligne les lettres pour former des monologues obsessionnels analogues aux supplications internes que l'on répète intérieurement face aux dangers ? Un désir commun et urgent de partager et prolonger ces gestes d'émancipation sans doute.

Benoit, Guillaume

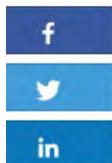
« Glenn Ligon - Galerie Chantal Crousel »

Slash September 19, 2018.

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GLENN LIGON – OBSCURCIR POUR RÉVÉLER

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Exposition à la Galerie Chantal Crousel

L'histoire commence ainsi : à l'âge de neuf ans, le jeune Glenn Ligon doit préparer un objet en papier mâché de son choix pour sa classe d'art de primaire. Il vient d'une famille afro-américaine et habite depuis sa naissance dans le Bronx. Ligon décide de construire le bateau du Titanic et ensuite de le peindre : il utilise toute la palette de couleurs et donne forme à un navire multicolore. Mais l'institutrice lui fait immédiatement comprendre que son travail est laid et qu'il lui faut tout repeindre. C'est à ce moment-là que naît son premier geste artistique, geste de réaction et d'invention simultanées : par défiance, le navire est entièrement recouvert de peinture noire, ce qui vaut à l'enfant une sévère réprimande et fait du noir le centre névralgique de la pratique du futur artiste.

Cette anecdote que raconta Glenn Ligon le mardi 11 septembre 2018 lors d'une discussion avec Sara Nadal-Melsió autour de son travail exposé à la Galerie Chantal Crousel constitue désormais un mythe fondateur pour l'artiste. C'est à partir de cette histoire d'enfance que sa pratique et la puissance de son oeuvre peuvent se déployer devant les yeux du spectateur. Le travail de Ligon est tout entier traversé par un double mouvement : celui d'une réaction face à la violence infligée aux victimes d'un pays encore divisé par la question de la race et celui d'un défi consistant à réinscrire au coeur de l'histoire des Etats-Unis la présence des exclus. Et le noir, cette non-couleur, cet écran opaque qui bloque la vue, révélera ce qui ne cesse d'être oublié.

Dans *Soleil Nègre* (2018), une série de tableaux-textes de l'artiste, des mots sont discernables mais leurs contours n'ont ni début ni fin : « SOLEIL » ; « NEGR... » ; la lecture s'arrête là. Face à l'opacité du texte, inutile de persister. De même que le noir ne reflète aucune couleur, de même le texte ne laisse filtrer aucune phrase compréhensible. Le regard rentre dans un mur de mots qui résistent à la lecture fluide. Les textes choisis par l'artiste sont ceux de James Baldwin, Gertrude Stein, ou Jean Genet, mais au lieu de les imprimer noir sur blanc Ligon recouvre certains passages de poussière de charbon, jetant ainsi dans l'obscurité et le texte et son sens. Le noir punit le spectateur. Ce dernier se voit obligé d'avancer à tâtons, aveugle, ne reconnaissant plus cet objet pourtant si familier qu'est le texte. Plongé dans la nuit du sens, il ne se confronte plus à une oeuvre qui serait une fenêtre ouverte sur le monde, transparente, au sens clair et immédiat. Mais du même mouvement le noir défie le spectateur ; il le défie d'entrer dans l'histoire du texte, d'en découvrir sa matière, de faire face à la réappropriation par un artiste noir d'un domaine qui a été historiquement privilégié par les hommes blancs, à savoir celui de la feuille de papier sur laquelle s'inscrit l'intelligence des hommes. Car le charbon qui s'étale sur l'image exprime la matérialité d'un texte qui est manipulé, qui détient une présence physique réelle. Le charbon entache la belle abstraction des mots noirs sur la page blanche et ce faisant rappelle que le langage n'est pas un système clos mais un objet de travail qui n'a de cesse d'être réinventé.

Francis Baptiste Haselden

« Glenn Ligon, *Obscurcir pour révéler* »

Point Contemporain, September 2018.

<http://pointcontemporain.com/glenn-ligon-obscurcir-pour-reveler/>

Et le noir enténèbre d'autres espaces de la galerie. L'oeuvre en néon *Notes for a Poem on the Third World* (2018) brille comme un soleil noir baudelairien. Une main en l'air, la paume ouverte, fait face au spectateur. Il s'agit du geste emblématique du mouvement « Black Lives Matter », et, plus précisément, du dernier geste de Michael Brown qui répondit à l'ordre « Hands up ! » avant qu'il se fasse tuer par la police le 9 août 2014. Le travail de Ligon est le symbole de la résistance contre la violence policière et le racisme d'État ; il témoigne du manque de reconnaissance d'une communauté délaissée et toujours ségréguée.

Mais plus qu'un simple symbole de lutte contre la discrimination, ce travail engage une réflexion sur la nature du geste. La main levée frappe le regard. En tant que geste cristallisé dans un mouvement immobile, l'oeuvre est porteuse d'une signification évidente : il faut résister à la violence policière, déclame-t-elle. Ce disant, le sens est instantané ; il apparaît d'un coup, à même la lumière du néon. Ainsi le geste serait à première vue le médium par excellence qui délivre un message. Mais au même instant où la fin est réalisée – lorsque le message est exprimé – le moyen disparaît de notre perception. Car le néon n'est plus considéré en tant que tel ; ce qui compte, c'est le message qu'il cherche à signifier. La fin qu'est le sens du message prime dans ce cas sur le moyen qui la réalise. Mais est-ce ainsi qu'il faut interpréter le geste ? Faut-il comprendre le geste comme un simple mouvement corporel qui serait le signe d'un sens qui le dépasse, comme un moyen d'expression en vue d'une fin ?

La force de la peinture de Ligon renouvelle notre compréhension courante du geste. En effet, le détail déterminant de l'oeuvre lumineuse n'a pas encore été révélé : sur la face du néon exposée au spectateur, Ligon a déposé une couche de peinture noire. Par conséquent, tout comme la matière du texte fut exposée dans *Soleil Nègre*, le néon comme moyen d'éclairage est mis en évidence par la peinture. D'où une nouvelle conception du geste tel qu'il est mis en oeuvre par l'artiste new-yorkais et défini par Giorgio Agamben : « Le geste consiste à exhiber une médialité, à rendre visible un moyen comme tel »¹. Un geste n'est pas un mouvement du corps qui chercherait à signifier un sens qui le transcenderait, mais, au contraire, un geste souligne l'importance du corps en tant que moyen pur. L'artiste vise bien évidemment à atteindre cette fin qu'est l'égalité entre les blancs et les noirs, reste que cette fin n'est pas abstraite ; elle est solidaire du moyen grâce auquel elle peut advenir : le corps noir et sa présence physique. Et faire un geste, cela revient à exhiber la brutalité qui est exercée sur ce corps, l'interdiction qu'a celui-ci d'être dans certains endroits ou de mener certaines activités. Tel un danseur, l'artiste rappelle que la vie et la mobilité sont inséparables du corps, et, inversement, que la destruction du corps consonne avec la mort. En obscurcissant le néon, Ligon met en lumière la vulnérabilité du corps et sa centralité dans tout mouvement d'émancipation politique.

Tout se passe comme si le fantôme du navire noir, peint durant l'enfance de Ligon, traversait devant nos yeux les murs blancs de la galerie. En avançant, son étrave fend l'avenir et laisse derrière lui ces vagues obscures que sont la réprimande de jadis et la violence du présent.

¹ G. Agamben, « Notes sur le geste », trad. D. Loayza. <http://lemagazine.jeudepaume.org/2013/04/giorgio-agamben-notes-sur-legeste/>

Texte **Francis Baptiste Haselden** © Point contemporain

Visuel de présentation : Glenn Ligon, *Notes for a Poem on the Third World*. 2018. Néon et peinture. 210,8 x 141 cm.
Courtesy de l'artiste et de la Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Photo : Florian Kleinfenn



Glenn Ligon. *Soleil Nègre #9*. 2018. Bâtonnets de peinture à l'huile, poussière de charbon et gesso sur papier. 30.5 x 38 x 4 cm. Courtesy de l'artiste et de la Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Photo : Florian Kleinfenn.

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Debris Field/Notes for a Poem on the Third World/Soleil Nègre, Vue d'exposition. Crédits photo : Photo : Florian Kleinfenn, Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris

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Debris Field/Notes for a Poem on the Third World/Soleil Nègre

Commence aujourd'hui : 8 septembre → 4 octobre 2018

Pour sa première exposition personnelle à la Galerie Chantal Crousel, Glenn Ligon présente une nouvelle série de peintures sérigraphiées sur toile, en grands et petits formats, basée sur des formes abstraites de lettres ; deux néons aux motifs figuratifs, inspirés d'un projet non-réalisé de Pier Paolo Pasolini ; dix peintures à l'huile et à la poussière de charbon sur papier, réalisées à partir d'un texte de Gertrude Stein.

Depuis les années 90, Glenn Ligon explore l'histoire des États-Unis, la littérature et les questions de société en se concentrant sur les mots, leurs sens et leur illisibilité. En se référant à diverses sources littéraires telles que les écrits de James Baldwin, Gertrude Stein, Walt Whitman ou Jean Genet pour ne citer qu'eux, son approche confère au mot un poids et une densité presque palpable.

Dans cette nouvelle série d'œuvres présentée à Paris, Ligon conduit le texte vers une dimension encore plus abstraite. Tandis que la citation tirée de *Trois Vies* de Gertrude Stein disparaît sous une couche de poussière de charbon dans la série *Soleil Nègre*, le langage se désagrège pour prendre la forme de lettres abstraites sur les toiles de la série *Debris Field* et l'image universellement symbolique de la main remplace le texte pour donner forme aux deux néons.

Glenn Ligon (né en 1960) vit et travaille à New York. Son œuvre a été exposée dans de nombreuses institutions telles que le Whitney Museum of American Art à New York, Camden Arts Centre à Londres, le Power Plant à Toronto, le Walker Art Center à Minneapolis, le Studio Museum à Harlem, Institute of Contemporary Art à Philadelphie, ou encore le Kunstverein Munich. Il a notamment participé à plusieurs grandes manifestations collectives : la Biennale de Berlin (2014), la Biennale d'Istanbul (2011), documenta XI (2002), la Biennale de Gwangju (2000), la Biennale de Venise (1997 et 2015) et la Biennale Whitney (1991 et 1993).

Un catalogue accompagnera l'exposition. Il contiendra un texte de Sara Nadal, commissaire d'exposition, écrivain et enseignante, ainsi que les poèmes de Gregg Bordowitz, artiste, écrivain et professeur. Il sera publié en octobre 2018.

Debris Field/Notes for a Poem on the Third World/Soleil Nègre — Conversation entre l'artiste et Sara Nadal

Rencontre Mardi 11 septembre à 18:00

Une conversation aura lieu à la galerie entre l'artiste et Sara Nadal

« *Debris Field / Notes for a Poem on the Third World / Soleil Nègre* »

Slash, September 2018.

[https://slash-paris.com/fr/evenements/debris-field-notes-for-a-poem-on-the-third-world-soleil-](https://slash-paris.com/fr/evenements/debris-field-notes-for-a-poem-on-the-third-world-soleil-negre?utm_source=Abonn%C3%A9s+newsletter&utm_campaign=07d1f2ed0d-EMAIL_CAM-)

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展讯与对谈 | 格伦·利根 (Glenn Ligon)

原创: Robert Ayers Ocula艺术之眼 昨天

格伦·利根 (Glenn Ligon) 在桑塔画廊 (Galerie Chantal Crousel) 的首个个展“碎片场/第三世界诗歌的注释/黑人太阳” (Debris Field/Notes for a Poem on the Third World/Soleil Nègre) 将于9月8日开幕, 呈现其最新的绘画与霓虹装置作品。

本文将回顾Ocula作者Robert Ayers在去年与艺术家的一次对谈。



格伦·利根, Notes for a Poem on the Third World (chapter one), 2018, 霓虹灯, 颜料, 213 x 394 cm。图片提供: 艺术家, Luhring Augustine, 纽约, Regen Projects, 洛杉矶, Thomas Dane Gallery, 伦敦。拍摄: Ronald Amstutz

格伦·利根 (Glenn Ligon) 是60年代出生美国艺术家中最负盛名的一位。在讨论「后-黑人身份」 (post-blackness) 这个概念时, 人们常将他与纽约哈林区Studio Museum的馆长、主策展人Thelma Golden联系在一起。利根最有名的作品系列即是他的文字绘画, 他另也创作霓虹灯、影像及摄影作品, 也

For Glenn Ligon, Home Is Where History and Friends Are Inspirations



Glenn Ligon with a David Hammons work made by bouncing a grimy basketball on paper. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Glenn Ligon, the New York artist, is best known for canvases stenciled with fragments of famous texts that explore the experience of being black, and some deliberately slide from legibility into abstraction. While he doesn't exactly consider himself a collector, the walls of his TriBeCa apartment reflect a rich history of his artistic loves and influences.

Giving a tour of the works, acquired through purchase or exchanges with friends, the 56-year-old artist was most excited about one of David Hammons's basketball drawings, a delicate smokey abstraction made by bouncing a grimy basketball on a piece of paper. "David has been an amazing touchstone for a lot of artists," said Mr. Ligon, who said he first became interested in working with light after seeing Mr. Hammons's ["Concerto in Black and Blue" in 2002](#). Mr. Ligon currently has three neon text sculptures on view in New York, at the Studio Museum in Harlem, Petzel Gallery and the Whitney Museum of American Art.



David Hammons: Concerto in Black and Blue @ Ace Gallery, NY ... Video by photodirect

Other favorites include silhouetted figures on paper by [Bill Traylor](#), motion studies of a mixed-race boxer by [Eadweard Muybridge](#) and a canvas of white-on-black concentric waves by the Aboriginal artist [Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri](#). "It's about a myth from his language group in Australia and the formation of the land, but it's an incredible abstraction too," Mr. Ligon said. "Embedded in it is a secret language that's really inspiring to me." Here are edited excerpts from the conversation.

Why did you have to have this basketball drawing by David Hammons?

What I loved is it has two dates — 2004 and 2010. That is the year when he added a little electric clock on the back of the frame. If we're quiet, we'll actually hear it ticking. It's called "Time Out" and so much of David's work for me is about language and puns. Stop the clock. The team calls a timeout to regroup, strategize. All of that's in there, but it's also literally a record of the performance of bouncing a basketball. David is one of those artists who sparks the idea to come. That's the reason to have a work of art. Besides the visual pleasure, it gives you ideas.



A work by the Aboriginal artist Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Is there a story behind the [“I AM A MAN” poster](#)?

These were the signs carried in the sanitation workers’ strike in Memphis, the one that King went to support when he was assassinated. One of the earliest text paintings I made used that as its basis. I’ve been looking for one for a very long time. When that came up at auction, I thought, “I have to buy it.”

Where was your photograph of dancers taken?

[At the Savoy, by Roy DeCarava](#). He produced a portfolio for the Studio Museum in Harlem when I was an intern there in my 20s. I was too poor to buy it, but I wish to God I had just had the foresight to think, “This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.” I’ve never seen that kind of dancing. I’ve heard my mom describe going to clubs in Harlem and this kind of transition from vaudeville to performers doing these very bold comic dancing routines.

Who are some artists you trade works with?

[Byron Kim](#). [Lorna Simpson](#). [Lynette Yiadom-Boakye](#). [Duro Olowu](#), who’s a fashion designer and Thelma Golden’s husband. He made a beautiful shirt for me. Byron and I are always talking about our trade — I’m going to give you this thing and you’re going to give me that thing, but one or the other will just forget about it. We’ll be in the old folks home and it’ll be like, “Byron, remember you were going to give me that 30 years ago?”

« GLENN LIGON », *The Auburn Avenue*, June, 2017.
<https://www.theauburnavenue.com/glenn-ligon-interview>

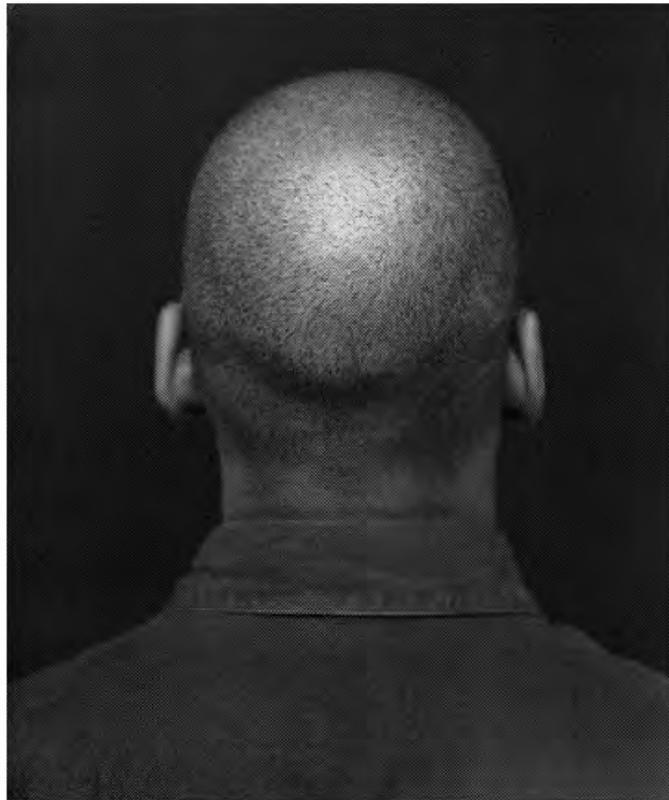
AUBURN AVENUE

GLENN LIGON

Cited as Barack Obama's favorite visual artist, Glenn Ligon has produced conceptual artwork for over three decades. His vision is sharply focused on examining the heartbeat of American culture -- measuring its pulse by exploring a myriad of social and cultural themes using various media.

We had the pleasure of speaking with him about his artistic process, life-long connection to art and the ultimate goal of his art.

Galerie
Chantal Crousel



Glenn Ligon, *Self-Portrait (II)*, 1996, silkscreen ink and gesso on canvas, 48 x 40 inches; © Glenn Ligon; Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London.

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**Thank you for taking time to speak with us. Let's start by going back.
Can you remember the very first time you fell in love with art?**

It must have been in elementary school. The school I went to when I was growing up in New York City didn't treat art classes like they were extra-curricular or the thing you did to fill the time until your math and science classes. Instead, art was treated as a way to critically analyze and understand the world.

How has life informed your art, or vice versa?

I grew up in a public housing project in the South Bronx. Someone doing an interview with me a couple of years ago asked what it was like to grow up in a "cultural desert." I had to remind them that hip-hop, a musical genre that has spread across the globe, originated in the "cultural desert" they claimed I grew up in. It was also a time when graffiti artists were using spray paint and words to create a new art form. Both of these things were huge influences on me.

Your vast collection of artwork includes references from notable writers, political figures, celebrities, musical artists, etc. How do you determine which references make it into your pieces?

I use text in my pieces when the text won't leave me alone: when I keep coming back to particular passages in an essay or a joke on a comedy album. When it persists in my head, constantly rising above the noise of daily life, that is when I think that I need to find a way to use it in an artwork.

Further, when conceptualizing an idea, how do you decide which medium you will use to execute the idea?

Sometimes things start out in the wrong medium. For example, I have made a number of drawings using the word "America." They are fine, but I made stronger work when I used the word "America" in neon, where the sense of the word as both something shining and in shadow was obvious.

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Malcolm X (Version 1) #1, Glenn Ligon, Malcolm X (Version 1) #1, 2000, Flashe paint, silkscreen ink and gesso on canvas, 96 x 72 inches; © Glenn Ligon; Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London. Vinyl-based paint, silkscreen ink, and gesso on canvas.

A fair amount of your artwork is known for being text-based, incorporating simple yet powerful words and phrases. Can you speak about your perceptive identification and use of such language, as well as about the intentionality of presenting it in your work?

The text is from people whose ideas I wanted in my work. An artwork, however, is not an essay. Each has its limits and strengths, things it can and cannot do. The crossing of text from the space of literature to the space of art allows it to do different things, which is what excites me.

Your neons have garnered considerable acclaim and notoriety in recent years. What is your take on the response to these pieces, specifically in regard to “Warm Broad Glow,” “Rückenfigur,” and “Double America?”

Each neon uses simple words that have complex meanings. I think viewers respond to the pieces because there are many ways to enter into them. After all, everyone understands the literal meanings of the words “negro sunshine” but what do they mean in the artwork? I am interested in that ambiguity.

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Glenn Ligon, *Double America*, 2012, Neon and paint, 36 x 120 inches; © Glenn Ligon; Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London.

The intersection of race, politics, identity, and history often underscores the ethos of your work. Is there a method by which you frame or integrate these constructs when crafting your art?

I am interested in how race, politics, identity, sexuality, history and other things interact. In particular, I am interested in how the past intrudes into the present. James Baldwin said that history is in us and I want to think about how history and other forces shape the way we live.

When you look at different pieces from your oeuvre, what do you see? Are there any particular pieces that evoke prominent emotions?

In my heart, I am a painter, so when I make a good painting I am the happiest.

From your perspective, what is the goal of your art?

To ask good questions.

AUBURN AVENUE



Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (I Am a Man)*, 1988, Oil and enamel on canvas, 40 x 25 inches; Collection of National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., © Glenn Ligon; Courtesy of the artist, Lühring Augustine, New York, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London.

Tell us a little about the creation of and inspiration behind your upcoming project, *Blue Black*.

Blue Black is a curatorial project at the Pulitzer Foundation in St. Louis that is in response to an Ellsworth Kelly wall sculpture of the same title that is permanently installed in one of the Foundation's main gallery spaces. When I first saw the Kelly piece I thought one could do an entire exhibition on how artists have used the colors blue and black in combination over a range of mediums. It has been exciting to see this all come together.

Going forward, are there any passion projects that you wish to undertake?

I have been asked to write about the work of many other artists for books and magazines over the years. While I enjoy it, I now want to figure out how to incorporate more of my own writing into the artwork I make. That would be a major breakthrough for me.

Glenn Ligon in Conversation



Glenn Ligon. Photo: Paul Sipuya.

Glenn Ligon is one of the most celebrated American artists of his generation. He is credited alongside Thelma Golden, director and chief curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem, with coining the term 'post-blackness', and is probably best known for his text-based paintings, though he has also worked in neon, video, and photography, and is also a successful writer and curator. Ligon achieved a particular kind of renown when *Black Like Me #2* (1992) was selected to hang in Barack and Michelle Obama's private quarters at the White House in 2009. This black oil and gesso on canvas picture takes its title from John Howard Griffin's 1961 memoir of the same name, in which Griffin, who was white, records his travels in the American South disguised as a black man. The work consists of a quotation from the memoir that is written over and over again ('All traces of the Griffin I had been were wiped from existence'). In 2011, the Whitney Museum of American Art held Ligon's first comprehensive mid-career retrospective, *AMERICA* (10 March–5 June 2011). The exhibition, which also travelled nationally, included such text-based paintings within the roughly 100 works on show, which also presented a range of other pieces across different media, including silkscreen prints, drawings and sculptural installations.



Installation view: *Blue Black*, West Gallery, Pulitzer Arts Foundation, St Louis, Missouri (9 June–7 October 2017). Courtesy Pulitzer Arts Foundation. Photo © Alise O'Brien Photography.

Blue Black is Ligon's latest project at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation in St Louis, Missouri (9 June–7 October 2017): a group exhibition that he curated, and which includes three of his own works alongside 51 by other artists. It takes as its starting point [Ellsworth Kelly](#)'s remarkable twenty-eight-foot-tall 'painted wall sculpture' of the same name, which was commissioned by the Pulitzer in 2001 and has been permanently installed in its spectacular Tadao Ando building ever since. For the show, Ligon has assembled a remarkable collection of artists, including [Joan Miró](#), [Kerry James Marshall](#), [Joan Mitchell](#), Mary Heilmann, [Susan Rothenberg](#) and Carrie Mae Weems. Their works accompany Kelly's *Blue Black*, weaving webs of meaning around the painted wall sculpture that are as stimulating as they are complex.

To begin with, Ligon found that the Kelly reminded him of Louis Armstrong's recording of '(What Did I Do to be so) Black and Blue?' and decided, as he explains in his introductory essay to the show, to explore 'what the lyrics of a melancholy show tune about racial equality had to do with Kelly's rigorous and elegant paintings...' That space has proven to be full of possibilities, for this is a rich and multifaceted exhibition with a whole range of interpretations of how the colours blue and black might be understood. For example, Armstrong's recording is cited at the beginning of Ralph Ellison's 1952 *Invisible Man*, which itself forms the subject of [Tim Rollins and K.O.S.'s *Invisible Man \(after Ralph Ellison\)*](#) (2015). This painting hangs in the first room of *Blue Black*, alongside portrait paintings by Jack Whitten, Carrie Mae Weems, [Lynette Yiadom-Boakye](#) and—perhaps most significantly in this context—by Kerry James Marshall, whose *Untitled (policeman)* (2015) shows a black police officer sitting on the bonnet of his car. This is a perplexing enough painting wherever you hang it, given current arguments around the policing of America's African-American communities; but as the Pulitzer is less than half an hours drive from Ferguson, the scene of protests after the 2014 police killing of the unarmed teenager Michael Brown, it is given a significant extra political charge.



Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled (policeman)* (2015). Synthetic polymer paint on PVC panel with plexi frame. 152.4 x 152.4 cm. Courtesy The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

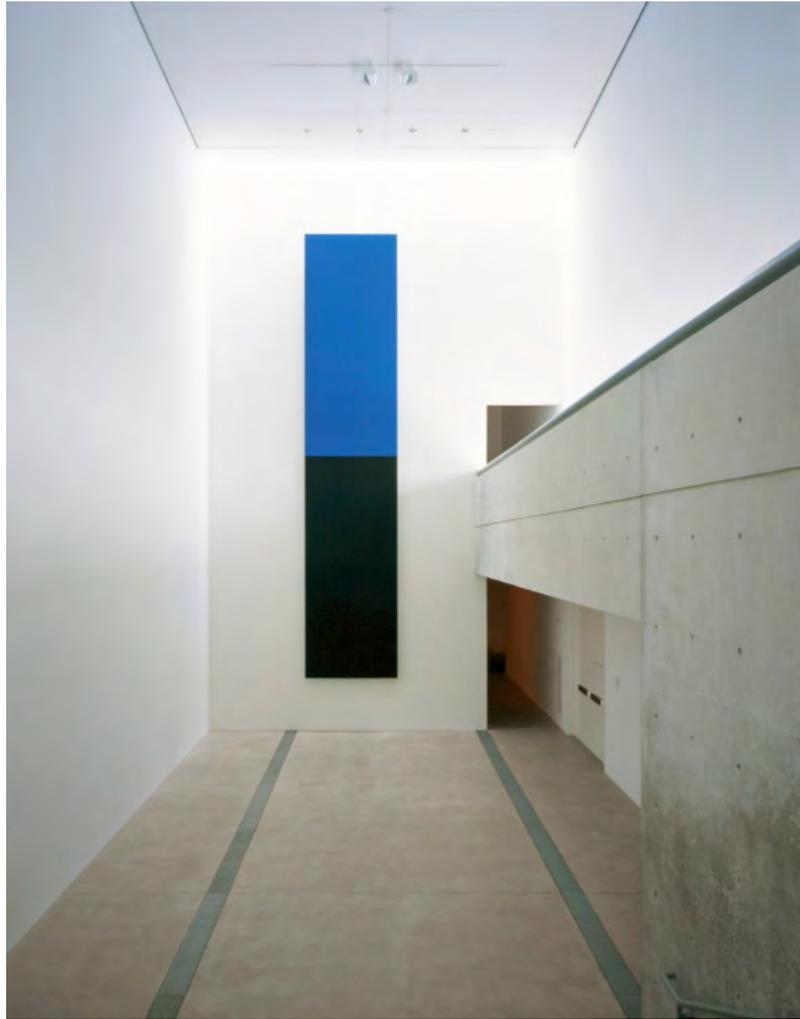
Still, it would understate the sophistication of Ligon's show to suggest that this is simply a political exhibition. Not only does Ellsworth Kelly—an artist who is almost exclusively discussed in formal terms—provide its starting point, he concludes it as well, with a beautiful little painting, *Black Blue* (1959), which was painted more than 40 years before the Pulitzer's wall sculpture that provided Ligon with his original inspiration.

The following conversation took place at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation on 8 June 2017.

Can you explain how this show *Blue Black* came about?

I did the first visit here probably two years ago, with the understanding that I would be doing a solo show using the whole space. When I got here I realised how the Kelly is such an iconic piece in the building. I had only seen it in pictures but when you get to the space you realise, 'Oh, the Kelly is here. Every show has to respond to it.'

So I said to Cara [Starke, Director of the Pulitzer], 'There's a whole show you could do around those two colours, black and blue,' and started naming artists. But I assumed that somebody had done that already. After all, the building's had ten years of programming. But Cara said, 'No, nobody's done that,' and I thought to myself, 'Well, maybe that's more interesting for me.'



Ellsworth Kelly, *Blue Black* (2000). Painted aluminium panels. 336 x 70 x 2 1/8 inches. Courtesy Pulitzer Arts Foundation. Photo: Robert Pettus.

The timing is fascinating, isn't it? You first conceived the show when Barack Obama was president. We now find ourselves in Trump's America. How different has that made the meaning of the show?

I don't know. It's probably not for me to answer. I know it didn't really change any curatorial decisions. But one thing that Trump's presidency made me much more aware of was the importance of the first gallery where there's Kerry James Marshall, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Tim Rollins and K.O.S., Carrie Mae Weems, and Jack Whitten. I always knew it would be interesting to have a kind of visual conversation between the works in that gallery. When you walk in that's the beginning of the show, and you have all these works that are looking at each other and looking at you. That conversation gets read very differently in Trump's presidency than it might be if Hillary [Clinton] was president or Barack [Obama] was still president. You can think of that in terms of a certain kind of politics: the first conversation in the show contrasted with the lack of conversations that we seem to have in this country nowadays. So yes, Trump's presidency has amplified certain things in the show.

I presume that *Black Like Me #2* isn't in the White House any more.

No. I don't know what the procedures are but I'm sure the minute Trump became president they started putting the bubble wrap over it. But that piece was in the personal quarters anyway, so it was always going to go no matter who became president.

Ayers, Robert. « Glenn Ligon in Conversation», *Ocula*, July 27, 2017.
<https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/glenn-ligon/>

OCULA

That gives us the opportunity to talk about post-blackness a little bit, a term coined by yourself and Thelma Golden when you were working on the 2001 exhibition *Freestyle* for The Studio Museum in Harlem, which Golden explained included artists who were 'adamant about not being labelled 'black' artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness.' Barack Obama occupies a key position within those post-blackness debates, doesn't he?

Except those debates predated him. So maybe he's come to symbolise something within those debates.

If Obama didn't exist as a symbolic figure of post-blackness, it would be necessary to invent him?

Right. What comes after post-black seems to be white supremacy. That term was a way of describing how I thought about an artist like Mark Bradford at the beginning of his career. He was doing abstract paintings, and he is clearly interested in the history of abstraction, but the materials he was using were hair-curling papers from his mom's black beauty salon. So the material has a specificity and it's used in a way that puts a kind of content into abstraction in an interesting way. For me, it was a jokey way to describe that to Thelma Golden. But as people have taken it up seriously it has become a useful way to think about how artists of colour have infused abstraction with this specificity. That's what I guess I'm most interested in.

And that specificity provides the foundation for this show?

In some ways, yeah.



Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, *Messages from Elsewhere* (2013). Oil on Canvas. 149.9 cm x 139.7 cm. Private Collection. Chicago. © Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. Courtesy the artist; Jack Shainman Gallery, New York; Corvi-Mora, London.

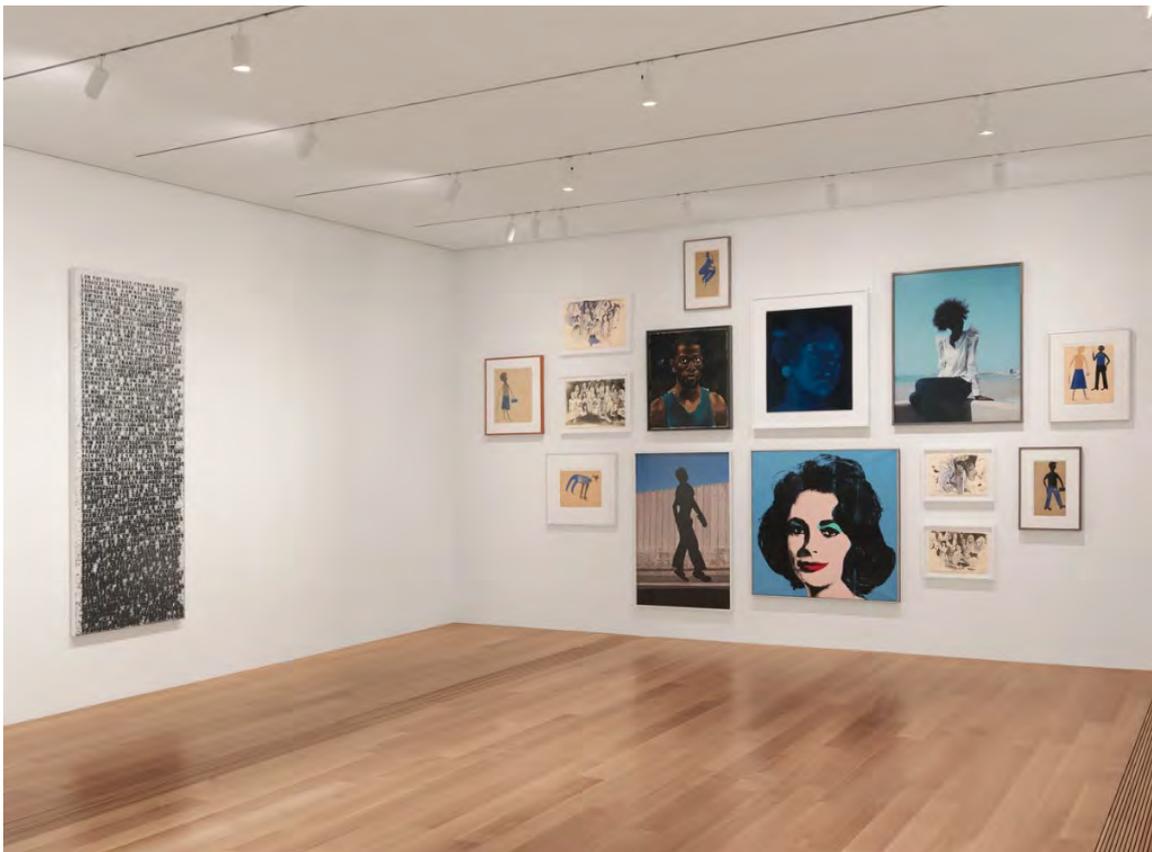
OCULA

In the past you've spoken about colour being able to exceed what an artist intends for it. Does that mean that artists don't always know what they're doing?

There's a story about somebody asking Miles Davis how he composes something, and he says, 'I start with what I know and go to what I don't know,' and I think artists often do that. Why is Ellsworth Kelly still using black and blue in 2000? He used the same colours right there in that painting from 1959. It's because it's always going to be surprising; there is always something new to be found in it. If you know what it is beforehand, then why bother doing it?

I think what's interesting about the Kelly is that he's a master of distilling things. The discussion around his paintings is formalist but they're very emotional in some ways. The painting here is so perfectly situated and it's so monumental that I walked in and I was like 'Wow!' I've seen big artworks before that I've just thought 'Mmm. Big ...' You know? But I think of Kelly as an emotional artist and I know other curators I've talked to who have agreed that that's their experience of the work too. I'm curious about that.

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Installation view: *Blue Black*, West Gallery, Pulitzer Arts Foundation, St Louis, Missouri (9 June–7 October 2017). Courtesy Pulitzer Arts Foundation. Photo © Alise O'Brien Photography.

Ayers, Robert. « Glenn Ligon in Conversation», *Ocula*, July 27, 2017.
<https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/glenn-ligon/>

OCULA

I'm intrigued by how you've hung Warhol's Liz #4 (1963), on a salon-style wall alongside works by Bill Traylor, the self-taught artist who was born into slavery in 1853, Cecily Brown's watercolours based on the cover of the Jimi Hendrix album *Electric Ladyland*, photographs by Viviane Sassen, another Yiadom-Boakye portrait and Lyle Ashton Harris's remarkable self-portrait as Billie Holiday.

Yes. Liz is white-white-white but I never really thought about that until she was hanging on that wall. That's so interesting, because nobody really talks about Liz's whiteness in discussions of Warhol. But put it on a wall that has all these different kinds of representations on it and it becomes so glaring. It's so much a part of what Warhol was interested in. But I didn't want it to be just a white woman surrounded by black figures. That's not what it's about. It's really about portraiture and different ways of looking. I want there to be moments of surprise and I want certain kinds of conversations to happen.



Andy Warhol, *Liz #4* (1963). Synthetic polymer paint silkscreened on canvas. 101.6 x 1 01.6 cm. Private Collection. © 2017 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

OCULA

Setting up conversations between different works is partly what curating is about, isn't it?

It's interesting to think about one's taste as well. I realise, for instance, that I don't really get sculpture, so that's why there's so little of it in this show. That's my failing. There are also certain artists that I don't know if I've totally gotten their work conceptually. So doing a show like this is an opportunity to think more about their work. I use it in a sneaky way of my own: I need to think about it some more so put in in the show.

What is the difference between painting as an art practice, and curating exhibitions or writing essays as art practice?

Well, in the end there is no difference. In some ways I'm very conservative because I separate these things out and make hierarchies out of them. I probably do that because writing is as hard as making art for me, and there's only so much time so I feel like I have to choose. But if I think about my process, being in the studio making work, writing, or curating the show, they all take equal amounts of energy and time so they are kind of equivalent. —[O]

Sargent, Antwaun. « The Many Shades of Glenn Ligon's Blue Black», *Hyperallergic.com*, July 24, 2017.
<https://hyperallergic.com/392188/glenn-ligon-blue-black-pulitzer-arts-foundation/>

HYPERALLERGIC

The Many Shades of Glenn Ligon's *Blue Black*

In a new exhibition, Glenn Ligon explores the idea of "blue black" as it manifests not only in black identity but also in American culture.

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Installation shot of Glenn Ligon's "A Small Band" (2015), neon and paint, 74 3/4 x 797 1/2 inches (189.86 x 2025.65 cm), with Ellsworth Kelly's "Blue Black" (2000) in the background (image courtesy Glenn Ligon; Thomas Dane Gallery, London; Luhring Augustine, New York; Regan Projects, Los Angeles; © Glenn Ligon; photo © Alise O'Brien Photography)

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ST. LOUIS — In the entrance gallery of the Pulitzer Arts Foundation are a series of figurative painting, sculpture, and a photographic print all staring at each other. This scene of interiority opens the group exhibition *Blue Black* curated by the artist Glenn Ligon. Kerry James Marshall's central character in "Untitled (policeman)" (2015), wearing his standard issue, navy blue Chicago Police Department uniform, hand on his hip, looks out in a moment of reflection, at the boy on the other wall in Carrie Mae Weems' "Blue Black Boy" (1997), whose eyes gape. The peering of the boy represents an image born out of black cultural looking and the white historical gaze. The first is perceived if you focus on the officer's eyes which make present the knowing glance of a black father at his son. The other image this looking relationship produces, in my mind, is what happens when the effects of the white gaze is recognized to be more than a theoretical construct but something representative of systemic power structures that have real life consequence. Under the white gaze, the black child becomes another black boy, like Michael Brown and the officer, representative of the history of law enforcement as an institution that polices black bodies unjustly, his race evaporates, he is simply an agent of the state, like the white patrolman, Darren Wilson. The looks that passed between Wilson and Brown brought about the final moments of Brown's life because Wilson, per his testimony, saw the unarmed 18 year-old black boy as a "demon" in that suburban St. Louis street.

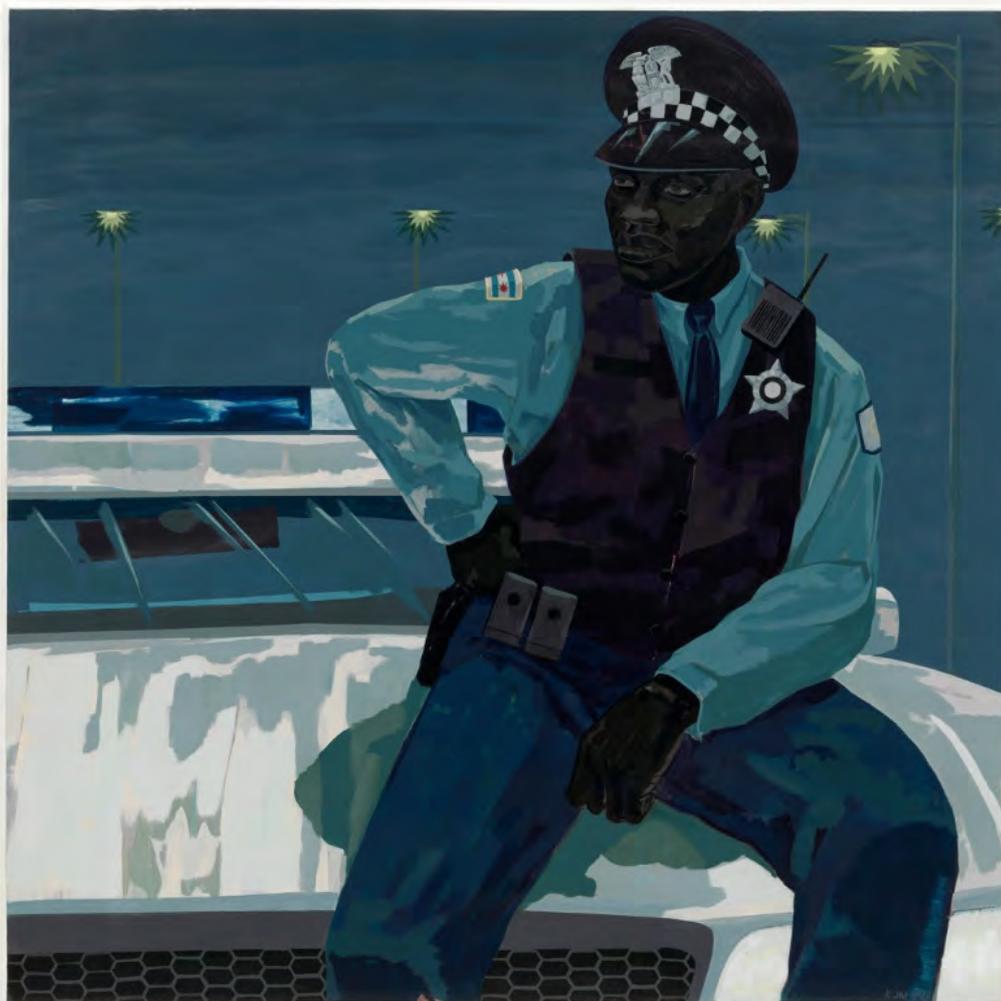
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If you walk into the frame of Weems's photograph, which is to say the blue black boy's line of vision, your presence is mirrored back — you are looking and looked at. If you don't walk into his line of sight, he peers out at Jack Whitten's abstracted version of himself in "Self Portrait I" (2014). The hang of all the mounted works is inspired by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's exhibiting technique that places her black fictive figures within eyesight of each other. In this gallery, Ligon places Yiadom-Boakye's "Messages from Elsewhere," a 2013 oil of a black female figure wearing a lapis lazuli dress, gazing over her shoulder, lost in contemplation. She's daydreaming in the direction of Whitten's face. Sitting in the center of the room is Simone Leigh's sightless femme terracotta statuette, "Dunham" (2017), sporting an afro. There's something spiritual about the way she sees nothing, yet is seen by every figure in the room.

If the figures are looking, they must be thinking, searching, and seeing too. But what are they searching and seeing? Inside, the gallery, I didn't wonder, I knew: the blue black experience.



Kerry James Marshall, "Untitled (policeman)" (2015), synthetic polymer paint on PVC panel with plexi frame, 60 x 60 inches (152.4 x 152.4 cm) (image courtesy the Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of Mimi Haas in honor of Marie-Josée Kravis, 2016, digital image © the Museum of Modern Art/licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY)

HYPERALLERGIC

It's not the general black, African-American journey. It's a more limited and yet liberating voyage taken by and through skin so black, so dark, it coruscates blue. The men, women and child, exchanging what Ligon calls, "black looks," are a reminder that there are various hues of the various black identities that coalesce into the African-American experience. "Blue-black is the kind of black where you go, 'Black!,'" writes Ligon in his curatorial essay. He continues:

Perhaps that's because blue-black traces its roots back to a mythic point of origin in Africa, whereas "black," along with "Negro" and "African-American," might be considered just one more stopping point on the way to an as-yet-unknown destination.

In a culture where the color of your skin is paramount, each color category — from the highest of yellows which can slip into an off-white of privilege, to the blues of black, which can make one feel like an Ellisonian disappearing act — comes with its own unique experiences of racism, colorism, freedom and death. Visually, racially, formally, metaphysically, each of the artists' blue black representations appear together as you walk through the gallery, acclimating you to Ligon's curatorial thinking about color and race.



Andy Warhol, "Liz #4" (1963), synthetic polymer paint silkscreened on canvas, 40 x 40 inches (101.6 x 101.6 cm) (image courtesy private collection, © 2017 the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. / Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York)

HYPERALLERGIC

Born in the South Bronx in 1960, Ligon's earliest grammar school memory is of words changing the trajectory of his life. "Words were the ticket," he tells me, laughing. In kindergarten, Ligon's teacher asked the class to write four letters of the alphabet and a word that starts with each letter. Five-year-old Ligon asked his teacher to write out the rest of the alphabet for him and he wrote words to match. The school's administration called his mother, a nurse's aide, into a meeting and said that he needed to go to a different kind of school. Ligon says while his mother was explaining that she didn't have the money to send her young boys to private school, a teacher interjected, "Your kids might be smart here, but in a real school they will only be average." "Ok, I'm going to find a real school for my kids to be average in," said Ligon's mother, "because in this school they've already been written off in kindergarten." Ligon ended up at the tony Walden School and says, "that alphabet, those words, changed my life." In the exhibition, Ligon's pays sly homage to that 1965 moment by including his 2001 work, "Malcolm X, Sun, Frederick Douglass, Boy with Bubbles (version 2) #2," a large-scale silkscreen of a page out of a 1960s Black Power-themed coloring book, representing a new kind of knowledge that awaited him.

Blue Black itself is an extension of Ligon's fascination with language. The artist organizes the show less like a curator and more like a poet, arranging the work around three lyrical combinations of the words blue and black. One section meant to respond directly to an Ellsworth Kelly sculpture is titled, "blue black," after the wall work that inspired the exhibition. The second, "blueblack," features works that blur the lines between the two colors. The last, "blue-black" is partially inspired by Toni Morrison's 1992 Guardian interview in which she articulates the heart of American identity: "In this country, American means white. Everybody else have to hyphenate." The slippage of language inspired Ligon to utilize a poet's ability to sublimely marshal simple words with debilitating force. The exhibition includes Ligon's text painting, "Untitled (I Am Not Tragically Colored)" (1990). It's a work in which the artist appropriates the line, "I am not tragically colored," from Zora Neale Hurston's celebrated 1928 essay, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," and stencils it in bluish-black oil repeatedly on a wooden door. With each impression, the phrase gets messier, less visible, and broken into pieces: "I am not," and single words, "colored," alluding to the intertextuality and mutability of language. The work "Untitled (I Am Not Tragically Colored)" is an overture to Ligon's three-decades-long practice of using text, painting, installation and video to investigate the rhetorical power of the black voice.

HYPERALLERGIC

The idea for the group exhibition came to Ligon as he gazed up at Ellsworth Kelly's monumental work "Blue Black" (2000), a 28-foot-tall painted wall sculpture commissioned for the Tadao Ando designed main exhibition hall of Pulitzer Arts. As he looked at the rectangular blocks of blue and black, he tells me he "heard Louis Armstrong's gravel-strewn voice singing, "What did I do to be so black and blue?" Given the title, other associations could have come to mind: the sound of Miles Davis's trumpet on his 1959 modal jazz masterpiece, *Kind of Blue*; President Obama when he tried to convey to Ta-Nehisi Coates that his Kenyan father was certifiably black by exclaiming, "he was like a blue-black brother;" The popstar Rihanna, when she wails on her ballad, "Love on the Brain," that love "beats me black and blue;" the queer black film, *Moonlight* adapted from Tarell Alvin McCraney's play, *In Moonlight Black Boys Look*

Blue. For me, when I was growing up blue black wasn't something you wanted to be. Light skinned black boys on the playground would tease darker children by saying, "You so black, you blue!" Nowhere in Ligon's exhibition is the shadier descriptor — a black person's fear of being too black! — explored. Nor is what happened after the teasing on the playground revealed: darker skinned students would lead inquiries to determine if those of us who could easily win membership to any blue vein society were black enough. "To my friend who acts white, but you still my dog Antwizzy," one friend wrote in my eighth grade yearbook. "Hope you never change. Love ya the way you are. Stay black/white ha ha ha."

HYPERALLERGIC



Ellsworth Kelly's "Blue Black" (2000), painted aluminum panels, 336 x 70 x 2 1/8 inches (photo courtesy Pulitzer Arts Foundation, by Robert Pettus)

In contrast to my own experience, when it turns to matters of personhood, the art in the exhibition tends to show blue blackness as a source of pride, or pain inflicted not by colorism, but by white racism. The self-taught artist, Bill Traylor's cardboard painting, "Man and Woman" (c.1939–1924), for instance, depicts a white man in a blue skirt and a pitch-black woman in a blue shirt, exchanging glances. The painting is presented in the context of his life: He was born into slavery in rural Alabama in 1853. Similarly, Kara Walker's large tempera and watercolor collage, "Four Idioms on Negro Art #1 Folk" (2015), is a scene of stereotype and systemic white racism. In the work on paper, black figures slide down stripper poles and hold their hands up, as military men aim rifles at their bodies. It's as if they are saying "don't shoot," but the limbs scattered throughout the grounds suggest they are murdered anyway, socially and physically. Viviane Sassen's "Kinee," (2011), an abstracted image of the beautiful Senegalese model, Kinee Diouf, in a field of sky blue, feels aspirational, showing how blue-blackness has ascertained a certain desirability in fashion and life. (The inclusion of this Sassen image also brings to my mind, the fact that, blue-blackness as identity is a purely African-American invention. Africa's history of colonialism has, country by country, created different measures of blackness.)

HYPERALLERGIC



Simone Leigh, "Dunham" (2017), terra cotta, porcelain, raffia, steel, glass bead, epoxy, India ink, 35 x 30 x 30 inches (88.9 x 76.2 x 76.2 cm) (courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York; © Simone Leigh; photo courtesy Pulitzer Arts Foundation, 2017; © Alise O'Brien Photography)

The work entitled, "A Small Band" (2015), is a zigzagging, large-scale white neon sign comprised of three words: Blues, bruise, and blood. For the piece the artist appropriates a slice of the audio from composer Steve Reich's *Come Out* (1966), that quotes Daniel Hamm, a young Harlem resident accused of murder and beaten by the police, describing to a court how he managed to convince the cops to release him: "I had to open the bruise up and let some of the blues ... bruise blood come out to show them." On the stand, Hamm's tongue gets tied and, like an unwitting poet, he turns three simple words into new meaning, revealing a truth about black pain and how black musicians sang the blues so convincingly. Standing before the Ligon text sculpture, flashing blue in the main gallery, it was impossible for me not to think of other short lyrical phrases packing the power of racialized color. "Black Is Beautiful," "Black Lives Matter," "I Can't Breathe," all made under duress in times of black struggle.

Sargent, Antwaun. « The Many Shades of Glenn Ligon's Blue Black», *Hyperallergic.com*, July 24, 2017.
<https://hyperallergic.com/392188/glenn-ligon-blue-black-pulitzer-arts-foundation/>

HYPERALLERGIC

Given Ligon's extreme care in organizing a diverse and conceptually challenging exhibition featuring some nearly sixty works by artists including Wade Guyton, Byron Kim, Lyle Ashton Harris, and ones already mentioned, I wondered during my visit whether the museum's policy of not including wall text with the works will help or hinder his effort to have color considered beyond race. There's a real possibility, save for the lone iconic Warhol of Liz Taylor, that the audience without information in captions, will assume that *Blue Black* is of work by black artists toiling solely in matters of race, instead of a show of the colors and metaphorical meanings of blue and black as ways to challenge simple categorizations of race and art.

