

Glenn Ligon

REGEN PROJECTS

That Glenn Ligon's most recent paintings are so seductive is as disconcerting as it is revealing. Thirty-three of the thirty-six radiant text-based paintings in his recent show, from the series "No Room (Gold)," 2007, are verbatim transcriptions of a joke delivered live by the late, great stand-up comedian Richard Pryor: I WAS A NIGGER FOR TWENTY-THREE. / I GAVE THAT SHIT UP. NO ROOM FOR / NO ROOM FOR ADVANCEMENT. Pryor was renowned for his ability to objectify race relations in his routines, using irreverent, profanity-laced comment to foreground otherwise taboo subjects. Ligon, for his part, sidelines humor in favor of seductive contemporary beauty that draws knowingly and heavily on contemporary branding strategies.

The pitch-perfect cadence of Pryor's delivery—the subtle pauses, emphases, and repetitions that make his work so explosively funny—are captured faithfully in Ligon's paintings, determining the layout of the text. Like closed captions on live television, Ligon's preciously rendered performance relics emphasize the vast lacuna between the logic of the spoken word and the written. But despite their appealing, Warholian looks, the paintings drain the laughs from Pryor's joke, transforming the free-form levity of his stand-up delivery into static statements of heady (if profane) import. Ligon's irresistible gold ground, overlaid with artfully smudged black text, replaces Pryor's voice, rephrasing the comedian's caustic jibe as a canny graphic slogan. It is easy to imagine these paintings repackaged as expensive T-shirts. Which is, of course, the point. Like Pryor's content-rich humor, which forced difficult issues into the consciousness of a broad demographic, it is precisely the superficial appeal and accessibility of Ligon's work that gives it such profound currency. Elegant design can only do so much to tame and mute incendiary content, however, so while these paintings *could* be shirts, who would actually wear one?

Similar principles underlie Ligon's sculpture *Warm Broad Glow (Dark)*, 2007, a black wall-mounted neon work that spells the words NEGRO SUNSHINE in the bubbly style favored by preteens. (An earlier version of the work, *Warm Broad Glow*, 2005, appeared on the cover of this magazine in May 2006.) Thin cords bleed down the wall, connecting to square black boxes that produce a dull electrical hum, channeling invisible energy to the impassive black text, which, save for a few chips in the surface, conceals that power entirely. Opaque, self-consciously provocative, pseudo-political pronouncements are more and more the linchpins of canny marketing campaigns aimed at the educated elite, who like their commodities edgy but ultimately inoffensive. Ligon manipulates this system deftly, pushing the limits of decency and sociopolitical consciousness just far enough to point out the liberal complacency that underlies the assumption that we as a society have progressed far enough that we can use arcane historical terminology like *Negro* with abandon. But, as the barely repressed light of *Warm Broad Glow (Dark)* warns, history is never far from the present.

Ligon's latest body of work, then, does not traffic in sly mockery, blatant subversion, or tired appropriation. Rather, by flirting adeptly, frivolously, and indeed gleefully with the aesthetics of high-end design and contemporary branding, he emphasizes how a combination of guile, critical disregard, and savvy design can activate even the most acerbic racial commentary as a potent marketing tool. But while these glittering, irrepressible paintings foreground just how radically medium inflects meaning, they also emphasize the limits of good design and the persistent weight of content. For Ligon, as for Pryor, presentation is far from everything.

—Christopher Bedford

IN PRINT



No Room (Gold) #11
2007
oil and acrylic on canvas
32 x 32 inches (81.28 x 81.28 cm)