

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW

GLENN LIGON

SUSAN HILLER

WILLIAM LEAVITT

KARA WALKER

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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.

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STRANGER IN AMERICA

Glenn Ligon's shrewd syntheses of late modernist forms and highly personal appropriations from black literature and culture make for a stirring midcareer retrospective at the Whitney.

BY CARLY BERWICK

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.

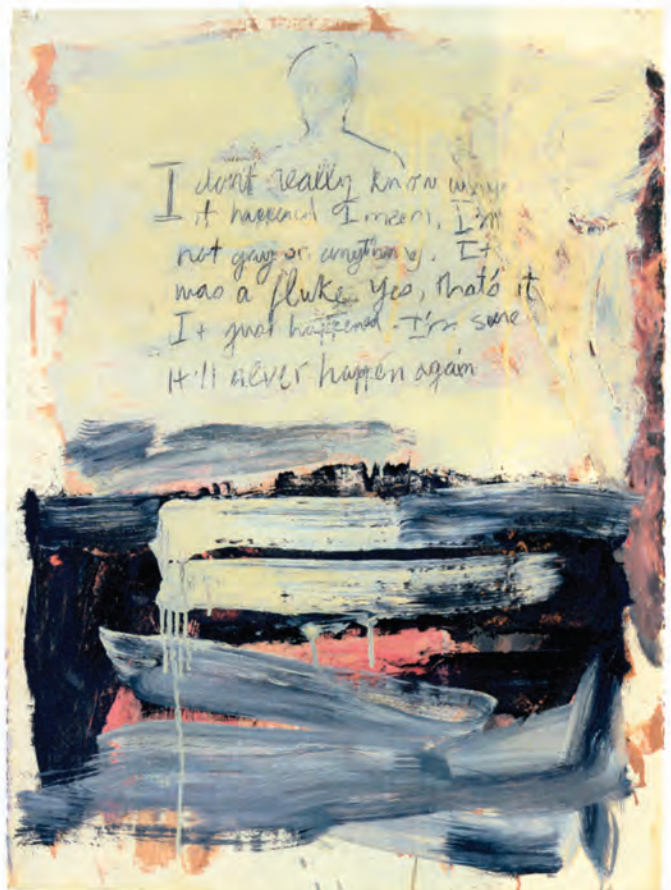
Ligon's relationship with the Whitney is longstanding. He graduated from the museum's Independent Study Program in 1985, three years after he received a BA in art from Wesleyan University. The Whitney owns the largest collection anywhere of Ligon's works, and it was the first museum to show him. He has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

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?

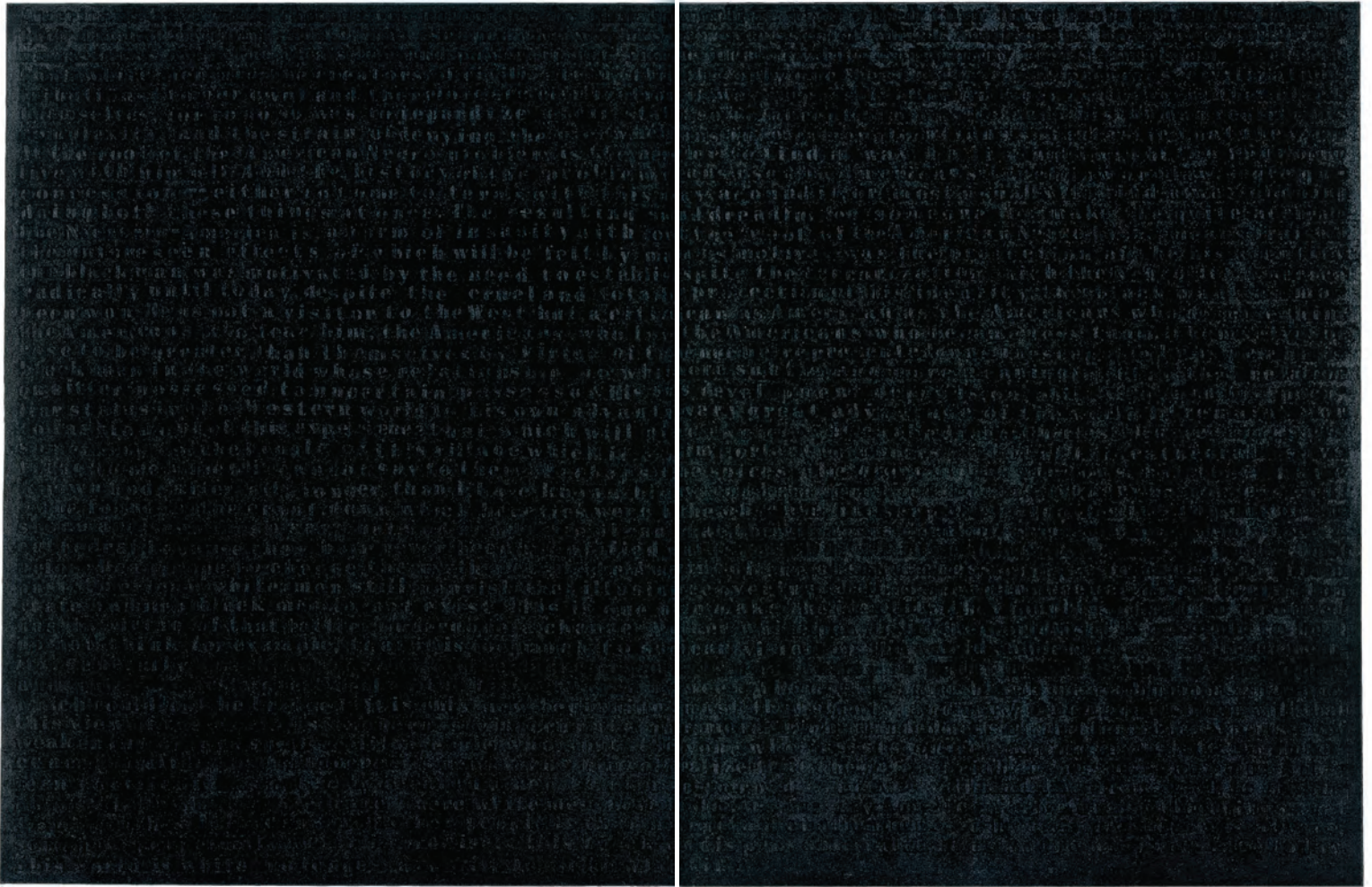
Left, *Narratives* (detail), 1993, nine photoetchings on chine collé, approx. 28 by 21 inches each. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