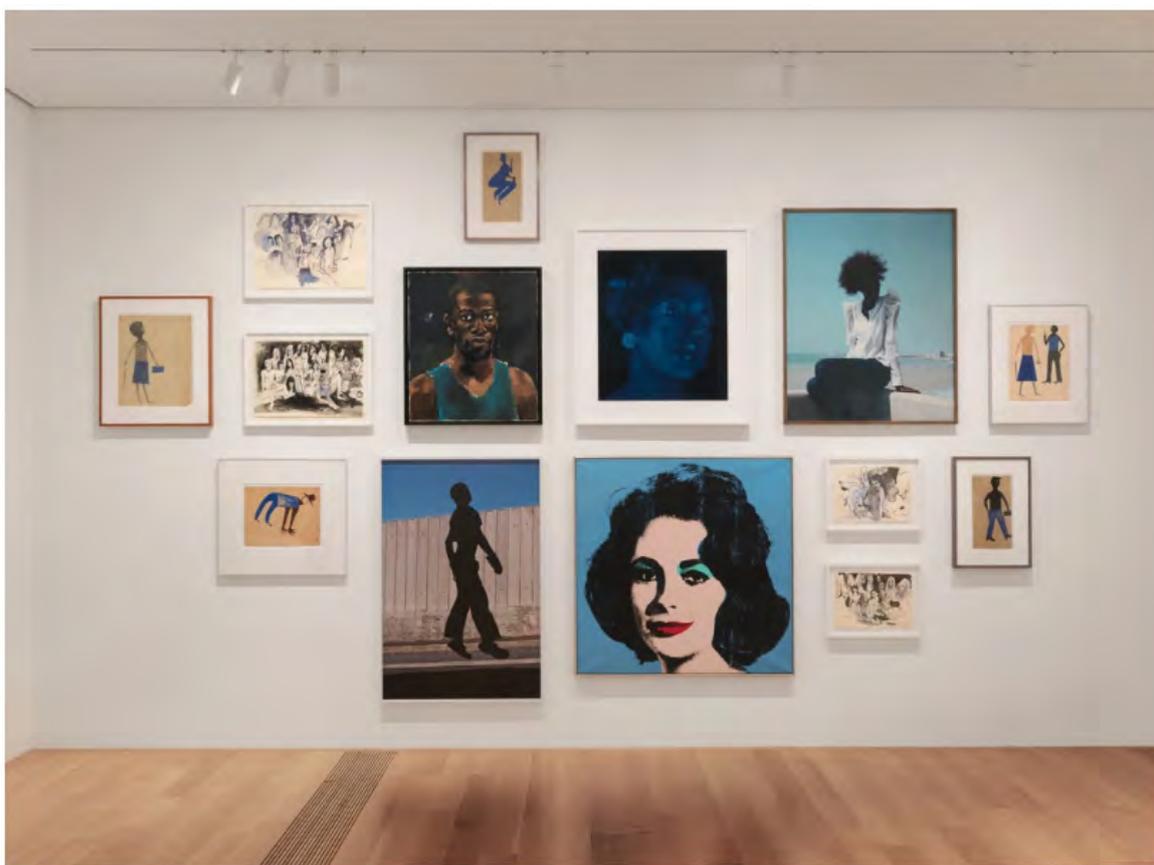


Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, "Messages from Elsewhere" (2013), oil on canvas, 59 x 55 inches (149.9 x 139.7 cm) (private collection, Chicago, © Lynette Yiadom-Boakye; image courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, and Corvi-Mora, London)

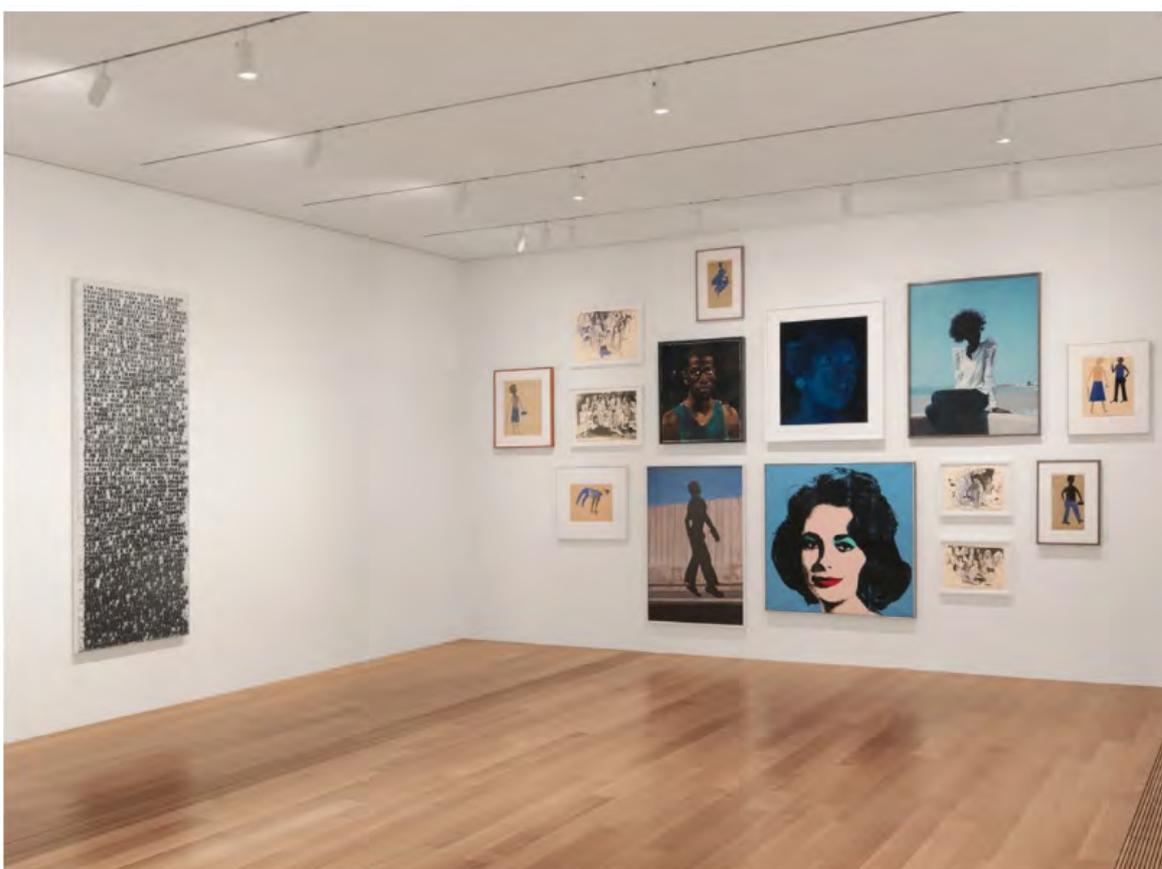
Sargent, Antwaun. « The Many Shades of Glenn Ligon's Blue Black», *Hyperallergic.com*, July 24, 2017.
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Installation view of *Blue Black*, West Gallery, Pulitzer Arts Foundation, 2017 (photo © Alise O'Brien Photography)



Installation view of *Blue Black* with a work by Ligon on the left, West Gallery, Pulitzer Arts Foundation, 2017 (photo © Alise O'Brien Photography)

Sargent, Antwaun. « The Many Shades of Glenn Ligon's Blue Black», *Hyperallergic.com*, July 24, 2017.
<https://hyperallergic.com/392188/glenn-ligon-blue-black-pulitzer-arts-foundation/>

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Norman Lewis, "Blue and Boogie" (1974), oil on canvas, 44 1/4 x 56 inches (112.4 x 142.24 cm) (courtesy the Studio Museum in Harlem, gift of the Estate of Norman Lewis 1981.1.1; photo by Marc Bernier)



Installation view of a Yoruba sculpture and a work by Terry Adkins in *Blue Black*, West Gallery, Pulitzer Arts Foundation, 2017 (photo by Jim Corbett, © Alise O'Brien Photography)

Sargent, Antwaun. « The Many Shades of Glenn Ligon's Blue Black», *Hyperallergic.com*, July 24, 2017.
<https://hyperallergic.com/392188/glenn-ligon-blue-black-pulitzer-arts-foundation/>

HYPERALLERGIC



Tim Rollins and K.O.S., "Invisible Man (after Ralph Ellison)" (2015), indigo and matte acrylic on book pages on panel, 36 x 36 inches (91.4 x 91.4 cm) (courtesy Studio K.O.S., Lehmann Maupin, New York, and Hong Kong; photo by Christopher Burke Studios, LLC)

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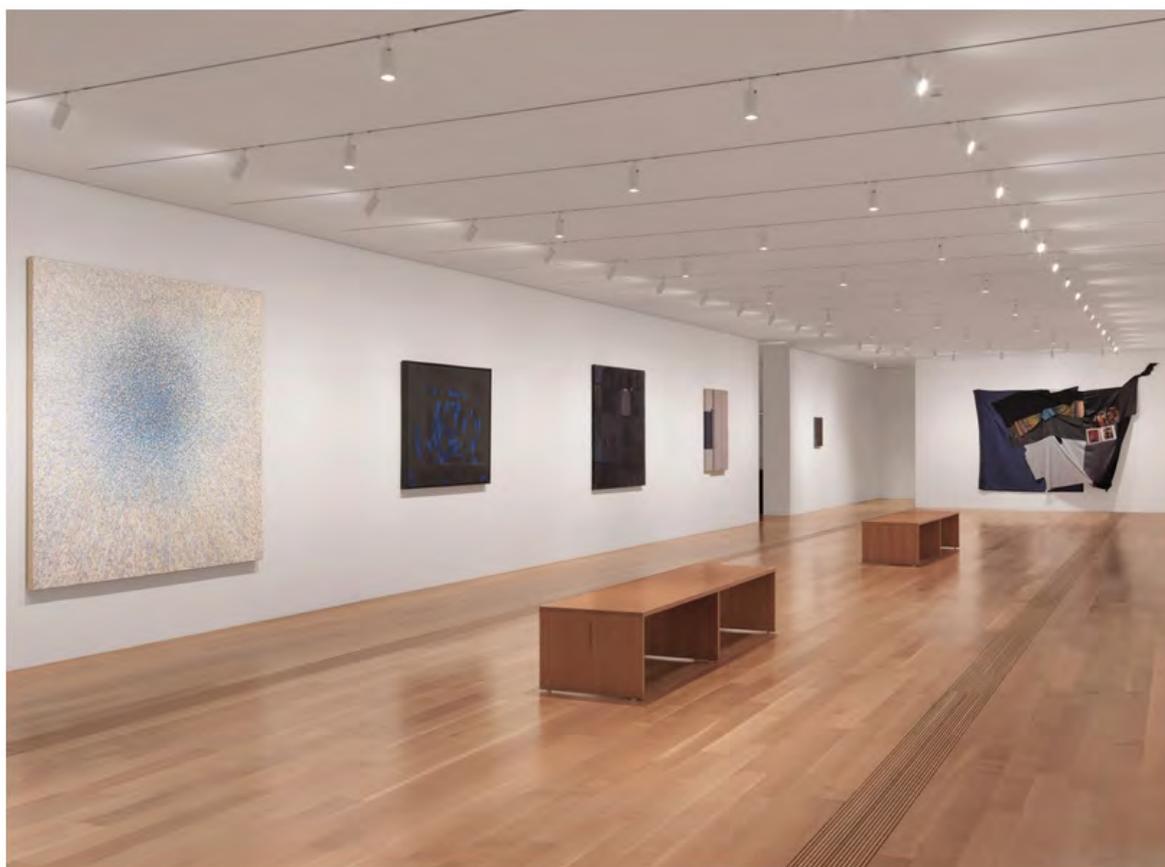


Installation view with works by Chris Ofili and Philip Guston in *Blue Black*, West Gallery, Pulitzer Arts Foundation, 2017 (photo © Alise O'Brien Photography)

Sargent, Antwaun. « The Many Shades of Glenn Ligon's Blue Black», *Hyperallergic.com*, July 24, 2017.
<https://hyperallergic.com/392188/glenn-ligon-blue-black-pulitzer-arts-foundation/>

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Overall installation view of *Blue Black*, West Gallery, Pulitzer Arts Foundation, 2017 (photo © Alise O'Brien Photography)



Derek Jarman, "Blue" (1993), digitized 35 mm film (courtesy of Basilisk Communications/Zeitgeist, © Basilisk Communications Ltd; photo courtesy Pulitzer Arts Foundation, by Jim Corbett, © Alise O'Brien Photography)

Sargent, Antwaun. « The Many Shades of Glenn Ligon's Blue Black», *Hyperallergic.com*, July 24, 2017.
<https://hyperallergic.com/392188/glenn-ligon-blue-black-pulitzer-arts-foundation/>

HYPERALLERGIC



Installation view of *Blue Black* with works by David Hammons and Eric N. Mack, West Gallery, Pulitzer Arts Foundation, 2017 (photo © Alise O'Brien Photography)

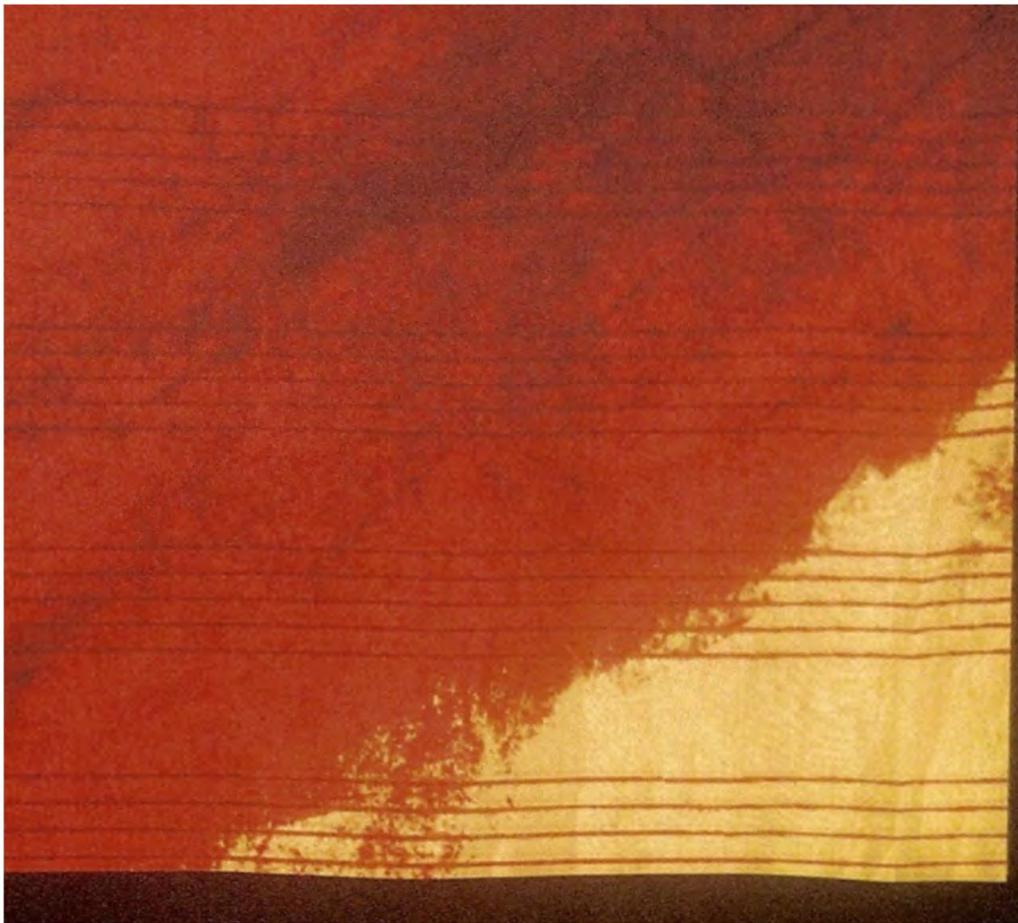
Blue Black continues at the Pulitzer Art Foundation (3716 Washington Boulevard, St. Louis, Missouri) through October 7.

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Questionnaire: Glenn Ligon

Q: What do you like the look of? A: Someone who knows who they are

Galerie
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Cover image for Jason Moran's *Thanksgiving at the Vanguard*, 2017

What images keep you company in the space where you work?

A Beauford Delaney portrait of James Baldwin, a drawing my three-year-old godson gave me, and a replica of an On Kawara date painting made by a friend to commemorate the day we first met.

What was the first piece of art that really mattered to you?

An abstract painting of a cityscape by an artist whose name escapes me. In retrospect, the work wasn't particularly good but the fact that abstraction could hold my attention as a child is fascinating to me.

If you could live with only one piece of art what would it be?

David Hammons, *In The Hood*, 1993.

What is your favourite title of an artwork?

See above.

What do you wish you knew?

Why folks here in America don't want to do right.

What should change?

We should close everything that's open and open everything that's closed.

What should stay the same?

Nothing, really.

What could you imagine doing if you didn't do what you do?

Selling real estate.

What music are you listening to?

Jason Moran's *Thanksgiving at the Vanguard* (2017), Cecil Taylor's *Nefertiti, the Beautiful One Has Come* (1962), Solange's *A Seat at the Table* (2016), and random things by Belle and Sebastian.

What are you reading?

Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* (2009), Fred Moten's *The Feel Trio* (2014), John McWhorter's *Talking Back, Talking Black: Truths about America's Lingua Franca* (2016), and lots of books on urban gardening.

What do you like the look of?

Someone who knows who they are.

What is art for?

It's to help us imagine and bring about the world we want to live in.

« 'Blue Black' by Glenn Ligon at Pulitzer Arts Foundation, St. Louis », *Blouin Art Info* August 26, 2017.
<http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/2434117/blue-black-by-glenn-ligon-at-pulitzer-arts-foundation-st>

BLOUINARTINFO

'Blue Black' by Glenn Ligon at Pulitzer Arts Foundation, St. Louis



'Blue Black' by Glenn Ligon
PULITZER ARTS FOUNDATION, ST. LOUIS



Ross Bleckner's "Galaxy Painting" (1993)
LINDA PACE FOUNDATION, SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

BLOUINARTINFO



Kerry James Marshall's "Untitled (Policeman)" (2015)
PULITZER ARTS FOUNDATION

Galerie
Chantal Crousel

The Pulitzer Arts Foundation in St. Louis, Missouri is hosting an exhibition, titled "Blue Black," through October 7, 2017. This is a lyrical meditation on the colours blue and black that has been curated by the American artist [Glenn Ligon](#). Ligon's body of work critiques the complexities of American history, race, language, and identity, an endeavor that is also apparent in his curatorial practice.

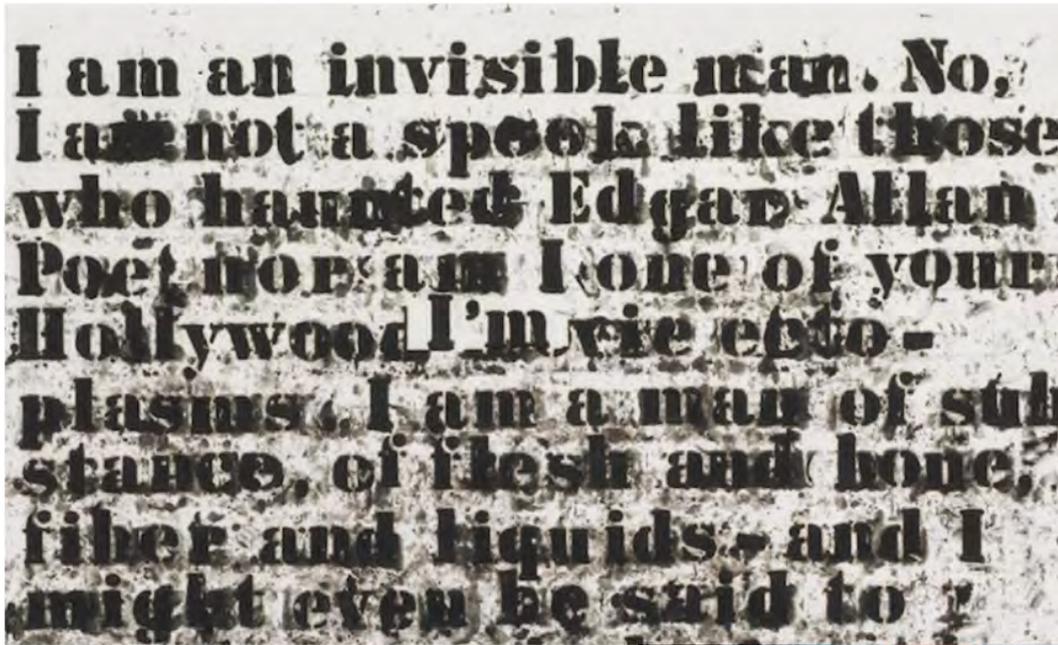
The exhibition brings together works ranging from abstraction to portraiture, from Norman Lewis to Andy Warhol, and includes well-known works by Ligon himself. Ligon's curatorial vision resists fixed interpretations enabling viewers to follow their own paths and experience numerous connections within and across the Pulitzer galleries. His work allows the colours blue and black to pose timely and nuanced questions.

The first work that visitors will see upon entering the museum is *Invisible Man* (after Ralph Ellison) (2008) by Tim Rollins and K.O.S. comprising a grid of pages from Ellison's masterwork superimposed with the letters "I" and "M"— through which the text is visible—with blue paint serving as negative space, the work brings language, colour, and form together to contend with identity. *Untitled (Policeman)*, a 2015 painting by Kerry James Marshall complicates a dominant narrative of the relationship of the police with communities of colour.

Blue Black Ellsworth Kelly, *Blue Black*, 2000. *3 Boy* (1997), Carrie Mae Weems' stunning bust-length photograph of a young African American child looking into the camera, is one of the photographer's "Colored People" series of works, in which she applies colored overlays to photographs of African American children, questioning the use of color as a means of categorizing people.

[The New York Times](#) notes that the show isn't reductively "racial" but includes race on a spectrum of meanings that runs from polemical to personal and poetic. Although a large number of the curator's work has been deep-rooted in the black history, there a number of artist with other identities as well leading to abstract art across ethnic and generational lines.

Decoding Glenn Ligon's Most Iconic Commentary on Race



Detail from Glenn Ligon's *Untitled* ("I am an invisible man"), 1991

Glenn Ligon is having a big February—the American conceptual artist has not one but two exhibitions, in *Lubring Augustine's* two New York locations. In addition to "We Need to Wake Up Cause That's What Time It Is," the already-acclaimed show of Ligon's work in the gallery's Bushwick location, *Lubring Augustine's* Chelsea space will also host both "What We Said Last Time" (a series of prints based on James Baldwin's 1953 essay "Stranger in the Village") and "Entanglements," a curatorial project by the artist featuring pieces by *On Kawara*, *Andy Warhol*, and others (opening February 27).

To get you prepared for the coming flood of Ligon-love, here's an essay by the *Hammer Museum's* Chief Curator *Connie Butler*—excerpted from from *Phaidon's Defining Contemporary Art*—on the artist's seminal 1991 work *Untitled* ("I am an invisible man"), one of the earliest examples of his ongoing engagement with text as a consciousness-raising medium.

Glenn Ligon's work is about creating identities—those we build for ourselves and those determined for us by others. Ligon is part of a generation of artists who came to prominence in the 1990s for work that addressed the personal through emotionally heated subjects like racism and sexism. Because he is African-American, his work is often discussed solely in terms of race. "There was an assumption that artists of color could only and would only talk about their identity," he has said. "From the beginning, myself and a whole group of artists [...] resisted the notion that there was some easily identifiable, unified, readily agreed-upon thing called blackness that we could present in our work."

Although the complex history of race in America is certainly a continual theme for Ligon, the diversity of media and techniques he has employed over the course of his career to create a compelling body of work is mirrored by the breadth of the topics he has tackled—the efficacy of language and the visual image in communications, the problem of authorial presence in a work of art, the role of social versus personal forces in shaping a message. His work forces a critique by its viewer, even if he, as the artist, refuses to take a side. *Notes in the Margin of the Black Book* (1991-93) juxtaposes the erotic photographs of black male nudes from *Robert Mapplethorpe's* 1986 publication *Black Book* with framed texts taken from a range of sources, some specifically addressing the images at hand, some not. This compilation of provocative images and opinions is presented for our consideration and thoughts on the construction of the black male identity.

Artspace



Glenn Ligon's *Untitled* ("I am an invisible man"), 1991

Galerie
Chantal Crousel

Ligon's most resolved and effective works are his text-based drawings and paintings of the 1990s. In this iconic body of work, the artist selects fragments of text—from works of literature by authors such as James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, and Walt Whitman, or from other sources, including a New York Times article about the defendants in the 1989 Central Park Jogger case—and stencils them onto sheets of paper or canvas. Using black oil stick to trace the words, Ligon's technique ranges from exacting to deliberately overworked, and the results affect the legibility of the text.

While letters at the top of the composition may be clearly outlined, thicker and smudgier layers of paint further down obscure the words beyond recognition; we are aware that the information is there, but we can't access it. In later works, Ligon began adding coal dust, which would stick to areas of wet lettering, further complicating any attempts to read the text but adding a luscious textural element, clearly positioning them as visually seductive works of art as well as fragments of writing. The conflict between the efficacy of these two forms of communication is often at the heart of these works. "Text demands to be read," says Ligon, "and perhaps the withdrawal of the text, the frustration of the ability to decipher it, reflects a certain pessimism on my part about the ability and the desire to communicate."

With this in mind, Ligon's *Untitled* ("I am an invisible man"), with its excerpt from the famous first lines of Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, is a brilliant inversion of the expected relation between text and image. As the author elaborates on the premise that his character (or is it Ligon himself?) is invisible, the text becomes increasingly illegible, while the visual draw of the work as a visual art object grows with the layers of thick oil stick. A separate, floating statement—"I'm not"—is superimposed on the longer text but has a reverse relationship to the composition; the first word gets lost somewhat at top, while the emphatic denial is very clear at bottom. The work is about a kind of cultural blindness, literally enacted by the viewer. Reading is obfuscated even as identity is constructed.

Farago, Jason. « Interview: He's Barack Obama's favourite artist. But is Britain ready for Glenn Ligon? », *The Guardian*, April 2, 2015.

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/apr/02/glenn-ligon-artist-obama-favourite-encounters-collisions-interview>

**The
Guardian**

Interview

He's Barack Obama's favourite artist. But is Britain ready for Glenn Ligon?

He put lipstick on Malcolm X and breathed new life into Mapplethorpe's nudes. As Glenn Ligon brings 'his own personal museum' to the UK, we meet the artist Obama handpicked for the White House

● **Obama's favourite artist carves up the past - in pictures**



▲ Detail from Glenn Ligon's *Malcolm X #1* (small version #2), from his show at Nottingham Contemporary, *Encounters and Collisions*. [Click here to see the full image.](#)

Farago, Jason. « Interview: He's Barack Obama's favourite artist. But is Britain ready for Glenn Ligon? », *The Guardian*,
April 2, 2015.
<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/apr/02/glenn-ligon-artist-obama-favourite-encounters-collisions-interview>



Galerie
Chantal Crousel



Glenn Ligon: 'There's an unequal distribution of forward momentum in America.'

Farago, Jason. « Interview: He's Barack Obama's favourite artist. But is Britain ready for Glenn Ligon? », *The Guardian*, April 2, 2015.

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/apr/02/glenn-ligon-artist-obama-favourite-encounters-collisions-interview>

The Guardian



Untitled 2006 by Glenn Ligon, one of his neon series playing with the word America.

The beautiful, powerful paintings of Glenn Ligon hang in museums around the world, but there is one artwork of his you can't see - not since 2009, at least. To catch a glimpse of his 1992 canvas *Black Like Me No 2*, which reproduces a text by a white journalist posing as a black man in the deep south, you would have to be very good friends with a certain art-lover in Washington DC.

"It's in the private quarters of the White House," Ligon says when I visit him in his Brooklyn studio. "So I can't see it. But I met Obama once, backstage at the Apollo in Harlem. I was with my friend and a woman said, 'I wonder if you have a moment to meet the president?' And, you know, we had dinner reservations - but OK. So we go downstairs and there's Obama with the chief of staff, who says, 'Mr President, this is Glenn Ligon. *Black Like Me No 2* is in your personal quarters.' And Obama looks at me and goes, 'Oh, yeah, we have a set of prints too! But they had to move them out, because of the light. I really miss them.'"

Ligon cackles at the memory. "I thought, 'Oh wait, this is real! They live with art, they take their children to look at art, they're not scared of artists. This is not some bullshit. This is not on his talking points. I was super impressed.'"

The president is hardly the only admirer of Ligon, whose exhibition *Encounters and Collisions* opens at Nottingham Contemporary this week, before touring to Tate Liverpool in July. Rather than mount a traditional retrospective, Ligon has instead curated a bold, peculiar history of postwar art, with works by more than 40 artists who have influenced him, making up what amounts to his own personal museum. He's included older painters like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, icons of black contemporary art like David Hammons, as well as underappreciated figures like Beauford Delaney. There are also artists who tackle LGBT issues, including Félix González-Torres and Zoe Leonard, and seven works of Ligon's own, including a colouring-book picture of *Malcolm X*, in which the black activist has been left with white skin.

Farago, Jason. « Interview: He's Barack Obama's favourite artist. But is Britain ready for Glenn Ligon? », *The Guardian*, April 2, 2015.

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/apr/02/glenn-ligon-artist-obama-favourite-encounters-collisions-interview>



Ligon's art, with its melancholy neon signs and dense, stencilled canvases, probes black representation, the complex terrain of race and homosexuality, and above all the grand promise - and less beautiful reality - of America. You can see reflections of his own career in the artists he's chosen, but the show doesn't treat the art of the past as mere source material. "It's about the broad influences on an artist's work," Ligon says. "Rather than: Richard Serra uses oil stick - you use oil stick! People can walk in and go, 'Oooh, this is a nice group show!' But the bigger issue, the bigger takeaway, is the notion of a community of artists."

Ligon has fleshed out his portrait of himself and his country with photographs that document the upheavals his fellow artists lived through. "Much of my work is engaged with 'America' - the idea of America. So it seemed interesting to think beyond art, to think of documents from various periods that were formative for me and the country as a whole."

Hence the inclusion of Bruce Davidson's shot of two muscular Guardian Angels in tight singlets patrolling the New York subway in the crime-gripped 1980s - and a Stephen Shames photograph of Black Panther founder Huey P Newton, topless and listening to Bob Dylan, which touches on both the struggle for civil rights and the way black men are depicted, feared, or desired. "He was incredibly charismatic," says Ligon of Newton. "And sexy. The Panthers were very aware of his appeal. That's what interests me: this black masculinity."

The centrepiece is the silent video installation *Bear* by Steve McQueen - in which the artist and a friend, both naked, wrestle and grope each other in a choreographed tussle that's both violent and strangely romantic. The men's images are doubled thanks to a shiny floor that

reflects the projection and absorbs the viewer into the fight. Ligon first met McQueen at London's ICA in 1995, when the two artists were in a show together. "I thought, 'Why has this guy got them polishing that floor for the 15th time?' Then, when the video came on, I was like, 'Oh. Fucking brilliant.'"

Farago, Jason. « Interview: He's Barack Obama's favourite artist. But is Britain ready for Glenn Ligon? », *The Guardian*, April 2, 2015.

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/apr/02/glenn-ligon-artist-obama-favourite-encounters-collisions-interview>



Ligon was born in the Bronx in 1960 and came of age as an artist in the 1980s. As a student, he venerated US painters like Pollock, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg - and yet, at that time in the New York art world, painting had a fraught position. At the august *Whitney Independent Study Program*, painting took a back seat to theory, and Ligon had to balance his desires as a painter with his political convictions. His text paintings were the result: thick, opaque canvases that reproduce the writings of such African-Americans as James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison or Zora Neale Hurston. They are painstakingly stencilled, over and over, into near illegibility. "The political," Ligon says, "gets turned, through repetition, into a kind of abstraction."

Although he has never stopped painting, Ligon has turned to other mediums for his investigations of masculinity, blackness, and the curdled promise of America. In the early 1990s, he took the pages of *The Black Book*, Robert Mapplethorpe's idealised photographs of nude black men, and framed them beside quotes from philosophers, critics, activists, and even religious evangelists. It was a measured but devastating critique, from one gay artist to another, that showed no photograph of a nude black man can escape questions of power and politics. More recently, he has turned to neon, displaying the magic word AMERICA - but with the letters reversed, or facing the floor, or with the light source switched off.

Ligon's show opens at a hinge moment for civil rights in America. Under Obama, gays and lesbians have made extraordinary strides - and yet the US has witnessed a hideous upsurge in police brutality against African-Americans, notably in Ferguson, Missouri, where the killing of teenager Michael Brown set off weeks of protests. Several recent deaths have emphasised both the persistence of violence and the insufficiency of images and

documentation to bring perpetrators to justice. In New York last summer, Eric Garner died after being placed in a banned chokehold by a police officer. Despite the existence of video evidence - in which Garner pleads "I can't breathe" - the officer was not indicted.

You can be visible and invisible at the same time, Ligon concludes. "Even with a million cameras, there's no such thing - for certain groups of citizens - as evidence. It's a hopeful sign that a black presidency has brought these issues to the fore. But at the same time as we go forward, we go back. Things like Ferguson and Eric Garner show us there's an unequal distribution of forward momentum in America. In the show in Nottingham, when people look at the America neon with no light shining from it, they'll see it."



View of "Glenn Ligon: Encounters and Collisions," 2015, Tate Liverpool, London. Walls, from left: Jackson Pollock, *Yellow Islands*, 1952; David Hammons, *Untitled (Body Print)*, 1974; Kelley Walker, *Black Star Press (Triptych)*, 2005. Floor: Cady Noland, *Pipes in a Basket*, 1989. Photo: Roger Sinek.

"Glenn Ligon: Encounters and Collisions"

TATE LIVERPOOL

WALKING INTO "Glenn Ligon: Encounters and Collisions" at Tate Liverpool, visitors found themselves poised between Jasper Johns's 1962 lithograph *Painting with Two Balls II* and a mid-1970s David Hammons body print in which the artist's features are framed within an ace of spades. In tandem with that suggestive pairing, the first gallery contained the Cady Noland sculpture *Pipes in a Basket*, 1989, which comprises handcuffs and a small American flag alongside a handful of pipes; Kelley Walker's screen-printed painting *Black Star Press (Triptych)*, 2005, based on scanned photographs of civil rights demonstrations that he overpainted with white, milk, and dark chocolate; Hammons's sculpture *John Henry*, 1990, made of steel railroad track, stone, and human hair; Alighiero Boetti's small embroidered textile *Incontri e scontri*, 1988, whose text (translated from Italian) supplied the show's title; and an early oil-and-enamel painting on paper by Willem de Kooning, *Black Untitled*, 1948. This resonant ensemble was rounded out by two of Ligon's own Richard Pryor paintings, *Mudbone (Liar)*, 1993, and *Niggers Ain't Scared*, 1996. Collectively, the works mapped key moments and issues—artistic, social, and political—in Ligon's formation and ongoing history, from his childhood in the Bronx in the '60s, through his coming-of-age in an era of civil rights struggles, to his education in the Whitney Independent Study Program, and his present-day life in Brooklyn. It also counterpointed several generations of artists, juxtaposing elders, such as Hammons and Johns, who have been significant mentors for him, with contemporaries, notably Noland and Walker, with whom he has close affinities. That almost all of the works in the modestly scaled gallery were made by his fellow citizens was also telling. Though the show was intermittently enriched by incursions from elsewhere, its purview was unmistakably the country of Ligon's birth (a focus underscored in another gallery by Ligon's *Untitled*, 2006, a monumental neon sign whose letters, painted black, spell AMERICA).

ARTFORUM

Building on that richly textured opening salvo, the show unfolded through a series of interconnected spaces in which exhibits were clustered thematically or by reference to formal or material concerns (or both). Integral to these groupings were photographs, films, and videos by William Eggleston, Charles Moore, and Agnès Varda, among others. Like many of the objects in the first gallery, these selections evoked watersheds of recent American history, providing a kind of quasi-documentary ballast throughout the exhibition. The generational admixture extended through the show, with classic works by forebears including Philip Guston, Bruce Nauman, Adrian Piper, Jackson Pollock, Ad Reinhardt, Richard Serra, and Andy Warhol installed alongside revered icons by important figures from Ligon’s generation (Byron Kim, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Zoe Leonard, Steve McQueen, and Chris Ofili, among others), while a few outliers, such as Sun Ra and Beauford Delaney, leavened this pedigreed corpus. All told, “Encounters and Collisions,” billed as Ligon’s “first major curatorial project,” brought more than forty artists into conversation and comprised some 125 works. A mere dozen, spanning the years 1985 to 2008, were by Ligon himself. Each was contextualized within a finely honed selection of works by other participants that engaged its core concerns, including homophobia, racial stereotyping, masculinity, social justice, artistic legacy, and the problems and possibilities of expressive abstraction. The show’s organizers, Tate Britain director Alex Farquharson (who initiated the show when he was director of Nottingham Contemporary) and Francesco Manacorda (artistic director at Tate Liverpool, to which it traveled) describe the exhibition in the accompanying catalogue as “a kind of retrospective, but one that takes the paradoxical form of a group exhibition—a group exhibition that traces Ligon’s relationships with others”—and as “the realization of the imaginary museum [Ligon’s] practice evokes.” Vastly different, these characterizations suggest the difficulty of identifying what kind of show Ligon actually made, if not what it all added up to. What is clear is that, in forgoing an incremental career summation in favor of a network of dialogues among the artist and a panoply of interlocutors, the exhibition not only proffered an alternative to the stock model of a retrospective but also recast the prototype of an imaginary museum. More important, it suggested new answers to the question of what that speculative construct might address.

In recent decades, artist-curated shows have provided the default option for professional curators hoping to confront or at least enliven their moribund situations via recourse to various forms of institutional critique. Artists have also been invited to assume the mantle of curator in order to articulate what their official counterparts feel unqualified to express or constrained from voicing themselves, not least positions deemed too partisan or too political for comfort. But in “Encounters and Collisions,” Ligon skirted questions of institutional framing and representation, concentrating instead on narrative modalities inherent in exhibition making. He thereby rejected models much favored by guest curators—notably, mining the museum and raiding the icebox, methodologies that take their names from exhibitions by Fred Wilson and Warhol, respectively. That is, Ligon neither recuperated marginalized artifacts into the institution’s collection displays in order to construct a transgressive counternarrative nor contested conventional hierarchies between and within the fine and applied arts by exhuming long-forgotten or denigrated objects from deep storage. Instead, he orchestrated his high-profile cast’s numerous subject positions into a richly interwoven narrative that inevitably registered as being in dialogue with the conventions of collection display but that, in its reach and diversity, was radically different from the boilerplate art-historical chronicles that generally determine such displays today.

ARTFORUM

He accomplished this feat by bringing to bear tactics he has long used in his own art. As Manacorda notes in his introductory essay, Ligon’s artistic practice is “intrinsically curatorial.” Whether by drawing on existing texts or by entering into dialogues with artists, writers, filmmakers, musicians, and others, he deploys methodologies essential to curatorial practice: research, selection, juxtaposition, framing, etc. But also fundamental to his curatorial strategy in “Encounters and Collisions” was provision for intimate engagements that, while paying due regard to the material specificity of each art object, contested the objects’ assumed autonomy by placing them in a larger conceptual framework. Proceeding via a ricocheting, recursive mode of referencing, he created dense, intricate constellations. Among the memorable results was the drawing-out of latencies in works that are perennial favorites: For example, the interracial homoeroticism animating Leonard’s runway photos from a Geoffrey Beene fashion show was brought to the fore by proximity to Gonzalez-Torres’s oblique ode to intimacy, the paired wall clocks “Untitled” (*Perfect Lovers*), 1987–90, even as Moore’s indelible photos of the Birmingham protests of 1963 suggested the histories of oppression that inflect private experience; meanwhile, the implications and stakes of performative agency in Giovanni Anselmo’s signature projected-slide piece, *Invisibile*, 1971, became all the clearer when viewed alongside Leonard’s, Gonzalez-Torres’s, and Moore’s works.

Among Ligon’s own contributions to “Encounters and Collisions” were several works with texts that employ the first-person pronoun: In *Untitled (I am drawn to sleaze . . .)*, 1985, the parenthetical phrase has been handwritten across an expanse of juicy oil pigment; in *Untitled (I Lost My Voice I Found My Voice)*, 1991, the text was repeatedly stenciled in oil stick onto a gessoed white ground until it became illegible; in *Study for Condition Report*, 2000, annotations identifying damage and wear are made on a photocopy of a photograph of a painting reprising the famous protest signs declaring I AM A MAN. Though all three statements might be read as subjective enunciations, the works trace Ligon’s evolving responses to his salient question of address: He moves from what appears to be (but, in fact, is not) an autobiographical disclosure to more obviously appropriated statements that conjure a deeper form of social engagement as well as a negotiation of that engagement’s complex mediations. That is, through the use of the shifter *I*, he used other voices to explore and test multiple facets of selfhood and to think through questions of identity by articulating experiences not necessarily lived by the artist, but imaginatively inhabited. Problematizing “issues of gender, race and social access through the delivery of his speech acts,” Manacorda perceptively argues, the artist aims to change “the conditions of visibility and ‘speakability’ within the visual art institution and beyond.”

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The third characterization of “Encounters and Collisions” advanced by its organizers is perhaps the most compelling: “a kind of autobiographical art history, one that, in particular, opens up the post-war American canon to the poetics and politics of difference, especially as articulated by artists who speak from subject positions . . . variously marginalised by dominant culture.” There is nonetheless something troubling in the choice of the qualifier *autobiographical*. Contrary to the anonymity that is a crucial feature of the copybook museum narrative—and that is necessarily imitated, however archly, in shows that mine the museum or raid the icebox—this show’s narrative was unquestionably authored. Its signatory was not, however, the curator, nor was it the museum-mining or icebox-raiding artist, who, having commandeered the protocols of anonymity, ultimately consolidates her own status as the author who has warped, critiqued, or transgressed those protocols. In fact, the signatory was not singular but multiple—namely, the myriad voices that Ligon choreographed into a collective he might identify as his “artistic community,” embodied in a particular historical place and time. Ligon’s imaginary museum, then, could be read as a much-needed anticipatory model that goes beyond recuperative and inclusive gestures, which do little more than tweak the entrenched canon, to a broader rethinking of the canon’s founding precepts. Thus, to the claim that “America Is Hard to See,” advanced by New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art in its recent collection display, “Encounters and Collisions” offered a salutary amplification: Such difficulty may be a function of vantage point and perspective, or the lack thereof.

In an interview some years back, Hilton Als suggested, after questioning Ligon about the range and compass of his forthcoming collection of writings, that the book would be about “yourself in the world.” Ligon seized on Als’s remark and titled the publication not *Myself in the World* (which would have confirmed Als’s summation), but *Yourself in the World* (taking Als literally). At the heart of that canny shift is an overture to the reader. In “Encounters and Collisions” Ligon made the same heuristic move away from the autobiographical (the auteur) in order to invite the viewer to negotiate her place in their shared world.

Lynne Cooke is Senior Curator at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

Glenn Ligon

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF
AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK
James Meyer

THE LATE 1980s AND EARLY '90s is a time without a name. Eras become knowable after the fact: Only recently have scholars and younger artists turned their attention to that relatively undefined art-historical moment. The moment in question witnessed the rise of AIDS activism and an expanded institutional critique (with its "minings" of public institutions and engagement of sites beyond the white cube), the Whitney Biennial of 1993 and the first manifestations of an art of relational exchange. Glenn Ligon and his generation—my generation—emerged in this milieu. Bracketed by such events as the AIDS crisis, the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, the dismantling of apartheid, and the decline of the art market, the art world of the early '90s was a scene in transition. Artists and critics had absorbed the critical positions of an earlier moment. The field of postmodernism had been drawn in sharply etched lines. The critics associated with the journal *October* had staked out a polemical divide between a painting suffused with mythical subject matter and a masculine authorial presence (the expressionisms of Julian Schnabel, Anselm Kiefer, Georg Baselitz), and an art of appropriated images and texts that sought to challenge patriarchy and rhetorics of authority (the discursive practices of Cindy Sherman,

Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince). In one version of that argument, painting was declared obsolete outright. The "end of painting" arguments of the Constructivists and Conceptualists enjoyed a belated (and ultimately short-lived) revival. Tainted with Romantic associations of uniqueness and authenticity, painting (the argument went) could not compete with more contemporary formats such as the Picture or video, which allowed the artist to dismantle sexist, homophobic, and racist constructions in the very formats in which they were disseminated. In fact, postmodernist techniques proved to be extremely effective in raising awareness of the AIDS epidemic and the callous lack of governmental response to the crisis. At the time, the acerbic posters and videos of ACT UP seemed to me the most fitting response to a dire situation, a point of view captured by the Gran Fury poster that read WITH 42,000 DEAD / ART IS NOT ENOUGH / TAKE COLLECTIVE DIRECT ACTION TO END THE AIDS CRISIS (*Art Is Not Enough*, 1988). So when I encountered Ligon's paintings for the first time, during the early 1990s, I simply couldn't understand how an artist of demonstrably political intention could imagine that painting words on a canvas could change anything. I could not see his work.

The Whitney Independent Study Program was ground zero for such debates during the '80s, when Ligon was enrolled there. His forays outside painting, such as his seminal *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book*, 1991–93, reveal an incisive grasp of poststructuralist ideas. Combining ninety-one pages from Robert Mapplethorpe's *Black Book* (1986) with seventy-eight quotations from multiple sources, the work unsettles any single reading of Mapplethorpe's project: The attempt to grasp the photographer's "intention" only leads to further interpretation. As the Whitney retrospective—installed with unusual lucidity by curator Scott Rothkopf—makes apparent, by the time Ligon exhibited this work in 1993, he had already come into his own as a painter. (The Mapplethorpe piece appears in the fourth gallery of the exhibition.) It would seem, at first glance, that Ligon felt ready to explore the photographic

This page, from left: View of "Glenn Ligon: AMERICA," 2011, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Six works from the "Door Paintings" series, 1990–92. Photo: Sheldon Collins. Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (I Am a Man)*, 1988, oil and enamel on canvas, 40 x 25". Glenn Ligon, *Untitled*, 1985, oil, enamel, and graphite on paper, 30 x 22 1/4". Opposite page, from left: Glenn Ligon, *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* (detail), 1991–93, ninety-one offset prints, each 11 1/2 x 11 1/2"; seventy-eight text pages, each 5 1/4 x 7 1/4". Glenn Ligon, *Sun (Version 2) #1*, 2001, silk-screen ink, oil stick, and gesso on canvas, 48 x 36". Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (There Is a Consciousness We All Have . . .)*, 1988, oil, synthetic polymer, oil stick, and graphite on two sheets of paper, overall 30 x 44 1/4".



James Meyer

« Glenn Ligon: Whitney Museum of Art, New York »

ArtForum Vol. XLIX, No. 10, Summer 2011, pg. 392-393, July 2018

UNHIDDEN IDENTITIES

A Glenn Ligon retrospective.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

Young artists go where the glamour of the moment is; it's how art history moves along, if not how it progresses. Today, that means a frenzied international market and its auxiliary organs, such as art fairs, which, grading all values by prices paid, make each artist a player, ready or not. It's hard now to recall that, less than two decades ago, fashion exalted politically themed work, which, backed by institutions and academic criticism, cast artists as agents of social change. (A down market eased the way to virtue; nothing else was selling very well.) "Glenn Ligon: AMERICA," a striking retrospective at the Whitney Museum, rescues a star of the era of identity politics from a blind spot in the present art world.

The Bronx-born Ligon, now fifty, makes combative points of being black and being gay. He is best known for paintings in black oil stick (and, sometimes, coal dust) of stencilled, racially charged prose, such as a work from 1990 that quotes a line from Zora Neale Hurston: "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background." The words repeat, from the top to the bottom of a tall, white-painted board, becoming increasingly smudged and illegible. But the show also includes fine, less familiar works in photography, sculpture, and neon. Handsomely and sensitively installed by the Whitney curator Scott Rothkopf, the show communicates an appealingly complex sensibility that is subject to self-doubt and aesthetic yearning, even when it is forcefully on message. Ligon emerges as a companionable spirit in an endemic ordeal of American democracy—who we are, beset by what we are taken to be—which most afflicts those, of course, who are most swiftly and carelessly categorized, as by skin color.

Ligon's father was a foreman at the General Motors plant in Tarrytown, New York; his mother was a nurse's aide. Growing up in the South Bronx, he won a scholarship to Manhattan's progressive Walden

School. After graduating from Wesleyan University, in 1982, he became a student in the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program, a hotbed of critical theory and conceptualist styles. His love of painting—he has singled out Willem de Kooning, Cy Twombly, and Terry Winters as tutelary heroes, and the importance to his work of Jasper Johns's stencilled lettering is obvious—made him something of a conservative on a scene whose preferred mode was the appropriation of photographic images, in works conceived to expose and mock the malignities of patriarchal, "late capitalist" culture. (Leading lights of the movement included Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Jenny Holzer, Hans Haacke, and Richard Prince.) Early drawings in the Whitney show, from 1985, find Ligon duly juxtaposing images of African-American hair products with images of canonical modern sculptures, by Brancusi and Giacometti, that display influences of African tribal art. But the satirical point is a mite blunted by Ligon's palpable liking for the sculptures.

Ligon's most apposite forebear is the charismatic and elusive black conceptualist David Hammons, whose needling tactics—like setting up as a street peddler of snowballs priced according to size, outside Cooper Union, one winter day in 1983—channel discontents of race and class without recourse to philosophizing, and without insulting past masters of art. In the Whitney show, another precedent both surprises and makes telling sense: Richard Pryor.

I hadn't known Ligon's series of word paintings of chipperly profane racial jokes from Pryor's standup act, in a series from 1993-96, which Ligon resumed in 2004. (An example: "Niggers be holding them dicks too. White people go 'Why you guys hold your things? Say 'You done took everything else motherfucker.'") The paintings' hot, flashing colors are as hard on the eyes as their texts are on the nerves. Ligon has said that he backed off his first engage-

Glenn Ligon Studio

Peter Schjeldahl

« *Unhidden Identities: A Glenn Ligon retrospective* »

The New Yorker, New Yorker, March 11, 2011: 76-77.

ment with Pryor's scorched-earth hilarity because its intensity scared him. That may be understandable on two counts. First is the social chasm between an artist trained in sophisticated manners of fine art and a performer who was brought up in his grandmother's brothel. The second possible root of Ligon's unease is an emotional stance, which might be called aggressive-passive, and which he shares with the comedian: a fury at unjust suffering, the expression of which strips bare a personal, humiliated vulnerability. Pryor's incendiary poetry burns to a core of humanity from which all customary divisions among people appear ridiculous. He let audiences feel at one with him, for spans of redemptive laughter. His genius steered him to decide that he had nothing to lose by that. But an equivalent attitude in art would have set Ligon at odds with the judgmental righteousness of his social-critical peers. In effect, he rides Pryor into regions of lonely anguish that he can't brave alone.

Ligon's anxiety plays out by fits and starts in the show, on notes that are comic or angry or just bemused. Elegance steadies him. The artist's superb command of painterly and presentational rhetoric impresses because it has crucial work to do: it gives public poise to private conflict. I remember being irritated, at the notorious, politically minded Whitney Biennial of 1993, by what seemed to be a didactic air in Ligon's "Notes on the Margin of the Black Book." He scavenged pages of Robert Mapplethorpe's "The Black Book" (1986) for its ninety-one erotic photographs of mostly nude black men. He framed the images and arrayed them with framed quotations—from critics or theorists or patrons of gay bars whom he interviewed—that assess the work or offer some reflection on race and sex. At the time, it was widely assumed that Ligon shared a politically correct condemnation of a white photographer's "objectifying" presumption. But it's plain now that he was moved in part by the classical form and the libidinous glory of Mapplethorpe's vision. The only thing that remains annoying about the work is the vapid starchiness of so many of the highbrow texts. Being black and being gay, and an aesthete as well, launched Ligon—and us, vicariously, as we contemplate the work—into a crossfire of ailments and compunctions.

Some of Ligon's ironies seem rather

pat. "To Disembark" (1993), named for a book by the poet Gwendolyn Brooks, dramatizes the story of a slave who had himself shipped North, to freedom, in a crate. Crates emitting recorded voices, including that of Billie Holiday singing "Strange Fruit," are augmented with descriptions of Ligon, written by friends, in the antique style of "Wanted" posters for escaped

Today, a Ligon painting, "Black Like Me #2" (1992), hangs in the private quarters of the White House. That's not ironic; that's progress. If Barack Obama's election didn't end identity politics in American culture, it certainly complicated the matter. The President's color is only one of the many characteristics that make him both a person and a symbol, standing



Ligon gives public poise to private conflict. Photograph by Lyle Ashton Harris.

slaves. The work comes off as an ingenious goof. Also relatively slight, albeit gorgeous, are neon inscriptions, inflected with black paint, of the word "AMERICA" and a phrase from Gertrude Stein: "negro sunshine." Stein was being fondly indulgent of black folks, in an old vein of white cluelessness. Ligon punctures more recent variants with quotes, in paintings on paper, from reviews of his own work, such as one that defensively praises him for not being defensive "about mainstream American art," unlike "many other minority artists." In fact, that hapless wording points toward a truth of Ligon's significance.

for a diversity that can't be sorted out on a demographic chart. Certainly, American racism persists, as does the rage that it incites. But this and other issues that galvanized Ligon's generation of artists are, at least, less clear-cut. Ligon deserves honor for foregrounding, in the famously liberal but chronically lily-white art world, voices such as those of Hurston, Brooks, and James Baldwin, as well as Pryor, and for helping to normalize public assertions of gayness. The fact that he could do so without compromising his personality and his artistic standards is a sign of more than hope. ♦

Glenn Ligon Studio



A neon sculpture from 2005 is among the works by Glenn Ligon, including black-and-white reproductions, in the New York City regional artist retrospective at the Whitney Museum.

Messages That Conduct an Electric Charge

Sometimes a career survey doubles as a scan of social history. This is true of Glenn Ligon's retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, a night but one people show their eyes back to America's state-building past and forward to the Obama present but focuses on the late 1980s and 1990s, a 100-system-revisited stretch of recent art.

HOLLAND
COTTER

ART
REVIEW

Mr. Ligon, who is 50 and was born in the Bronx, did his last breakout work in 1985. At that point, hedging through Reaganomics and already well into the AIDS crisis, a tide of what would come to be called identity politics was building but had not yet penetrated the gated New York art world. The 1985 Whitney Biennial didn't have a single African-American among its 84 artists. Outside the gates though, the cultural waters were stirring. A new generation of black artists was rewriting existing scripts about race. Young gay artists who'd seen the inside of a closet only long enough to pack up and get out were making art about the options ahead of them.

Mr. Ligon, just a few years out of college, was committed to painting in a brushy, romantic, abstract expressionist mode. But he was also acutely aware, as a gay black man, of the political ferment around him. His position became how to make a traditional language of painting expressive of who and what he was.

His initial solution was to keep painting, with de Kooning-esque strokes, but to add new content in the form of words, specifically brief anecdotes lifted from gay pornographic literature and incised with a pencil point into his pigment-soaked surfaces. Like graffiti scrawled in wet cement, or the Latin phrases written on a Cy Twombly painting, the words were a detachment, but they were also a territorial marker, a tag that placed his art really his. Four of these small paintings are among the earliest pieces in "Glenn Ligon: America" at the

Continued on Page 28

Glenn Ligon: America

ON VIEW Until June 5, Whitney Museum of American Art, 545 Madison Avenue, at 75th Street. (212) 570-2600, whitney.org.

UPPER EAST SIDE DINING Atrium, mat di Vito, (212) 888-6339, www.matdivito.com; Gaby, (212) 228-4246, gobarestaurant.com.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY LIBRADO ROMERO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Above, Glenn Ligon's works from his Coloring series. Below, detail from "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background."

Messages Conduct Electric Charge

From Weekend Page 21

Whitney. And they are the first in what has become a long line of language-based works by an artist who is equally an object maker and a conceptualist, and as interested in the past as in the present.

He modeled another early painting, "Untitled (I Am a Man)" from 1988, on a historical artifact: the simple placard, with the words "I Am a Man" in black on a white ground, carried by striking

black sanitation workers in Memphis in 1968, and documented in a famous photograph by Ernest C. Withers.

But Mr. Ligon's oil-on-canvas version isn't a copy of the placard; it's a re-invention of it — the words are differently spaced; the surface is differently textured — as a semi-abstract painting. It's a new kind of object, with an old history, and you perceive it in stages: first as words, a reading experience; then, as you get closer, as a looking-at-art experience; then, holistically, as a thinking experience. (If you linger over his work a little, give yourself to it, you'll get something from it. The temptation, with visually reticent art, is to breeze through the show, but that's like keeping your iPod on at a concert. You get a sense of what's going on, but you're pre-programmed and sticking with that.)

The shift back and forth between reading and looking, object and idea, is the basic dynamic emphasized by the show, which has been organized by Scott Rothkopf, a Whitney curator. And it represents an effort, very much of the current, formalist, post-'90s moment, to position Mr. Ligon as being as much a craft-conscious painter as a social commentator.

The positioning is valid, because the dynamic is demonstrable even early on. And it grows more complex and nuanced as the range of texts he uses expands to include fiction, autobiography, the popular press and oral history, and as his forms become more varied, moving into photography and sculpture.

Always, though, language is at the center. In 1988 Mr. Ligon made a series of paintings using epigrammatic passages taken from dream-interpretation guides popular among African-Americans when he was growing up. He stenciled the phrases, character by character, with oil stick, a thick, viscous medium that creates a slightly raised, braillelike relief, and used colors that suited the words. For example the phrase "Honeycomb: To suck honey from a honeycomb denotes pleasure" is stenciled in copper-colored letters on a brown-gold ground.

This series would be his last use of color in text painting for quite a while, with the exception of a group of pictures based on scabrous racial jokes by the comedian Richard Pryor done in eye-catching complementaries (electric blue on bright red, etc.). Black and white would become the norm, and stenciling a primary expressive medium.

In several paintings beginning in 1990

Cotter, Holland

« Messages That Conduct an Electric Charge »

The New York Times, Friday, March 11, 2011, page C19, C24.



Mr. Ligon covered wooden doors or door-shaped canvases with stenciled sentences pulled from different sources: an autobiographical essay by Zora Neale Hurston ("I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background"); Genet's play "The Blacks" ("I'm Turning Into a Specter Before Your Very Eyes and I'm Going to Haunt You"); a poem by Jesse Jackson ("I Am Somebody").

In each painting the single line is repeated over and over, continuously, in black letters on a gessoed background, with a few paintings white on white, or ivory on ivory. As the words wind down from the top, the stencil becomes increasingly clogged with pigment so that individual characters turn smudgy, and words grow progressively less legible and the bottom of the painting is a kind of miasma.

The effect is most extreme in pictures that quote from James Baldwin's 1953 essay "Stranger in the Village," an account of his stay in a tiny Alpine hamlet where, he claimed, no one had ever seen

painting format in a set of large-scale photographic images of the 1995 Million Man March on Washington, an event that promoted black male solidarity but was pointedly unwelcoming to gay men.

And in two installations he leaves painting behind altogether. One, "To Disembark," from 1993, is based on a 19th-century account by a slave named Henry Brown, known as Box, of his escape from captivity by having himself mailed from Virginia to Philadelphia in a wooden crate.

Like a monument to Brown, four shipping crates sit in a Whitney gallery; from inside one comes the voice of Billie Holiday singing the anti-lynching anthem "Strange Fruit." On the walls hang a series of witty, sometimes chilling "wanted" posters for fugitive slaves, with Mr. Ligon himself the runaway subject, as if he couldn't, even now, be free and clear of the past.

The sound of Holiday's melismatic wail carries into a second installation, "Notes on the Margin of the 'Black Book,'" a mural-like display of Robert Mapplethorpe's eroticized photographs of black men from the late 1980s and early 1990s. Some viewers find the series deeply racist. Mr. Ligon indicates his own ambivalence by annotating the pictures with printed commentary by theorists, artists, politicians, gay-bar patrons and so on.

The sheer range of informed opinion suggests that there is no "right" reaction. Mapplethorpe wanted to cause trouble, and he did. He was no hero but no villain either.

In any case, for Mr. Ligon, who embraces the logic of ambiguity, heroism is as contingent a category as history, race and gender. In 2000 for a commissioned community project in Minneapolis, he distributed copies of 1960s and '70s black pride coloring book to schoolchildren. He asked them to color the pictures, and he made silk-screens of the results. The child who colored in an African beauty named Salimu did a nice, respectful job. But Malcolm X came out

looking like a clown — white skin, cherry-red lips, dots of rouge — and Frederick Douglass disappeared under a rain of scribbles.

The retrospective ends as it started, with words. A big one, "America" is spelled out three times in neon in the final gallery, each version slightly different, none quite right. One has backward letters, another flickers as if running out of power; the third is painted black and emits only pinpoints of light.

There's a fourth neon piece downstairs in the lobby, consisting of the words "Negro Sunshine" — the phrase is Gertrude Stein's (and a racial stereotype as she used it) — and facing the street. Like everything by Mr. Ligon, "Negro Sunshine" can be read in differ-

Glenn Ligon is as much a craft-conscious artist as a social commentator.

ent ways. It can evoke the optimism that initially greeted the Obama presidency but that now can seem hard to sustain. Or it can refer to changes in American attitude — a real loosening up — toward race and gender since Mr. Ligon came on the scene in the mid-1980s. Or it can express a viewer's appreciation of the probity and plentitude of his art.

"This sober, tender-hearted, very searching history of a family's progress, comprehends in its picture of life which is distinctively American, a psychology which is universal."

The words are Marianne Moore's. She was writing about Stein's epic novel "The Making of Americans." I'll borrow and apply them to Mr. Ligon's work.

ONLINE: GLENN LIGON

An interactive feature on selected works in the exhibition:

nytimes.com/design

a person with black skin. His tale of enforced visibility and vulnerability ends with a vision of social transformation, specifically in America: "The world is white no longer, and will never be white again." But Mr. Ligon makes Baldwin's words all but unreadably dark, by stenciling them with a mixture of black paint and coal dust that cakes and clots on the canvas surfaces like epidermal growth and gives off a spooky sheen.

If the use of stenciling inevitably brings Jasper Johns to mind, the sparkle effects recall Andy Warhol's diamond-dust silk-screened paintings of shoes and shadows. In the late 1990s Mr. Ligon borrowed Warhol's silk-screen-

Cotter, Holland

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Fleissig, Peter. « Conceptual Artist Glenn Ligon's Survey Opens at the Whitney », *Vogue*, March 8, 2011.
<https://www.vogue.com/article/conceptual-artist-glenn-ligons-survey-opens-at-the-whitney>

VOGUE

Conceptual Artist Glenn Ligon's Survey Opens at the Whitney

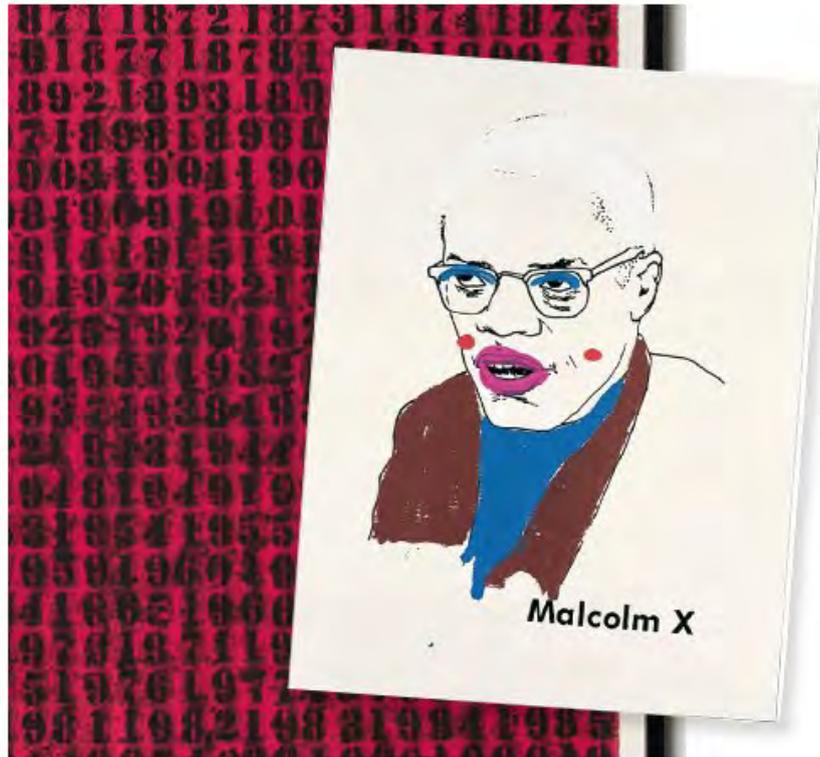
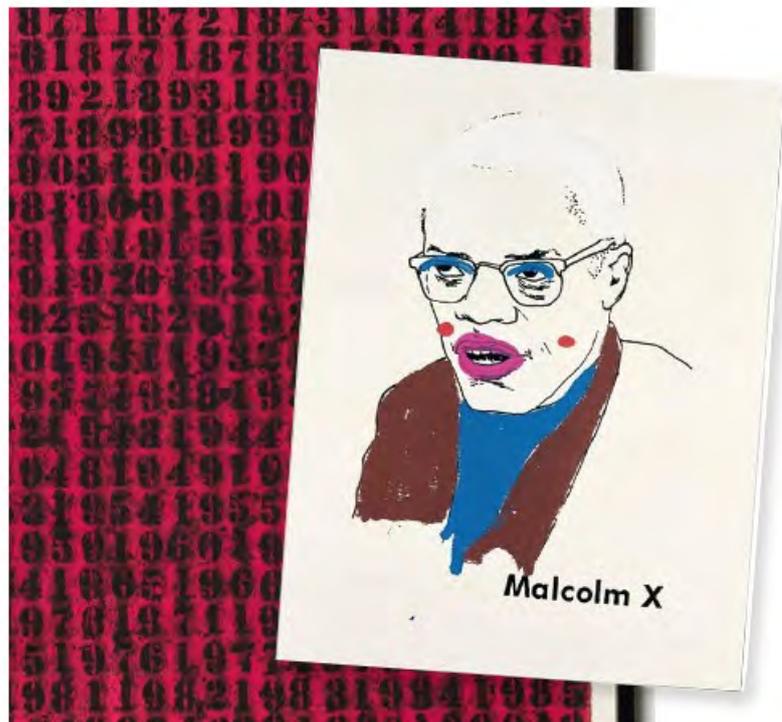


Photo: (from left) Collection of Barbara and Howard Morse, © Glenn Ligon, photograph by Ronald Amustutz; collection of Michael and Lise Evans © Glenn Ligon

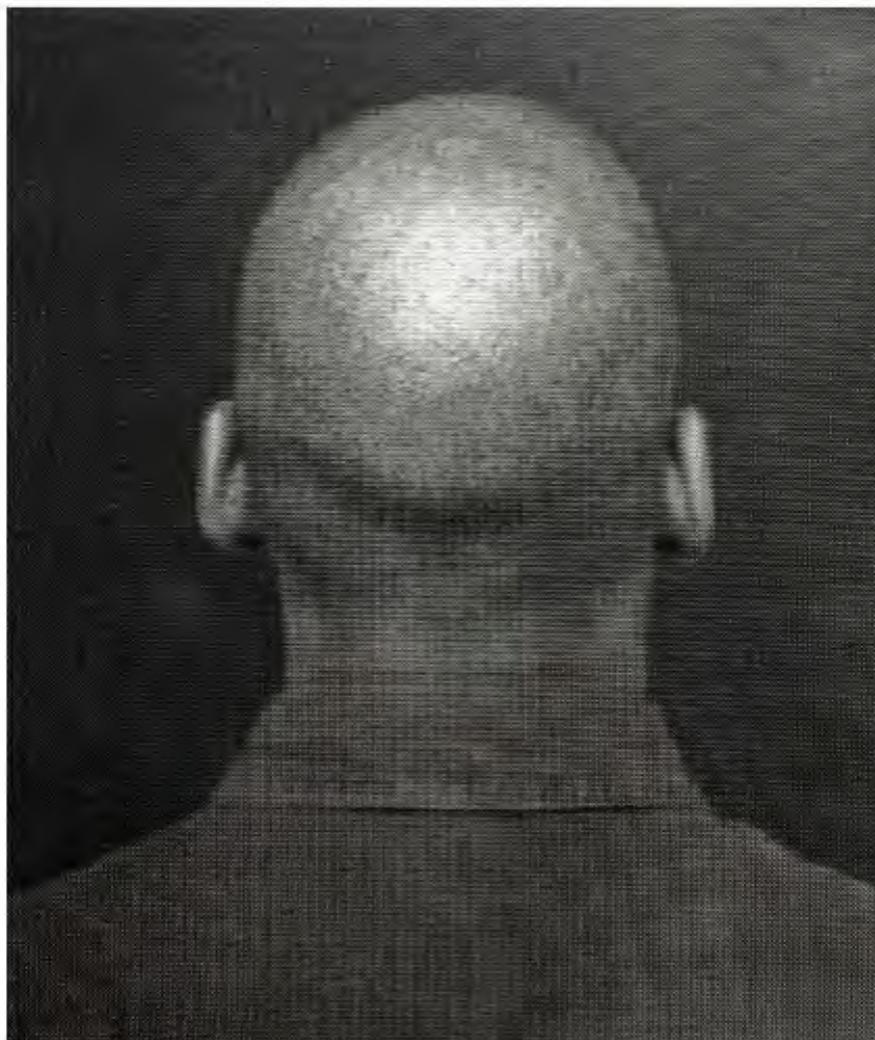


From left: *Untitled* (1776)

Photo: (from left) Collection of Barbara and Howard Morse, © Glenn Ligon, photograph by Ronald Amustutz; collection of Michael and Lise Evans © Glenn Ligon

Fleissig, Peter. « Conceptual Artist Glenn Ligon's Survey Opens at the Whitney », *Vogue*, March 8, 2011.
<https://www.vogue.com/article/conceptual-artist-glenn-ligons-survey-opens-at-the-whitney>

VOGUE



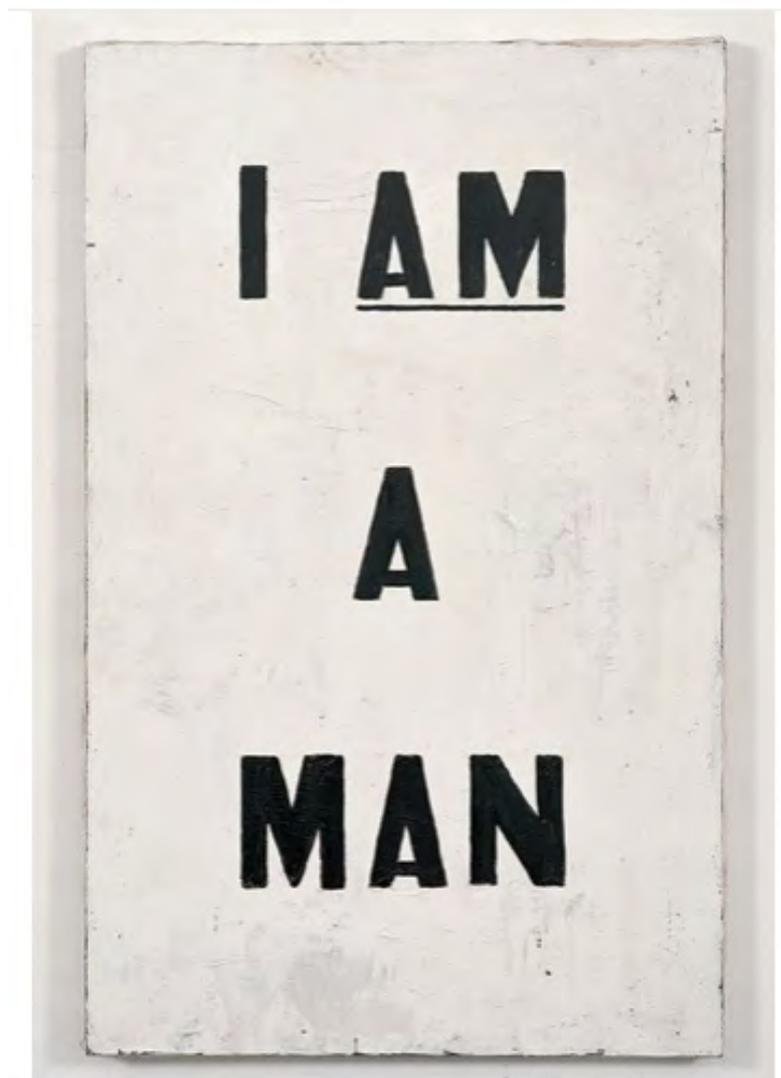
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Self-Portrait, 1996.

Collection of the artist © Glenn Ligon

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Untitled (I Am a Man), 1988.

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VOGUE



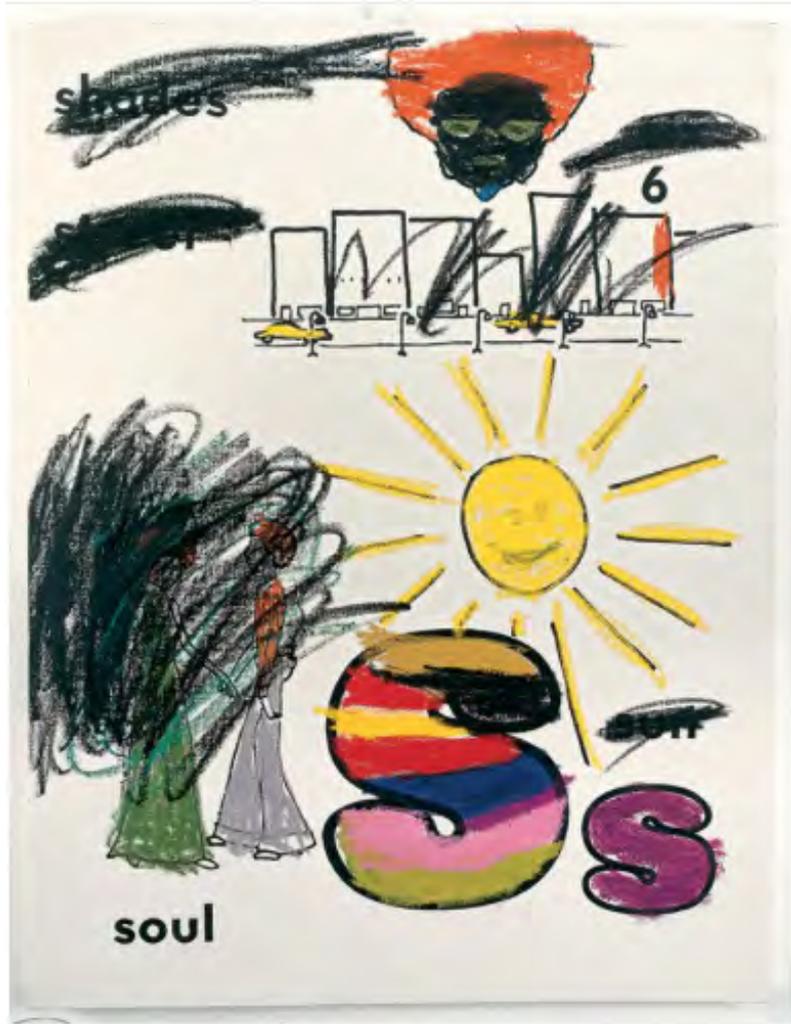
Galerie
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Rückenfigur, 2009.

Courtesy of Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Fleissig, Peter. « Conceptual Artist Glenn Ligon's Survey Opens at the Whitney », *Vogue*, March 8, 2011.
<https://www.vogue.com/article/conceptual-artist-glenn-ligons-survey-opens-at-the-whitney>

VOGUE



Sun (Version 2) #1, 2001.

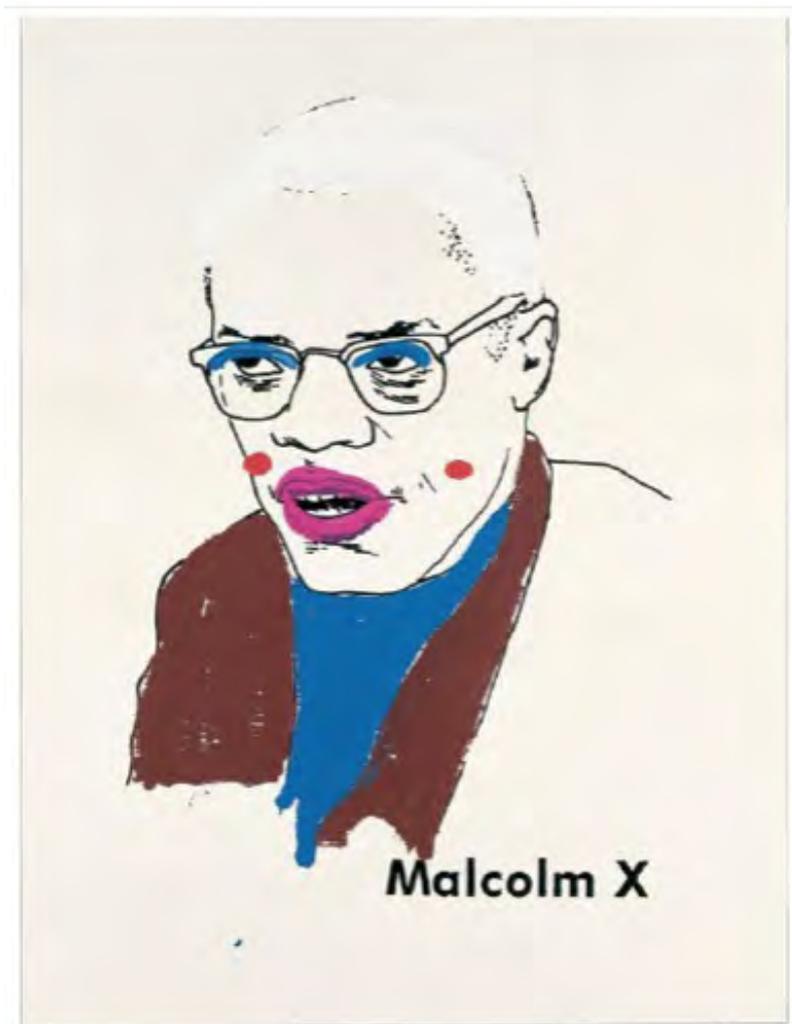
Collection of Eileen Harris Norton © Glenn Ligon

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<https://www.vogue.com/article/conceptual-artist-glenn-ligons-survey-opens-at-the-whitney>

VOGUE

Galerie
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Malcolm X (Version 1) #1, 2000.
Collection of Michael and Lise Evans © Glenn Ligon

VOGUE

Galerie
Chantal Crousel



Untitled (1776)

Photo: Ronald Amustutz; collection of Barbara and Howard Morse © Glenn Ligon



Mirror, 2002.

Courtesy of the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles; collection of Melody Hobson © Glenn Ligon

Not to be missed this spring is “Glenn Ligon: AMERICA,” the Whitney Museum of American Art’s mid-career survey of the Bronx-born artist whose painting *Black Like Me #2* (1992) was recently favored by Barack Obama with a place on the White House walls. Not that Ligon needs any endorsement to earn his place on the A-list: Coolness and passion fuse with devastating precision in this artist’s enterprise. Comparing his approach to a Jasper Johns map painting or a John Coltrane jazz rhythm worked to virtual abstraction, Ligon takes a fascinatingly cerebral approach in paintings, prints, and sculptures that can be disarmingly simple—but deliver a visceral punch.

In his case the “A” stands for “Africa” and “America” as he explores evolving questions of race and identity, often from a literary or verbal starting point: Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin (in particular “Stranger in the Village,” a short story about a black man in Switzerland) as well as the outrageous comic riffs of Richard Pryor. His *Gold Nobody Knew Me #1* (2007), for example, made with stenciled black letters in oil stick on a gold acrylic background, paraphrases Pryor’s joke, “I went to Africa. I went to the Motherland to find my roots! Right? Seven hundred million black people! Not one of those mother*****s knew me.”

VOGUE

Condition Report (2000), takes a print Ligon made twelve years earlier using the phrase held up during the 1968 AFSCME Sanitation Worker's Strike in Memphis—"I Am A Man"—and hangs it alongside the same print annotated by an art conservator with all the imperfections it has accrued over time, the dispassionate notes ("black spot, hairline cracks," etc.) only underscoring the humanity of the original phrase. With the upcoming publication of his book of essays, *Yourself in the World* (Yale University Press, 2011) Ligon, the erudite master interpreter, is now offering his own source material, too.

The Whitney show features some hundred works, including previously unexhibited early pieces, and Ligon's striking recent neon sculptures, including a newly commissioned 22-foot-long piece archly spelling out "negro sunshine" in white letters for the Whitney's Madison Avenue windows. The final gallery will present three twelve-foot-long neon works with the word "America" rendered in oxymoronic black neon—since neon can by definition not be black, the artist had to hand-paint the glass, just as the sanitation workers hand-painted their placards. As he conceived the "America" sculptures, which play with the idea of race, progress, and materialism, Ligon was reading Charles Dickens' French Revolution novel, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), with its famous opening line, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."

"Glenn Ligon: AMERICA" is at the Whitney Museum of American Art, March 10-June 5, 2011; whitney.org

Words, Words, Words: On Glenn Ligon

Illustration: *Untitled (I Am a Man)* © Glenn Ligon. 1988 Courtesy of the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles. Photograph by Ronald Amstutz

WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN we talk about America is more often than not a shadow conversation about who is and who isn't — or who should and who shouldn't be — a "Real American." This is hardly a new phenomenon. The practice of discussing who can and can't lay claim to the name "American" is itself profoundly American, as Americanizing as it is polarizing. Yet the experience is vastly different for those Americans positioned at the limits of inclusion than it is for those who police its boundaries. Membership, it would seem, has always had its privileges.

For Ralph Ellison, the act of writing from the margins (or, as he put it, the "lower frequencies") required "a constant plunging back into the shadow of the past where time hovers ghostlike." In the introduction to his aptly named essay collection, *Shadow and Act*, he writes:

When I began writing in earnest I was forced, thus, to relate myself consciously and imaginatively to my mixed background as American, as Negro American, and as a Negro ... More important and inseparable from this particular effort, was the necessity of determining my true relationship to that body of American literature to which I was most attracted and through which ... I would find my own voice.

Ellison's enforced interrogation of self and society — a kind of metaphoric digging in the crates of history, myth, and the American literary tradition — shares a frequency with the work of Glenn Ligon, another African American artist for whom the past, whether cast in shadow, steeped in phantasm, or clean and well-lighted, is never truly past. His mid-career retrospective, *Glenn Ligon: AMERICA*, debuted in the spring at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and opened on October 23rd at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Ligon is primarily a painter of text whose references are derived largely from the African American literary tradition, yet this is both a perfectly accurate and perfectly inadequate summation of his artistic practice.

REVIEW OF BOOKS

Like Ellison, who as a young writer famously transcribed his favorite Hemingway stories in order to internalize their style and sensibility, Ligon listens to the voices of his literary and cultural forebears — who include Ellison, as well as James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, and Richard Pryor — as a systematic means of finding his own voice among many others. Ligon's 1990 painting, *Untitled (I Remember the Very Day That I Became Colored)*, exhibited at the 1991 Whitney Biennial, is representative of the work that first brought him acclaim. It features a phrase from Hurston's 1928 essay "How it Feels to Be Colored Me" stenciled repeatedly in thick black oil stick over the primed-white surface of a wooden door about 80 inches tall and 30 inches wide, until it fades into a kind of incantatory illegibility. And, again like Ellison's, Ligon's smart and judicious acts of sampling from history and literature are not mere reverential citations. Instead, they are acute engagements with the weights and forces — historical, lyrical, emotional — of language and image; his works become, by virtue of his brush, oil stick, and stencils, both independent of and powerfully informed by their sources. But it's primarily Ligon's own talents as a writer that account not only for his flair for creating art with a kind of piquant import that he's made all his own, but also allow us a generous glimpse at the man behind it.

Glenn Ligon was born in 1960 in the Bronx, NY, and graduated from Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. He thought he would become an architect, but struggling through physics and chemistry disabused him of that notion. Young, black, and gay (the description to which James Baldwin once famously responded, "I thought I'd hit the jackpot"), he enrolled in 1984 in the Whitney Museum's prestigious Independent Study Program, which, during that era, was a Lacanian-Foucauldian boot-camp of sorts. It was there that the young abstract expressionist Ligon studied text-based work by contemporaries like Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Richard Prince, and Hans Haacke, and began to introduce into his paintings the words that would soon become central to his work.

REVIEW OF BOOKS

Beyond Ligon's instinct for the telling quote, it is the sumptuously lush surfaces of his paintings that beguiles the eye: letters rendered broad and thick with heaping impasto bound by rigid stenciling, their density expressive of their authority. His work is a typography fetishist's dream — as words seemingly attempt escape towards the viewer from a flat, white expanse ("I AM SOMEBODY") — or, occasionally, nightmare, when they bleed into near-incoherence at the bottom ("I LOST MY VOICE I FOUND MY VOICE"). Ligon's stenciling, like Jasper Johns's, is alive in its subtle imperfection, and is lent all the more gravity by the provenance of Ligon's historical and typographical appropriations. The gentle, trembling edges of the black block letters against a white background in 1988's *Untitled (I Am a Man)* — inspired by similar placards carried by striking black sanitation workers in Memphis in 1968 — suggests a peculiar mixture of defiance and caution that rings true once you've seen the workers' faces in Ernest C. Withers's photographs of their march through the city. The emotional arc of Ligon's work then bends from solemn protest toward swagger and fury with a piece like the Ice Cube-sampling *Untitled (Wrong Nigga to Fuck With)*, needling Cube's blunt threat of a mantra into your brain.

It is, then, no surprise that the monograph produced for Ligon's retrospective would find its greatest successes and gorgeously-rendered revelations in the details of the text-based work mentioned above, interspersed throughout the catalogue's plates. It is difficult to do any kind of justice on the printed page to Ligon's *Stranger* series, inspired by Baldwin's essay "Stranger in the Village," and whose surfaces are layered with shiny black coal dust that obscures Baldwin's words while lending them raw physicality, but the reproductions in *Glenn Ligon: America* somehow capture their metaphysical qualities. Edited by Scott Rothkopf and featuring contributions from Hilton Als, Okwui Enwezor, Saidiya Hartman, Bennett Simpson, and Franklin Sirmans, plus a conversation between Ligon and Thelma Golden, and a rigorous, comprehensive career profile by Rothkopf himself, it's an impressive chronicle of Ligon's evolution as an artist.

Yet it's *Yourself in the World*, a volume of Ligon's own essays and interviews (another joint effort from the Whitney and Yale Press) that truly astounds. Writing about Felix Gonzales-Torres in "My Felix (2007)," Ligon may as well have been writing about himself:

It is Felix's interviews and writings, however, that convey the fullest sense of his intellectual and artistic gifts ... In fact, his interviews and statements are so good that they point to a problem inherent in editing any book on Felix: he was more subtle, engaging, and intellectually nimble than most of his critical commentators.

The old playground retort "it takes one to know one" would seem Ligon-esque if one imagines it repeated ad infinitum on canvas, yet in this case it's also true. The admirer of writers like Ellison, Hurston, and Baldwin knows how to write himself: how to engage, how to compel, and how to amuse. In the first essay of the collection, "Black Light: David Hammons and the Poetics of Emptiness," which appeared in the pages of *Artforum*, he describes the difficulties of being an "African American artist" just so:

"African-American" or "African-American Art" has always been a complicated place to live. A noisy cul-de-sac at the end of a long and winding road that lots of folks are curious about but only want to visit during the summertime.

Throughout, Ligon displays generous wit and startling self-reflection, equal to if not surpassing that displayed in his *Narratives* series, based on slave narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. (One etching, for example, bears the caption: "The Life and Adventures of Glenn Ligon, A Negro; Who Was Sent to Be Educated Amongst White People in the Year 1966 When Only About Six Years of Age and Has Continued to Fraternize With Them to the Present Time.")

One piece, titled "Housing in New York: A Brief History, 1960-2007," takes the form of a diary in which each entry describes an apartment that Ligon has inhabited in New York. From the Bronx public housing projects where he grew up, to the Tribeca apartment where he now lives, each is a history unto itself: a history of blackness, of abandonment and gentrification, of subtle and not-so-subtle racism, of eminent domain, of small-time Dominican drug lords, and of quiet tree-lined streets.

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Ligon's relationship to history is succinctly expressed by Baldwin in "Stranger in the Village": "People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them." Yet Ligon owes perhaps as much to Gertrude Stein as he does to Baldwin. His 2005 piece, *Warm Broad Glow*, consists of the words "negro sunshine" fashioned in neon, the letters wrought in a typewriter font and dipped in black paint so the light reflects only upon the wall behind it. The phrase ("Rose laughed when she was happy but she had not the wide, abandoned laughter that makes the warm broad glow of negro sunshine. Rose was never joyous with the earth-born, boundless joy of negroes. Hers was just ordinary, any sort of woman laughter") is from Stein's 1909 novel, *Three Lives*, and she repeats it, characteristically, throughout the story. As literary scholar Werner Sollors observes in *Ethnic Modernism*, Stein's "love of repetition ... at times seems to deplete racist language of its traditional weight." By story's end, "the ethnic metaphor" becomes "a word again, one might say; and it appeared to have shed much of its hurtful baggage in the process."

Much of Ligon's work, including *Warm Broad Glow*, might be said to function in the same way. His works in neon have been called slight, but they might be seen instead as clever riffs on his own methods, turning on and off, "repeating" their cycle and appearing and disappearing into light or darkness. Ligon sees his systematic approach — a sentence, over and over again — as deriving from conceptual artist Sol LeWitt, although the artist may find a truer forebear in Stein.

Stein knew something about "Americanness," having published a massive novel about it (also chock full of repetition), *The Making of Americans*, in 1925. But what makes or defines an "American" has rarely been as interesting as what, or who, Americans have made or defined themselves against. More often than not it is those perceived as outliers who are actually central to the conversation. In his reading of *Shadow and Act* (which he quotes in an interview with Gary Garrels), Ligon seizes upon Ellison's fantastic satirical metaphor that serves as a rebuke to the exclusionary sort: "[On] the moral level I propose that we view the whole of American life as a drama acted out upon the body of a Negro giant, who, lying trussed up like Gulliver, forms the stage and the scene upon which and within which the action unfolds." A Swiftian modest proposal for sure, but one that speaks not only to Ellison's attempt to define his relationship to his own nation but also to Ligon's struggle to do the same. When Ligon "quotes" Ellison's well known prologue to *Invisible Man* in his paintings ("I am an invisible man..."), the "I" is certainly Ellison's, but it is also Ligon's, and ours as well. We as viewers must confront our own relationship to their work, the slighted histories to which it refers, and the omissions and lacunae that it makes visible.

REVIEW OF BOOKS

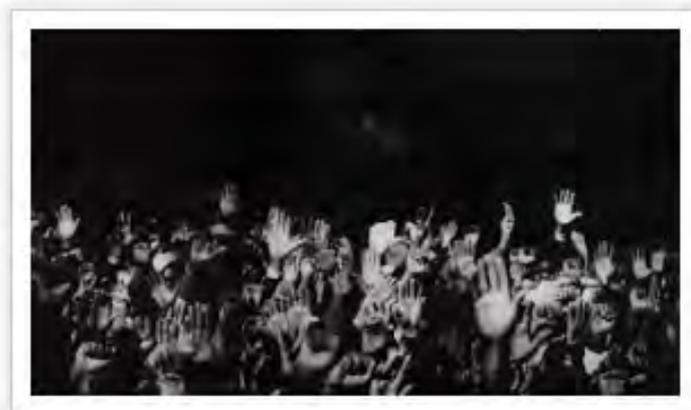
“Americanness” is a quality that perhaps best remains eternally undefined; or rather, is more aptly characterized by those, like Ellison and Ligon, who may linger at the borders of visibility, but actually provide the captive “stage and scene” for our nation’s cultural life. “I did not know my true relationship to America,” Ellison wrote in 1964. “What citizen of the United States really does?”

Lebovici, Élisabeth. « AMe-r-I-ca/ I AM A Man : inversion, subversion? Glenn Ligon au Whitney Museum. », *Le Beau Vice*,
April 22, 2011.

<http://le-beau-vice.blogspot.com/2011/04/ame-r-i-ca-i-am-man-inversion.html>

Le Beau Vice

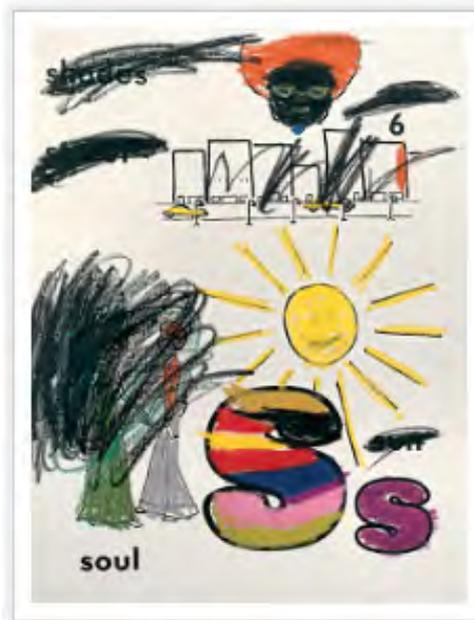
AMe-r-I-ca/ I AM A Man : inversion, subversion? Glenn Ligon au Whitney Museum.



Lebovici, Élisabeth. « AMe-r-I-ca/ I AM A Man : inversion, subversion? Glenn Ligon au Whitney Museum. », *Le Beau Vice*,
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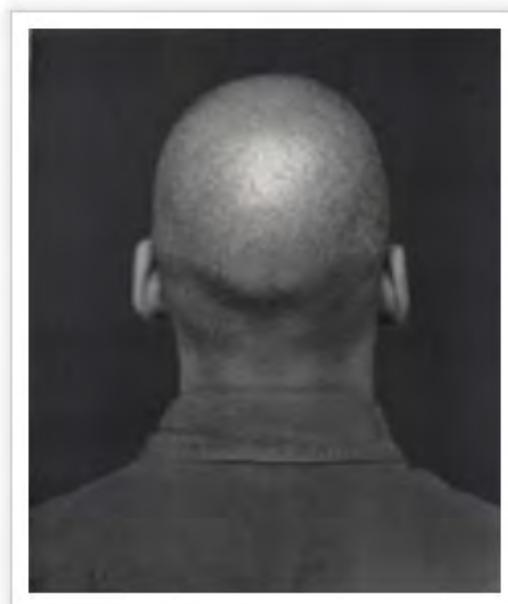
Le Beau Vice



De haut en bas : *Untitled, (I'm a Man)*, 1988 ; *Condition Report ("I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background)*, 1991; *Hands*, 1996, *Malcolm X (Version 1) #1*, 2000; *Sun (Version 2) #1*, 2001;

La magnifique exposition de Glenn Ligon au Whitney Museum distille "hélas, dans le cœur, une tristesse affreuse", comme lorsque Charles Panzera chante Fauré. Est-ce le lieu, cette architecture brutaliste de Marcel Breuer appelée, très bientôt, à ne plus abriter le musée d'art américain pour lequel elle fut construite? Ou est-ce, beaucoup plus directement ce que l'artiste nous montre de sa réalité, happée par l'histoire qui l'a construite, et qui fait mal?

Au milieu de l'exposition trônent des photographies qui ne sont pas les siennes: c'est le *Black Book* de Robert Mapplethorpe. Que faire de l'héritage de ces nus, ultra-classiques, d'hommes noirs parfois découpés- une croupe, une cuisse, une ("grosse") bite, un anus luisants--parfois en pied, statues sur un socle? Le débat à propos de la sujétion de ces modèles noirs faisait rage quand, en 1992, Ligon s'est approprié ces images, pour les exposer avec de nombreux cartels, chacun contenant une citation. Quelques-unes constituaient des réactions violemment contre, d'autres plutôt pour, et beaucoup élargissaient le débat à la représentation de la race, du genre, de la sexualité, à celle du noir "hyper-viril" et "hyper-efféminé", à la fois. *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* fut montré durant la Biennale du Whitney 1993, entièrement consacrée aux politiques de l'identité et qui fit tant débat qu'elle ne se reproduit plus jamais.



Self-Portrait, 1996

Le Beau Vice

Ce qui passionne douloureusement dans le travail de Ligon, c'est qu'il se sert d'images et de mots, de phrases, qui ont *déjà servi* et qui parlent, ici, à la première personne, du plus intime. Ceci se manifeste, non seulement dans ce qui s'affiche ici, et qui procède de la citation photographique (la Marche d'un million organisée par Louis L. Farakhan) ou littéraire (James Baldwin...) mais également dans les opérations techniques du travail artistique.

D'où la présence (et l'absence, de fait) des caractères d'imprimerie de ses "compositions". Celles-ci reprennent et répètent à l'envi des phrases sur des panneaux (des morceaux de portes, en 1991), jusqu'à l'engloutissement dans la matière et l'inintelligibilité progressive, à mesure que ces phrases descendent la surface. Ainsi : "I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background," (d'après Zora Neale Hurston) ou "I Am Somebody," (de Jesse Jackson). Cette dernière phrase s'évanouit, lorsqu'elle est posée blanc sur blanc.

Une deuxième pièce traite de l'autobiographie, reprenant les titres et la composition des anciennes "vies d'esclaves en fuite" du XIX^e siècle- qui étaient donc également des appels au lynchage. Ligon s'y présente à la troisième personne, s'ajoute des caractéristiques physiques peu recommandables : des yeux torves par exemple, ou un "look conservateur". Il retrouve l'ambiguïté sexuelle des *Most Wanted Men* de Warhol (on se reportera au travail de Richard Meyer pour les analyser). L'une d'entre elles s'appelle : "Containing a Full and Faithful Account of His [Ligon's] Commodification of the Horrors of Black Life Into Art Objects for the Public's Enjoyment."- renvoyant à la question du rôle ambigu de l'artiste, qui fait donc son marché du pire au prétexte de l'exposer.



Runaways' (1993)



Lebovici, Élisabeth. « AME-r-I-ca/ I AM A Man : inversion, subversion? Glenn Ligon au Whitney Museum. », *Le Beau Vice*,

April 22, 2011.

<http://le-beau-vice.blogspot.com/2011/04/ame-r-i-ca-i-am-man-inversion.html>

Le Beau Vice

Glenn Ligon fut l'un des premiers parmi les choix d'œuvres des Obama pour leurs quartiers privés à la Maison Blanche. Né en 1960, au tournant des combats pour les droits civiques des noirs américains, il a fait des études artistiques universitaires et est passé par le Whitney Independent Study Program- c'est à dire par les exercices de déconstruction marxistes et psychanalytiques appliqués à l'esthétique. C'est ainsi que le monde de l'art contemporain est probablement plus prêt à l'écouter, en tant que noir, en tant que gay, que des communautés desquels il se marginalise, précisément en devenant artiste. Ce paradoxe, où montrer revient à s'aliéner de ceux qu'on montre, tout en voulant précisément faire acte de cette aliénation, constitue la ligne fragile et douloureuse du travail de Ligon.

Comme le signale le commissaire de son exposition, Scott Rothkopf, cité par le F.T (<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/6bc4744e-557b-11e0-a2b1-00144feab49a.html#ixzz1KEsswfr3>) : " L'anxiété demeure, que nous n'arrivions pas à entendre ce que ces peintures ont à nous dire--et ce sentiment de méconnaissance est, en partie, ce qu'elles ont à dire. "

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Chantal Crousel



Mirror, 2002



Figure, 2010

Lebovici, Élisabeth. « AMe-r-I-ca/ I AM A Man : inversion, subversion? Glenn Ligon au Whitney Museum. », *Le Beau Vice*,
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Le Beau Vice

La splendeur ambiguë des tableaux où Ligon cite des phrases de James Baldwin (ci-dessus) tient d'abord à la somptuosité des effets visuels obtenus, à la fois par la pose de suie et de glitter, la poussière charbonneuse et le maquillage s'unissant pour composer une matière luisante, chatoyante, jouant de plus en plus avec message qu'elle transporte. Il s'agit d'un texte de 1955, intitulé "Etranger au Village", où Baldwin rage d'éprouver la solitude de l'unique homme noir dans un village Suisse, considéré comme un être exotique en Europe et une aberration historique dans une Amérique, incapable de rendre compte de "l'histoire nègre".

Lors d'une deuxième "exposition", les peintures ont été passées par l'écran sérigraphique, pour obtenir des fonds colorés, floqués de suie, noircissant encore un peu plus le texte, qui précisément traite de l'aliénation, par leurs zones grises qui le dégradent à leur tour.

Au contraire, la pénultième salle de l'exposition du Whitney opte pour une autre référence Warholienne : de grandes toiles proposent des images très gaies, et très gay de figures héroïques. La série est fondée sur l'agrandissement d'un livre de coloriages des 70's, que Ligon a proposé de remplir à de jeunes enfants lors d'un atelier au Walker Art Center de Minneapolis. L'irrévérence des tous petits pour des images sacrées de la culture black (ainsi Malcolm X, tout blanc, muni de rouge à lèvres et d'ombres à paupières) a servi de base à ces tableaux, qui en sont de fidèles copies. Ligon a aussi travaillé à partir de blagues, plus ou moins correctes de l'acteur américain Richard Pryor. Ces façons de relancer le travail en puisant dans des fonds riches d'ambigüités cumulent ainsi dans l'un des grands signes au néon que Glenn Ligon produit en guise de générique final à son exposition: AMERICA, dont les lettres R et CA sont disposées à l'envers. Reste AM et I. (Qui) Suis-je dans l'Amérique, quelle Amérique en moi?



Glenn Ligon

Whitney Museum of American Art



Untitled (I Am a Man),
1988. Oil and enamel on
canvas, 40 x 25in.
Collection of the artist.
Photograph by Ronald
Amstutz. Courtesy:
Glenn Ligon.

Walking into Glenn Ligon's mid-career retrospective, deftly curated by Scott Rothkopf, the visitor is greeted by a sea of hands raised in affirmation. A couple curl into fists but most rise into the air more vulnerably, with open palms and grasping fingers. Although the crowd's pledge is unknowable, what we read in the thrust of their outstretched arms is a dream of participation, the corporeal scaffolding of participatory democracy. This silkscreened image is a mere show of solidarity, a snapshot of an illusory community fuelled by the adrenaline of the 1995 Million Man March. Cryptic and abbreviated, *Hands* (1996) exemplifies Ligon's conflicted stance towards notions of collectivity and nation. It is an image of unity undercut by anonymity; a vision of democratic process riven by absences. Such ambivalences towards communitarian structures – a leitmotif of this exhibition – are ultimately spelled out, letter by letter, in the trio of neon sculptures (two untitled, and the third entitled *Rückenfigur*, 2009) that conclude the show. Inspired by the paradoxical opening lines of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) – 'It was the best of times. It was the worst of times' – the word spelled out in these final confrontations of motherland also furnish the exhibition with its plucky title, 'AMERICA'.

Of course *Hands* is an image of America too: it introduces the spectre of nation that stalks the exhibition. It also inaugurates the recurrent facelessness that troubles so many of Ligon's portraits. And in picturing this controversial gathering organized by Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam – in turn a reprisal of earlier scenes of civil rights history – *Hands* establishes a third theme of 'AMERICA': Ligon's marshalling of history as the unstable ground against which to situate his interrogations of race. Both salutation and exhortation, private summons and public pledge, *Hands* especially seems to quote David's *Tennis Court Oath* (1791), with its central tangle of thrusting hands similarly reaching for the promise of participatory democracy.

Yet even as Ligon evokes David's foundational image, the screenprinted surface and its resistance to readability align it more closely with the Warholian tradition of history painting, one in which the past is staged through degraded, third-hand silkscreens of press photographs. In this sense, *Hands* is in conversation with Andy Warhol's 'Race Riots' (1963–4), one of the earliest treatments of race in postwar American art, and a group of paintings that form the crux of Anne Wagner's argument for Warhol as a contemporary 'history painter'.

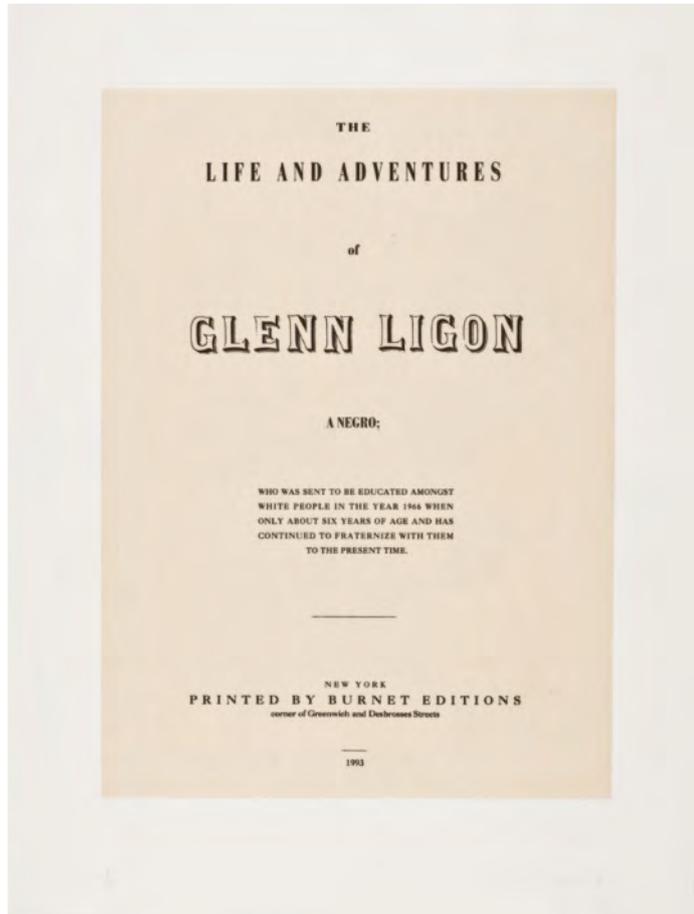
Warhol is a crucial figure for Ligon: he surfaces everywhere, including Ligon's screenprinted self-portraits as one of America's 'Most Wanted'. These Warholian profiles, restring to highlight the American criminalization of black maleness, function as an updated version of Ligon's earlier portrayals of himself as 'wanted': a series of prints resembling 19th-century posters reporting runaway slaves ('Runaways', 1993). In texts (written by friends) that describe the 'escaped' Ligon in ways such as 'mild-looking, with oval-shaped, black-rimmed glasses', the artist situates himself as an amalgam of America and its histories, plumbing a range of historical identities as the tools of his own self-representation. In a nearby gallery, a pair of pendant self-portraits, *Untitled* (1776–1865) and *Untitled* (1865–1991) (both 1991), reiterate this inscription of Ligon as a product of the historical landmarks of his country. Advancing from the crispness of 1776 to the smudged terminus of 1865, one painting lists the years between the American Revolution and the Civil War, while the other logs those between 1865 and the work's 1991 fabrication. Employing his trademark stencil on blood-red, gridded paper, the swelling nimbus of oil ringing Ligon's numerals here suggests less the deficits of vision – as it does in the artist's celebrated text paintings – than history as a text with a shadow, and the artist as embedded in its nexus. The other major series included here, such as 'Notes on the Margin of the Black Book' (1991–3) and the paintings based on Richard Pryor jokes, similarly register Ligon's responses to landmark representation of race and sexuality within recent American history.

Through this broad rubric of nation, and a diverse selection of work, this survey aims to counteract the flattening of Ligon's practice that has resulted from its insistent definition in terms of identity politics. But the flattening of Ligon's work has been more literal too – a result of the printing press and endless photographic reproductions which reduce it to something we literally read rather than behold. All matted paint, smears of oilstick, and coal dust, photography – even the careful details of the Whitney catalogue – simply fails to capture the way in which Ligon lets text congeal into texture, and words dissolve into paint. Emphasizing this materiality, 'AMERICA' commences with Ligon's early, fleshy AbEx-inspired works, which root his engagement with text in a form of cursive mark-making, and his layered accretions of pigment in a painterly investment in surface.

Mostly, though, paint functions as a medium of resistance for Ligon; it occludes visibility and threatens form. Nowhere is such deletion more explicit than in *Untitled (Cancellation Prints)* (1992 and 2003), where a flesh-coloured 'X' overtakes the entire white image field, demarcating the distance between the construct of whiteness and the pinkness of most European skin. This obliterating impulse equally manifests in *Self-Portrait*, the inky, black surface of which is visibly scratched and gouged. Such signs of refusal emphasize how Ligon's numerous self-portraits are invariably exercises in effacement and retraction. The installation of the 'Million Man March' series especially foregrounds the way that Ligon turns his back on the viewer – three times in fact – in three large screenprints of the back of his head, 'Self-Portraits' (1996). These rear views echo *Screen* (1996), an image of the march viewed from behind that hangs nearby. Joining them is *We're Black and Strong (I)* (1996), a second tenebrous cluster of silhouetted figures seen from the rear, who behold the blank reverse of a looming screen before them – a stand-in for the image plane, or more precisely, its underside.

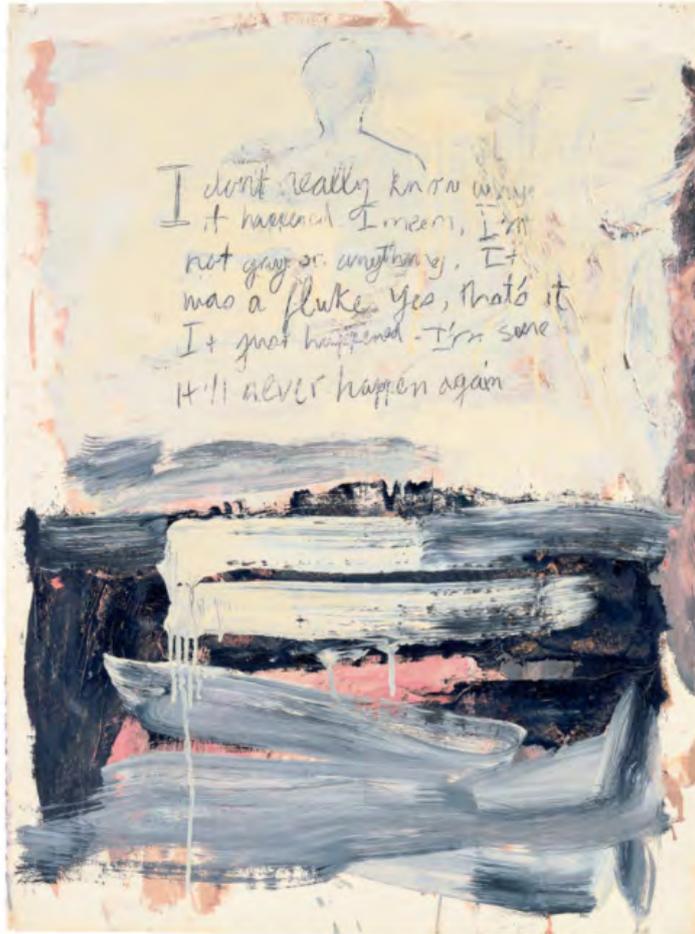
These reversals continue in the final gallery where Ligon's three black neon iterations of the word 'AMERICA', are displayed. One pulses light; the other, painted black, suffocates its neon aura; while the third has each individual letter flipped on its back. This last text sculpture – a final rear view – is officially titled *Rückenfigur*, the term for a figure seen from behind, often looking onto a landscape as in Caspar David Friedrich's iconic mountain contemplator. This closing gesture of self-reflection is a fitting way to conclude. For what is a retrospective but a backwards-glancing venture? Or, more precisely, a view onto one's own past through the eyes of distant, unknown figures, audience and critics alike – a host of *Rückenfiguren* – in whose spectral guise come to understand our own blotted past.

Stranger in America



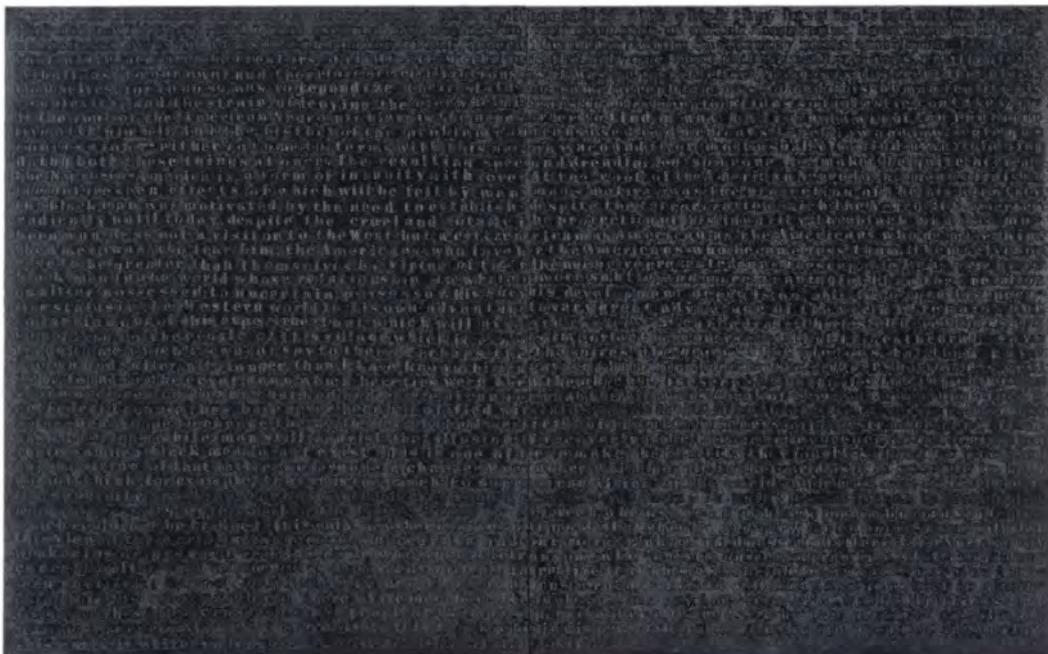
Narratives (detail), 1993, nine photoetchings on chine collé, approx. 28 by 21 inches each. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Art in America



Untitled, 1985, oil, enamel and graphite on paper, 30 by 22¼ inches. Collection of the artist.

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Untitled (Conclusion), 2004, oil stick, synthetic polymer, coal dust, glue and graphite on canvas, two parts, 90 by 144 inches overall. Collection Jill and Peter Kraus. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Art in America



Notes on the Margin of the Black Book (detail), 1991-93, 91 offset prints, each 11½ inches square, with 78 text pages, each 5¼ by 7¼ inches. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

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Chantal Crousel



View of Ligon's "door" paintings, 1990-92, oil stick, gesso and graphite on wood, each 80 by 30 inches; at the Whitney Museum. *Photo Sheldon C. Collins.*

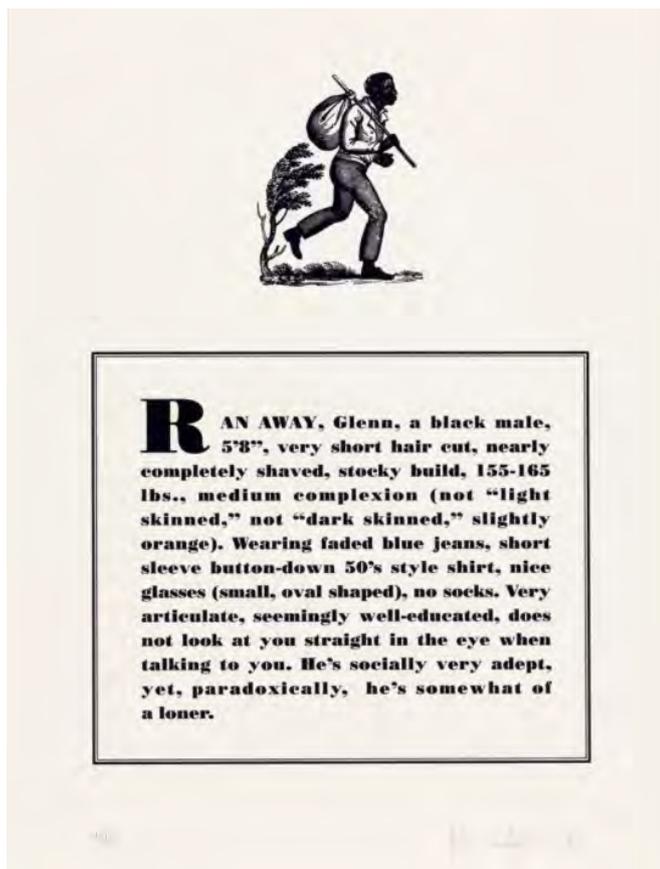
Art in America



Galerie
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We're Black and Strong (I), 1996, silkscreen ink and gesso on unstretched canvas, 120 by 84 inches. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Courtesy Regen Projects.

Art in America



Runaways (detail), 1993, 10 lithographs, 16 by 12 inches each.
Whitney Museum of American Art.

AS A YOUNG BOY, Glenn Ligon would get on the subway with his older brother, traveling from the South Bronx to Manhattan to go to school. On the way to the train, he walked through a burned-out neighborhood in which the only intact structure was a police station, mordantly nicknamed "Little House on the Prairie." Emerging onto the leafy streets of the Upper West Side, he headed to the progressive Walden School, which Andrew Goodman, one of three civil-rights workers slain in Mississippi during the "Freedom Summer" of 1964, had attended some years earlier.

In 1972, when Ligon was 12, one Walden School teacher wrote in an end-of-year report, "Glenn has a good knowledge of slavery and black history, but finds standard social studies uninteresting and as yet has developed no social conscience. He tends to be politically apathetic about being black, which is a shame." That report, remade in screenprint on handmade paper as one of eight *End of Year Reports* (2003), presently hangs on the walls of New York's Whitney Museum of American Art in "Glenn Ligon: America," the artist's midcareer retrospective, organized by Whitney curator Scott Rothkopf. Now 51, Ligon lives in Manhattan's Tribeca and works in a spare, airy loft near the Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn, down the hall from his longtime friends, the artists Paul Ramirez Jonas and Byron Kim.

Ligon's relationship with the Whitney is longstanding. He graduated from the museum's Independent Study Program in 1985, three years after he received a BA in art from Wesleyan University. The Whitney owns the largest collection anywhere of Ligon's works, and it was the first museum to show him. He has appeared in two Whitney Biennials, in 1991 and 1993, as well as, in 1994, the museum's landmark "Black Male" show.

Art in America

In the context of this retrospective, which demonstrates Ligon's sustained and serious engagement with race-related issues over 25 years, that almost 40-year-old report strikes an ironic chord. Was Ligon just not acting militant or poor enough for the certainly well-intentioned teacher who was evaluating him?

Ligon's contribution to the 1993 biennial, for which he won his first renown, was *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* (1991–93), a dismantled and wall-mounted copy of Robert Mapplethorpe's notorious tome [1], its 91 images of naked black men interspersed with quotes that Ligon gathered from scholars, writers, the subjects of the photographs and men in bars. The homoerotic Mapplethorpe images helped fuel the Culture Wars of the early '90s. Ligon himself is gay, yet he most often discusses his work in the context of being African-American. He told French critic Marie de Brugerolle in 1995 that he found the images "very disturbing" when he first saw them.

I asked myself if those photographs were racist. I realized then that the question was too limiting, that it was more complicated. Can we say that Mapplethorpe's work is documentary or fetishistic? Maybe, but at the same time he put black men into a tradition of portraiture to which they've never had access before.²

Ligon's subtlety in staking a racial position with *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* is a bold reframing of Mapplethorpe's own defiance of norms. Yet the project fascinates, in part, because its complexities allow it to rise above a simple exercise in identity-oriented art. Today, the quotes Ligon gathered are like the voices at a raucous neighborhood meeting. "Color is not a human or personal reality; it is a political reality," says James Baldwin. "I felt like a freak," says Ken Moody, one of Mapplethorpe's models. "People who look at these pictures become addicts and spread AIDS," says someone named Rita Burke.

Almost all of Ligon's paintings, prints and videos (the last medium is not included here, though a recent video is on display at New York's Museum of Modern Art throughout the run of the Whitney show) are based on appropriation of some sort—mostly of text, but (as with Mapplethorpe) often images as well. A kind of polyphony is the result, even when Ligon is quoting just a single author. One of the most mysterious and magnetic qualities of his work is its capacity to be endlessly reread, its interpretations changing continually over time. This is very different from merely reflecting the era in which it was made. The voices in Ligon's work sustain disagreement and argue gracefully among themselves. They make a virtue of uncertainty.

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AMONG THE MOST POWERFUL pieces in the exhibition are three large paintings from the “Stranger” series, begun in 1996 and accounting for nearly 200 works produced over 13 years. The series appropriates excerpts from James Baldwin’s 1953 essay “Stranger in the Village.” Ligon has used texts by Zora Neale Hurston and Gertrude Stein, the critic Richard Dyer and the comedian Richard Pryor. Yet Baldwin has particular resonance for Ligon, not only because he was also black and gay but because he emphasized the role of language in creating the “legends” (a Baldwin term) that we make of one another. “Stranger in the Village,” for instance, relates the author’s experience in a small Swiss hamlet, where children, struck by his novelty, touched his hair with fascination or ran after him shouting “Neger!” Baldwin ruminates on what it means to be perceived as black in the village and in America, writing, “The root function of language is to control the universe by describing it.”

Some of the quotes taken from Baldwin’s essay are visible in the paintings—Ligon uses the first or last lines, or something in the middle—but most are not. The artist repeatedly stenciled the text in black oil stick, layering in coal dust. He proceeded in regular lines, from top to bottom. The letters rose from the surface and the text thickened until it was nearly illegible. Ligon has said he chose coal dust because he was looking for something with a literal weight. Catching the light and making the raised letters glint like gems, coal dust reminded him of Andy Warhol’s diamond dust. But coal can also be seen to have racial overtones, as in the phrase “coal black,” which in the early 20th century came to be used as a slur.

Ligon used the same technique, and text, in the diptych *Untitled (Conclusion)*, 2004. Walking from one side to the other of this large (90-by-144-inch) painting, you can see letters, carved out through shadows from an overhead light, announce themselves even as they sink back into the oil and coal. Within the carefully built up and stenciled lines, you are able to decipher words here and there, even a phrase —“Americans have made themselves notorious,” for example. Ligon challenges viewers to see race, and to see beyond it, through a reduced palette of mostly black and/or white, and through his technique of erasing even as he writes. “There are a lot of things in our culture that seem clear,” said Ligon in an interview at his studio. “But I think what the paintings are trying to do is to slow down reading, to present a difficulty, to present something that is not so easily consumed and clear.” 3

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The generous and judicious installation, proceeding mostly chronologically through 10 galleries, also organizes Ligon's work by theme and series. From his earliest efforts, Ligon's exceptional balancing of form and content, humor and wrath, and high and low is apparent. The show opens with a room of text-based paintings that the artist began in 1985, incising phrases from letters to gay porn magazines into layers of impasto. At the time, Ligon was working nights as a legal proofreader. Inundated with text, he made the imaginative leap of incorporating it into his paintings, which had previously been gestural abstractions.

A text in an oil-on-paper painting from 1988 echoes the tone of the teacher who wrote that end-of-year report on Ligon. In stencil, it quotes curator Ned Rifkin on Martin Puryear, as reported in a *New York Times* article that year: "There is a consciousness we all have that he is a Black American artist but I think his work is really superior and stands on its own." Aside from its condescension, the statement gets under the skin because, in perhaps more veiled terms, similar things have been written about Ligon's work over the years. Even recently, Peter Schjeldahl, writing in the Mar. 21, 2011, *New Yorker*, observed, "Ligon deserves honor for foregrounding, in the famously liberal but chronically lily-white art world, voices such as those of Hurston, [Gwendolyn] Brooks, and James Baldwin"—as if honor accrues to Ligon for merely representing his race. (Does he not deserve honor for quoting Stein?) Ligon is not simply transcribing these authors' words and sticking them on museum walls; nor is he being "combative," a term Schjeldahl uses earlier in his review.

In 1990, the artist began a breakthrough series of paintings on doors, undertaken after time spent contemplating an old door in his studio. Black all-capital oil-stick letters on a white-primed wooden ground read, "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background," taken from Hurston's 1928 essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me." Ligon arranged the stencils freehand, guided only by horizontal

pencil lines, and repeated the text across and down the 80-inch-high and 30-inch-wide door. Toward the bottom the letters crowd and bump up against one another, like thoughts in a busy mind. Ligon is a brilliant reader, selecting and reworking texts to shape his own interpretation of the world. "In the early door paintings . . . text goes from legibility to illegibility to black crisp words on a white ground, [serving] to metaphorically resonate with what the text is speaking about," Rothkopf told me. "The form is really informing the content."

Ligon maintained the door format as he continued the series on canvas, using other quotes from Hurston, Jean Genet, Jesse Jackson and rapper Ice Cube. One work from the series, *Black Like Me #2* (1992), now hangs in the Obama White House, borrowed from the Hirshhorn Museum. The repeating text, "All traces of the Griffin I had been were wiped from existence," is taken from white journalist John Howard Griffin's 1961 eponymous account of passing as a black man in the South.

The apparent simplicity of Ligon's stencil paintings masks their depth. Ligon observed that while the "Stranger" and door paintings move toward abstraction, they speak more about how culture constantly modulates as time passes. "I think it's thinking about things that go in and out of [cultural] consciousness," he said, referring to the changing reception of Hurston's and Baldwin's writings. Although some time intervened between the door series and the "Stranger" paintings, they feel like close siblings.

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Ligon grappled with the subjects of socially constructed identity and American racism more directly in *Runaways* (1993), a witty, deft, poignant rewriting of runaway slave broadsides. For this portfolio of 16-by-12-inch lithographs, 10 altogether, he had friends help him come up with descriptions of himself, which he then recast as the type of notices that 19th-century slave owners posted after a slave escaped. “Ran away, a man named Glenn. He has almost no hair. He has cat-eye glasses, medium-dark skin, cute eyebrows. . . . He talks out of the side of his mouth and looks at you sideways. Sometimes he has a loud laugh, and lately I’ve noticed he refers to himself as ‘mother.’” Also in 1993, Ligon produced a related suite of nine photoetchings (each 28 by 21 inches), *Narratives*, that likewise wryly mixes autobiography and history by drawing on the archaic voice and look of slave narratives. One sheet reads, “The Life and Adventures of Glenn Ligon/A Negro; who was sent to be educated amongst white people in the year 1966 when only about six years of age and has continued to fraternize with them to the present time.” In their adept, witty bending of genre, Ligon’s *Runaways* and *Narratives* take great liberties with the constraints of identity politics, even as they speak brutally and exactly about the legacy of slavery and the fear of difference.

Like so many of his contemporaries—artists such as Lorna Simpson, Janine Antoni and Byron Kim, who were also included in the 1993 “Biennial with a Social Conscience,” as the *New York Times* dubbed it, and “a saturnalia of political correctness” as it was deemed by *Time*’s Robert Hughes—Ligon and his work are often discussed in terms of identity, end of story. Yet the artist has also tapped into other traditions and concerns, exploring, for example, the seriality of Minimalism, the use of texts as found objects, and language-based abstraction. Rothkopf sees multiple links between Ligon and Jasper Johns. “If you look beyond the stencil as a vehicle for putting text on, it’s about how language and numbers can function within a work of art,” Rothkopf said. “Questions about the difference between reading and looking are very germane to Glenn’s work.”

IN 1993, LIGON EMBARKED on a series of lush, chromatically rich, text-based paintings that seem to be equally about visual pleasure and the limits of speech. Quoting from sensationalist stand-up routines by the popular black comedian Richard Pryor, Ligon stenciled the words in bright colors against fields of contrasting hues. The paintings look a bit like Richard Prince’s joke paintings, a series of transcriptions of deadpan one-liners that Prince began in the mid-’80s. But Ligon’s joke paintings are more personal. Pryor was willing to make public, on prime-time television no less, the most outrageous, often highly sexual, private thoughts or in-jokes about African-American culture. This made him something like Mapplethorpe for Ligon, dramatizing socially taboo subjects. Ligon “performs” Pryor for museumgoers, who stare at the paintings in isolation, rather than, like the comedian’s audiences, laughing, cringing or blowing their noses in concert halls.

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Several of the Pryor paintings, from 1995 and 2004, revisit the following quote by the comedian: “I remember when black wasn’t beautiful. Black men come through the neighborhood saying ‘Black is beautiful! Africa is your home! Be proud to be black!’ My parents go ‘That nigger crazy.’” Pryor’s anecdote exists as fiction and truth, joke and observation; it reflects on the contradictions of color pride. In a 2004 painting with a dark purple ground, the joke’s setup is stenciled in blue, while the punch line is in orange, which tracks into the purple, dissolving the clarity of the letters. As in the joke, it is complex, vibrant color—not just “black”—that is beautiful.

“Beauty was a complicated thing as we talked about identity and race. [It] wasn’t allowed in the critical dialogue, which often made beauty seem irrelevant or inappropriate,” said Thelma Golden in an interview. Director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, Golden was curator of the 1994 “Black Male” show when she was at the Whitney and has been a longtime friend of Ligon’s. “This retrospective lets us see how important beauty was as a strategy, device, tool, weapon for artists like Glenn, who were esthetic innovators and operated in that fine balance between content and form.” Ligon’s paintings from the ’90s allow the eye and mind to play with multiple levels. At the retrospective, they also lead directly to Ligon’s most recent work: the “Stranger” paintings and a final group of four neons.

The neon works were prompted by Ligon’s curiosity about whether it was possible to make “black” neon. The owner of a shop below his studio, Lite Brite Neon, said no, but suggested painting the front of a tube black, with the light cast onto the wall behind. Using this method, Ligon had Lite Brite craft several versions of the word “America,” in which the stencil-like letters glow on the wall or, in one case, only at their joints, which were left unpainted. The perception of “black” here depends on “white” light—a characteristic twist in keeping with Ligon’s career-long inflection of materials and meaning.

The latest neon, *Warm Broad Glow II* (2011) reads, in lower-case letters, “negro sunshine.” An understated yet loaded phrase, it is installed in the front window of the museum. The word “negro” challenges viewers to contemplate the ways that language carries with it the prejudices of the past. At the same time, the piece projects a qualified buoyancy of mood. The phrase is taken from Gertrude Stein’s “Melanctha” novella, one of her *Three Lives* (1909). In the novella, Stein’s language surrounding race seems decidedly retrograde—the dark-skinned character is dumb, coarse and promiscuous, while the light-skinned Melanctha is smart and brooding. Yet Ligon reads Stein as engaging in a knowing play with stereotypes and expectations, and offers both homage and critique.

From start to finish, the retrospective reveals Ligon to be true to his method, a devoted reader who repeatedly returns to a personal canon of texts. It also shows him to be a quintessentially American artist—in his humor, his delight in texts high and low, and his relentless mining of national history. Johns famously prescribed, “Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it.” With a keen ability to sustain contradiction and doubt, Ligon adopts this democratic tinkering spirit, fashioning a finely wrought syllabus of America.

1 The electricity of viewing these images in a museum has burned off a bit. Mapplethorpe published *Black Book* in 1986, and in 1989, his name became synonymous with shock art (for some) and censorship (for others) when the Corcoran Gallery of Art, under congressional pressure, canceled an NEA-funded traveling Mapplethorpe retrospective.

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² This and several other interviews, as well as Ligon's own lucid writings, are collected in *Yourself in the World*, edited by Scott Rothkopf, forthcoming from Yale University Press. ³ Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes by Ligon and others are taken from interviews with the author conducted during February and March 2011. "Glenn Ligon: America," which closes at the Whitney June 15, travels to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art [Oct. 23, 2011–Jan. 22, 2012] and the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth [February–May 2012]. It is accompanied by a 302-page catalogue by Scott Rothkopf, with contributions by Hilton Als, Okwui Enwezor, Saidya Hartman, Bennett Simpson and Franklin Sirmans, and a conversation between the artist and Thelma Golden.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW "Glenn Ligon: America," at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, through June 5.

GLENN LIGON



GLENN LIGON, *FIGURE #20*, 2009, ACRYLIC, SILKSCREEN, COALDUST ON CANVAS

Galerie
Chantal Crousel

Glenn Ligon is a New York-based artist whose work in a wide range of media—including painting, video, installation, various print media, and neon—draws from an equally wide range of sources, including canonical twentieth-century texts, historical images, and others' accounts of the artist himself. Ligon's re-presentations of and interventions on text, images, history, the self, even his own artistic production, explore the mutability of language, meaning, and identity in various forms. Querying our ability to "read" the world around us, his works call attention to the artist's and viewers' subjective reconfigurations of material eroded by history, memory, and by the artist himself. But semantic investigations do not overdetermine the visual forms. Instead, the objects and images—at times austere, occasionally lush, sometimes seemingly ephemeral in their materiality—are readily wedded to their critical explorations, sometimes complicitly. Ligon's work will be the subject of a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art opening in March 2011.

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David Drogin: Your work has an incredible range of media, subject matter, sources, and references, tied by a common thematic thread of legibility—sometimes in a literal sense of actually being able to read words but also, more generally, in calling attention to the comprehensibility of meaning, even if it's not a text. It's a thread that you can see from early text pieces but also in the neon works or self-portraits.

GLENN LIGON: From the first text paintings, which used quotations from authors like Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Genet, Walt Whitman, or Ralph Ellison, this question of legibility was foregrounded partially because the quotes that I was using in those early paintings always had the word "I" in them, and the titles of the paintings didn't clearly identify them as coming from specific authors or specific essays or novels. So, there was always confusion for the viewer about who that "I" was. Over time, it became known that "Glenn Ligon makes text paintings using quotes," but even then, there was still confusion about that: What does it mean to take on another person's words as a way of talking about the self? One of the things I've always been interested in was the connection or collision of identities—that something written by Hurston in the 20s could seem incredibly relevant and autobiographical in some sense, that one could inhabit it, in the way that when you were a kid, you wanted to be a rock star, and everything about that rock star seemed to express who you were. It's the same kind of relationship to those texts for me: The text is something that I wanted to inhabit, and the way I chose to inhabit it was to make paintings that have quotes that create confusion about who's speaking.

Drogin: Even thinking about the non-text pieces, you can see that. I'm thinking of a print called *Self-Portrait*, but it was of Stevie Wonder...

LIGON: *Self-Portrait at Age Eleven*.



GLENN LIGON, *SELF-PORTRAIT AT AGE ELEVEN*, 2004, PAPER PULP ON HAND-MADE PAPER

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Drogin: There's an idea of inhabiting or wanting to inhabit some identity that appealed to you. Do you find in works that are about that, that it mostly has to do with something from your youth? That piece is about age eleven, and in the early text pieces, those were books that you were drawn to as a teenager and young adult, right? In other words, is there something there about—if not nostalgia—about early dreams of what you wanted to be?

LIGON: No, I think it was more about how the past comes into the present. I was using quotes by writers like Ellison, Hurston, Genet, or James Baldwin in order to say that even though we're in a different historical moment with different political realities, those texts still have relevance and meaning and seem to express the current moment in a way that is very vivid for me. It's not simply about a kind of identity formation in the sense of "these are people I want to emulate." It was more about, "these are the people who are speaking to me at the moment." But your comment makes me think that my work has always been about the near present, not the present. The quotes are from fifty years ago, not five years ago. I'm always mining the archive for the source material of the paintings.

Drogin: Do you think that's because really recent material hasn't had a chance to potentially change its meaning? In other words, with recent sources, not enough time has gone by to see how that will hold up historically or through changing contexts?

LIGON: Right, it's too over-determined. In the first text paintings that I did with Hurston texts, it was at a moment when she was being rediscovered. Her books had gone out of print, and so they weren't texts that were in the world in an "every grad student is reading this" kind of way. They were texts that were just coming back into the public consciousness through the efforts of writers like Toni Morrison or Alice Walker, who were rediscovering them and bringing them back into print.

Drogin: Right, again the historical, the stuff that's had time to ferment in the historical or artistic consciousness that's appealing to you.

LIGON: And I guess it's also about a loosening up: over time maybe those texts become over-determined, but in another way they become more available for use, the relationship that one can have with them isn't so fixed anymore.

Drogin: Going back to when you said you were using the Hurston texts and that there was a moment of rediscovery for her—maybe at the time that you were first doing those works, those texts would have registered in the viewer's mind as somewhat recognizable because it was a moment when that author was having a renaissance. Taking off from there, how important is it that the viewer of these pieces recognize the source of the quote? Or is it actually all about that play, all about that recognizability and the possibility of not recognizing the source?

LIGON: I think it circles back to this question of legibility, too. That the source of the quotation is not immediately apparent relates to the merging of identities that I was talking about. But also I felt like these were authors that should be known. I remember when I was in the Whitney Independent Study Program, I had a very small shared studio. The person I shared that studio with was working with Charcot's photographs of hysterics. She asked me what I was working on, and I said, "Oh, well I've just been reading James Baldwin essays, trying to think about how to make work out of them," and she just looked at me like, "James Baldwin? Who's that?" The name was totally unfamiliar to her. So, I thought it was interesting to make work where, if one did a little research, one could find out where these quotes were from, and the miracle of the Internet has made my job a lot easier. When I started doing these text paintings, Google wasn't available, so it was a bit more difficult for the viewer to find the quotes. Another time, I did a lecture at the Whitney, and someone in the audience said, "when I look at your text paintings, I don't understand what they're about, but when I look at a DeKooning, I know what that's about, I understand that." And my first response was, "there's a sentence at the top of my painting that's very legible, and it repeats to the bottom. So what about that don't you understand?" It occurred to me that this was not only a question about, "is text in art art, and what is all this illegibility about?," but also a question about content: He was saying, this is content that I don't think is appropriate for art, and therefore I don't understand it or don't want to.

Drogin: Or maybe on a level of the basic viewer, if it's something like a DeKooning, in which the meaning is seemingly open-ended—although there's antagonism to that kind of art, too—viewers feel comfortable because they feel they can bring to it whatever they want, whereas in a piece that has a specific text, the meaning is anchored, in a way, and therefore, it can be more challenging for them, because they feel like there's something that they specifically need to understand, or they feel they need to be able to recognize the source.

LIGON: Yeah, but what is more challenging than abstract art? I felt like the knowledge of his ability to "read" a DeKooning had become so naturalized to him that it just seemed like something he could do: that he could just walk into a museum and understand that thing in front of him, which I found a bit troubling because it sort of erased what the process is—the process of learning about a piece, looking closely at it, reading reviews—all of that was just gone. It was, "I get this work, and I don't get your work."

Drogin: Your thinking about "challenging" the viewers involves having them learn something. You want to encourage them to understand who Baldwin is, or you use Google, and maybe the viewers will too—they'll go home, type a sentence that they've seen in one of your works, do the research, and find something out. So, it's a kind of edifying experience for them, but at the same time, a lot of your work is about preventing legibility and problematizing understanding too, which sets up an interesting dichotomy.

LIGON: There's a sort of pessimism in my work, a pessimism about making things explicit or understanding things and transmitting that understanding. One of the things that is interesting about a writer like Baldwin is that he's trying to take very difficult subject matter—race relations, colonialism, etc.—and through his essays, make sense of them. In Baldwin's essays, I became interested in the gaps, the things that cannot be expressed and can't be explained as well as the difficulty of the subject matter he's trying to tackle. The paintings that I made using Baldwin's essays stage the complexity of his ideas for the viewer through the act of presenting a text that is very difficult to read, that goes in and out of focus, that is alluring because it's paint and coal dust on canvas, but also frustrates communication.

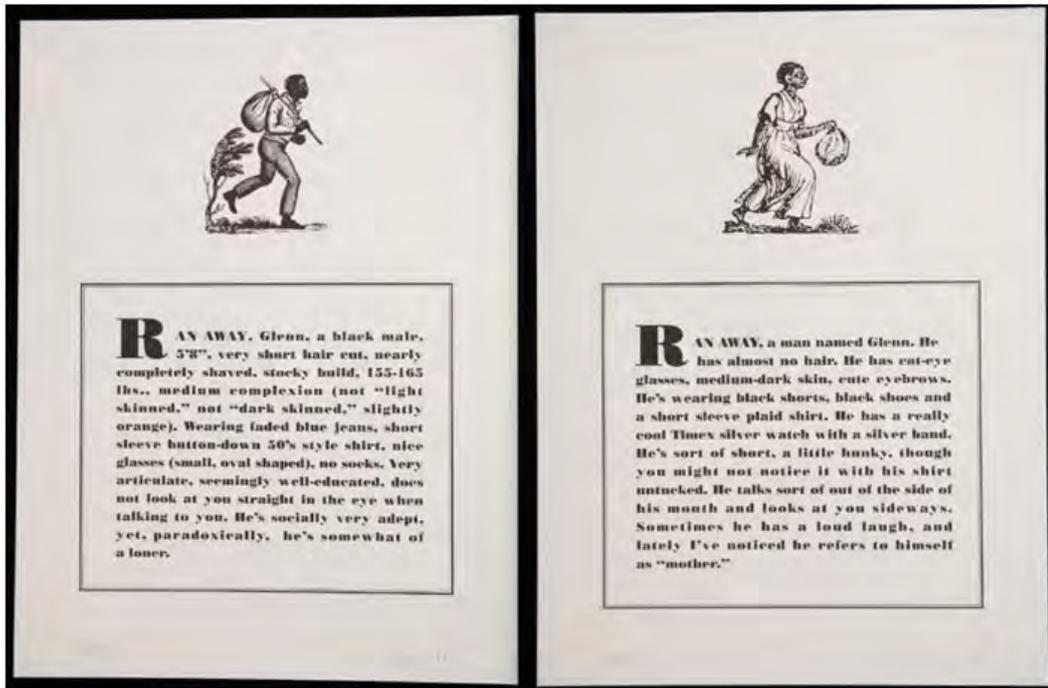
Drogin: Even in pieces that aren't quotes or text pieces at all, there's this issue of challenging the viewer's ability to understand the image or understand identity. I'm thinking of the self-portraits of the back of your head, for instance. It's a theme that's kind of explicit in the text pieces in which legibility becomes difficult, but it goes beyond that to these other media that you've been dealing with. Even in films that you've been working on, the legibility is challenged because there's the video *The Death of Tom*, that's purposefully out of focus. You're inviting the viewer to understand something, but also throwing up obstacles in the way, because that's how understanding something really is, or that's how reading a text is: it comes in and out of focus.

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LIGON: Yes, and part of that is a reaction to the artistic climate when I started making work, a reaction to the mandates around the work of artists-of-color for a certain kind of legibility. Critics would say, "your work is about identity," and that would seemingly be enough to say. I was always uncomfortable with that kind of easy digesting of the work, as if artists-of-color are simply expressing who they are, as if one had unfettered access to who one is, and one could just say it...

Drogin: And as if each person trying to understand that wouldn't understand it differently.

LIGON: Exactly. And so the work has, in some ways, been a kind of resistance to that easy narrative of identity.



GLENN LIGON, FROM "RUNAWAYS," 1993, LITHOGRAPHS

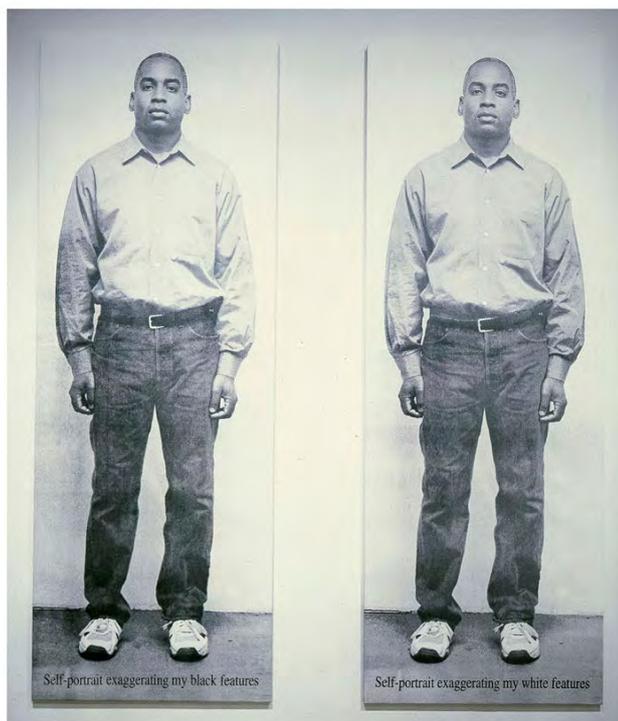
Drogin: That's true in the "Runaway Slave" series and in the coloring book series, in which you made paintings and drawings based on children's drawings in 1970s coloring books with Black Power imagery—how does a child today come to material that really has no personal, historical resonance for them? And then you're reinterpreting what they've done, highlighting the idea that each person is contributing something different to a thing that originally had one kind of meaning.

LIGON: In the "Runaways," it was about getting a bunch of people together to describe me. The mandate was to describe me as if I were missing and you had to describe me to the police. And those descriptions varied so widely that they sort of called into question the notion of a unified identity. It was really about each person's take on what my identity was and using the totality of the descriptions as a way of thinking about what identity might mean. In the coloring book series, as you said, it was about a child's relationship to images that have a very different kind of resonance if you were an adult. A five-year-old's relationship to an image of Malcolm X on a coloring book page is that it's simply an image to color, but for an adult—me—trying to make a drawing or a painting based on a five-year-old's drawing of Malcolm X that has lipstick and blue eye shadow has to deal with all the ramifications of defacing an icon and think about how adult viewers are going to respond to that defaced image. The multiplicity of meanings across generations from one historical moment to another, from person to person, is always what I'm interested in.



GLENN LIGON, *UNTITLED (MALCOLM X)*, 2008, PENCIL, ACRYLIC FLASHE ON PAPER MOUNTED ON PANEL

Drogin: Sometimes when I show your *Self-Portrait Exaggerating My White Features*/*Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Black Features* to my students, it's one of their favorite pieces. It's the same photographic self-portrait, silkscreened twice with one image adjacent to the other, so although there may be slight differences because it's printed twice, it's basically the same image. I get them to look at it, and I don't tell them that it's the same at first, and they actually start imagining that there are differences between the two figures because they're desperate to see them, and they take the title at face value. People bring expectations to being able to understand a work, so it comes to this issue of legibility, that you as an artist can bring things out that are there embedded in the viewer's mind even when they aren't in the actual image. In a recent work that you had in a show at Regen Projects in Los Angeles, you based all of the paintings on a photograph of a painting that had been in Documenta in 2002. Regarding your attraction to historical material that has had time to ferment and change, you're now even coming to use your own artistic production, not just texts from the 1920s and 50s.



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LIGON: I think it's a sort of return to my roots, so to speak. I was very interested in Abstract Expressionism when I first started painting. By the late 80s, I had abandoned that investigation even though I was still making paintings. But as I've worked with making new paintings out of existing images, they become more and more abstract—just think of a Xerox of a Xerox of a Xerox. That distancing process of taking an image of an existing painting, making a silkscreen out of it, and making new paintings from it—and those new paintings having gaps and fissures in them—is, for me, making an abstraction out of text-based work, basically.

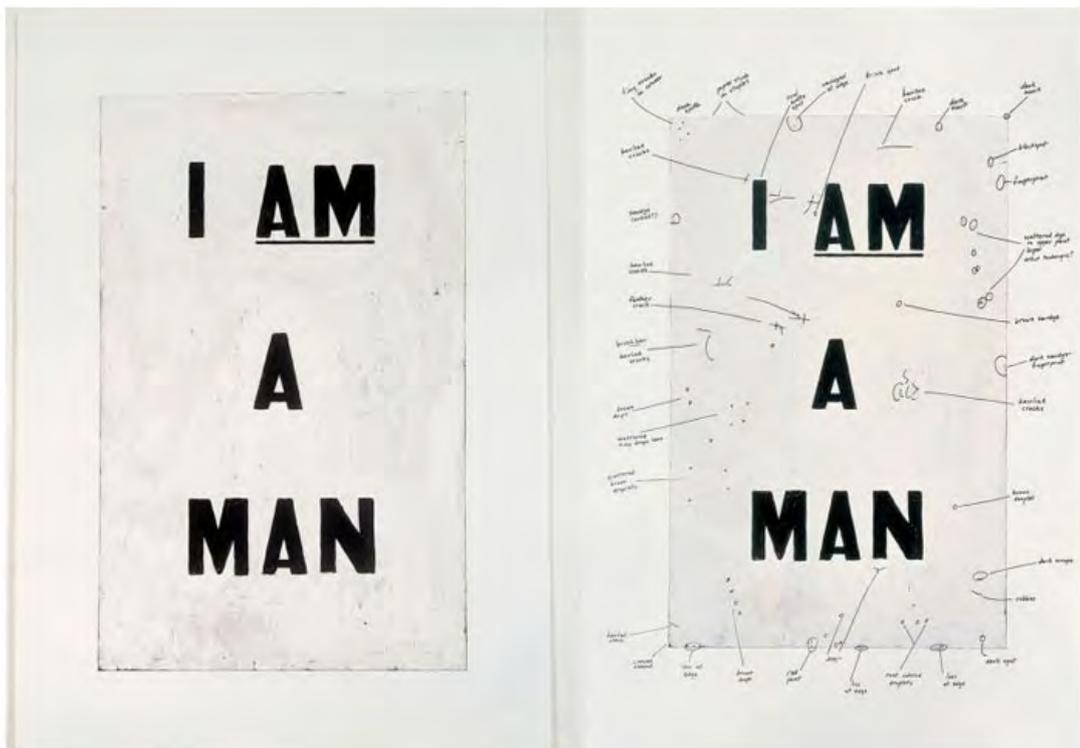
Drogin: Because the image itself, but also its meanings, begin to erode. You say photocopy of a photocopy of a photocopy, but in our age, now saving a JPEG as a JPEG as a JPEG makes the same thing happen. Each time, you're compressing and losing the information a little bit until it eventually becomes completely illegible.

LIGON: Yeah, that sort of degradation of the image causes a certain difficulty in a way because it's further and further away from the source material that generated the painting, and so, the question becomes, does that degradation of the image then mean that the text is no longer relevant at all? If the painting started out as being about the difficulty and the struggle of the viewer to read an image, if you then take what was already difficult and make it abstract, what does it say about the engagement with that text? That's not a question that I've really answered yet, and maybe in some ways, it's a response to this particular historical moment in which questions about race and identity and things have become very difficult and blurred—they always were, but I think more and more, those questions tend toward abstraction.

Drogin: These paintings are also compelling in part because they become about the persona of an artist. A piece that's in Documenta is a kind of landmark in your own career, and you're returning to that, so it's about the texts—their original meaning and their loss of meaning over time and as they get repeated—but it's also about who you are as an artist, addressing this issue of "oh, he's a text painter," and then degrading it or eroding it to question your own history as an artist. And, returning to your own work as a source was already part of your practice in 1998, in the prints based on a condition report.

LIGON: Yes, the *Untitled (I Am a Man)* painting from 1988 based on signs carried by protesting sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee in 1968, which is one of the earliest text paintings that I did. Ten years after I made it, I took it to a friend, who is a painting conservator, and I asked him to look at the painting and do a condition report, which is a conservator's report written on an image of the painting, detailing all the issues that would be addressed if the painting were coming into a conservation lab. And so, as you said, it's a return to my own production, but in the case of those prints that came out of the condition report, it was about detailing not only the physical aging of the painting over time—all the cracks and paint loss and all of that—but also changing ideas about masculinity, changing ideas about the relationship we have to the Civil Rights Movement.

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GLENN LIGON, *CONDITION REPORT*, 2000, IRIS PRINT AND IRIS PRINT WITH SERIGRAPH, 2 PARTS

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Drogin: We've been touching on the issue of eroding materials and meanings and disintegrating source material. You talked about how meaning or even actual letters erode, so people have to bring their own understanding into it, having to fill in the gaps themselves—this, which made me think of the series related to the Million Man March, in which there's a sign, a big banner that people are holding up, but you erased the text from it.

LIGON: Yeah, I became really interested in the Million Man March organized by Louis Farrakhan in 1995 partially because there's a long history of mass demonstrations of African Americans on the Mall in Washington D.C. to remind people that we're here. I thought it was ironic that people who had been here four hundred years need to remind our fellow citizens that we exist! But the march also had a component called "The Day of Absence," which is what people who were not specifically invited to the march—i.e., women—were supposed to do in solidarity with the march. So, I started with the idea that I would look at images of the march and think about absences that mirrored the literal absence of women on the Mall. So, one of the images I took was a banner that was unfurled on the Mall during the rally that said, "We're black and strong." I had a tiny image of it from a magazine and started blowing it up on a Xerox machine, and I realized that when you blow something up, it sometimes gets lighter and lighter, and at a certain point, the text disappeared. I thought, well, that's kind of what I'm interested in—these images in which there's something there, and it gets bigger and bigger, and then that something disappears. The piece started as a four-by-three-inch photo and became a ten-by-seven-foot silkscreen piece in which the text on the banner had disappeared but returned as the title of the piece. That painting is titled *We're Black and Strong*, but the image that the viewer sees is a banner unfurled with nothing on it, a blank space.

Drogin: Anonymity was striking in that series. I also think of the one with all these hands that were raised up, so you have a sense of all these people, but again, because of how the image has been manipulated and blown-up, it loses some of its specificity. You have no idea who all those hands belong to, and out of context, you don't even know what they're doing. Hands raised in the air could be a rock concert, or it could be a prayer meeting.



GLENN LIGON, *WE'RE BLACK AND WE'RE STRONG*, 1996, SILKSCREEN ON UNSTRETCHED CANVAS

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LIGON: I'm really interested in book covers and am working on a book that looks at representations of race on the covers of books by and about African Americans. This trope of the expressive black hand appears over and over again on book covers: the raised fist; the uplifted, searching hand. It is an interesting moment of synecdoche, of a part, the hand, representing the whole, the race. But, as you said, in the image that I've presented, it's quite mysterious; you don't quite know what hands are being raised to, what the context is. And I think that was about this ambiguity around the march: What were its aims? What was it trying to do? Why do we need to raise our hands in that symbolic space again and again and again to be present in this country? All those things were expressed in that image.

Drogin: And also, just like the issue that you raise with your own work in terms of what different viewers bring to it, how did the public interpret this gathering—this rally—as a threat or as something edifying? That ambiguity is in your work about it.

LIGON: There's this funny gloss in the reading of that image because there was a huge controversy about the number of people who actually attended the Million Man March, so in my jokey moments I think, oh, people are raising their hands so they can be counted.

Drogin: That series drew from a historical event, but we've also been talking a bit about incorporating yourself and incorporating your own history, even your own past artistic production. So, in many of your works, there's an intensely personal side—your own text paintings, a condition report on your own work, descriptions of yourself, images of yourself. And there's even a film of you speaking to an analyst, which is normally the most private, enclosed space and circumstance you can have. Even though the visual material is of feet and a Kleenex box, it's still got this incredibly personal audio.

LIGON: In some ways, I've always thought of my work as self-portraiture, but never straightforward representation of the self; it's always self-portraiture filtered through forms that seem to be against portraiture, like the runaway-slave poster or the sign carried by sanitation workers on strike in '68, or even the *Orange and Blue Feelings*, which is a video of a therapy session, in which you see the therapist's body, but not her head, and you just hear my voice. What do you look at in a therapy session? You don't look at your therapist all the time, you look at his or her feet, you look around the office. That withholding of my image is a withholding of my reactions, as the face and body language tell us so much about what is really being said below the surface of the words. When I was making the video, I realized that the viewer wants to see who's talking and you never see that person. And so even though it's promising you an Oprah-like revelation, somehow because the image of the person is not there, it's quite frustrating.

Drogin: Right, again it's returning to that issue of throwing up obstacles in confrontation with how someone expects to be able to understand something.

Drogin: Right, again it's returning to that issue of throwing up obstacles in confrontation with how someone expects to be able to understand something.

LIGON: But also, in the video, you can't trust what you're hearing. There are moments when what's being said is not synched to what you're seeing on the screen. And that wasn't a deliberate strategy in the beginning. It started out as an audio piece, and then halfway through it, I thought, "no, this is a video," but since I had more audio than video at that point, I just put them together arbitrarily. So, the therapist reacts to things that are not being said.

Drogin: Recently, you've been doing a lot of work with neon, and to a certain extent, they're pretty straightforwardly tied to the rest of your corpus in terms of the neon being turned around, facing the wall—making things not as immediately readable as you would expect them to be. What else do you find compelling about them?

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GLENN LIGON, *RÜGENFIGUR*, 2009, NEON, BLACK PAINT

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LIGON: The neons are my attempt to understand sculpture in that they're three-dimensional objects that hang on walls. And what's interesting about them is that they have a very different kind of material presence than the paintings. There's a piece called *Rügenfigur*, literally, "back figure," which is the last of a series of pieces using the word "America." The first piece was the word "America" in very big letters, about fourteen feet long, and it was spray-painted black on the front of the letters, so that the light of neon appears against the wall, and black letters face the viewer. And I found it interesting to work in that way, partially because it was about this kind of—I wouldn't say "illegibility"—but this kind of occultation of the letter form. It's a simultaneous presence and absence. That simple act of spray-painting the front of the neon tubes black made these pieces quite mysterious. A number of people asked me questions like, "where does the light come from?" It seemed obvious to me, but I thought, oh, there's something intriguing about this blackness emanating light. Even when I explained, "it's just spray paint," it still remained mysterious for people. The America pieces were based on Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*: the first pages of that novel are called "The Period," in which you have that famous list that starts with "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...." It's Dickens' attempt at describing the age that the novel is taking place in, and he describes it in terms of oppositions, for instance, "we had everything before us, we had nothing before us." Initially I tried to use Dickens' words directly, and then I realized, no, what I'm really interested in is talking about America, where we're at, at this point. These pieces were begun before Obama's election, when we were in the middle of a war (we still are), when the economy was booming—the kinds of oppositions Dickens wrote about were going on in our culture too. The last piece in that series, *Rügenfigur*, is inspired by Caspar David Friedrich, specifically by a figure that appears in many of his paintings turned around, with his back to the viewer—a figure who is looking at a landscape or a seascape, his face turned away so his thoughts are not available and you can't read his emotions. Viewers project themselves into the painting through that figure, but at the same time, they don't have access to his interior thoughts. He's flipped around and faces the opposite direction from what you would expect. And so, in response to that figure, I took the word "America" and started flipping it around in Photoshop, so it's like you're seeing it from the other side, and I realized that some of the letters in the word "America" are bilaterally symmetrical, they're the same forward and backward. And so, that's when the idea came to me to make a neon piece just by turning each letter of the word "America" around. When you look at the piece, the A, the I, the M seem to be the right way around, but they're not because you're actually seeing the back of the letter. They're painted black on what was the front and now that's facing the wall. And then the other letters, the E, the R, the C, are backwards.

Drogin: So, it's like you're looking at it from the other side?

LIGON: Exactly, it's like you're looking at the back of the piece, except even that doesn't work, because if you were on the other side, the word would be reversed.

Drogin: It's just the letters that are reversed, not the whole word.

LIGON: Right. And it makes for a very strange word. So I thought that this was kind of emblematic of where we're at, too—we're looking backwards and forwards at the same time. America defamiliarized.