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

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

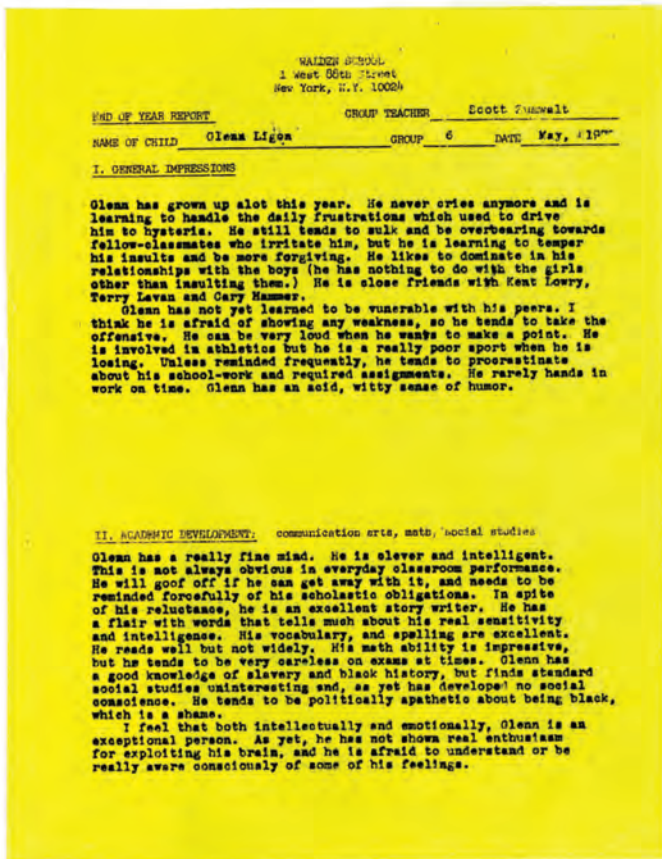


Ligon's contribution to the 1993 biennial, for which he won his first renown, was *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* (1991-93), a dismantled and wall-mounted copy of Robert Mapplethorpe's notorious tome, its 91 images of naked black men interspersed with quotes that Ligon gathered from scholars, 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



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.

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.



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.

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.”

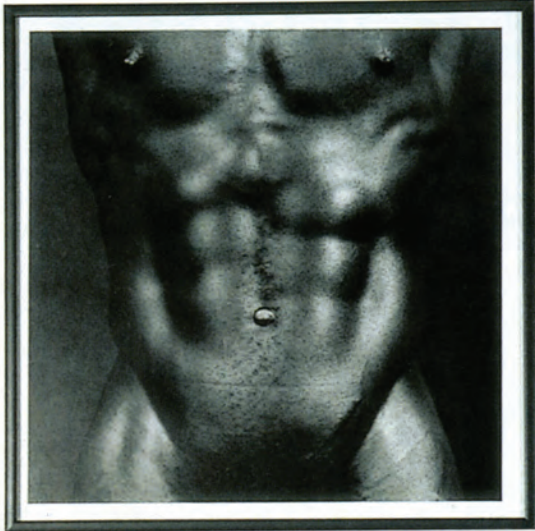
Some of the quotes taken from Baldwin’s essay are visible in the paintings—Ligon uses the first or last lines, or something in the middle—but most are not. The artist repeatedly stenciled the text in black oil stick, layering in coal dust. He proceeded in regular lines, from top to bottom. The letters 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

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

Above left, *End of Year Reports* (detail), 2003, eight screenprints on handmade paper, 8 1/2 by 11 inches each. Whitney Museum of American Art.

Opposite, *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* (detail), 1991-93, 91 offset prints, each 11 1/2 inches square, with 78 text pages, each 5 1/4 by 7 1/4 inches. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.



It is the way that black people are marked as black and not just "people" in representation that has made it easier to categorize and even when something as a fact is difficult, if not impossible, to analyze as white. The subject seems to fall apart in your hands as soon as you begin.

—Richard Dyer

Mapplethorpe appropriates the conventions of pornography visual codes of representation, and by abstracting its images into "art," he makes racism's platitudes of desire respectable. The use of glossy photographic textures and surfaces serves to highlight the visible difference of black skin. Coupled with the use of porn conventions of body posture, turning away to look sideways, and the fragmentation of bodies into details, his work reveals an underlying ambivalence.

—Lisa Johns and Katrina Murray

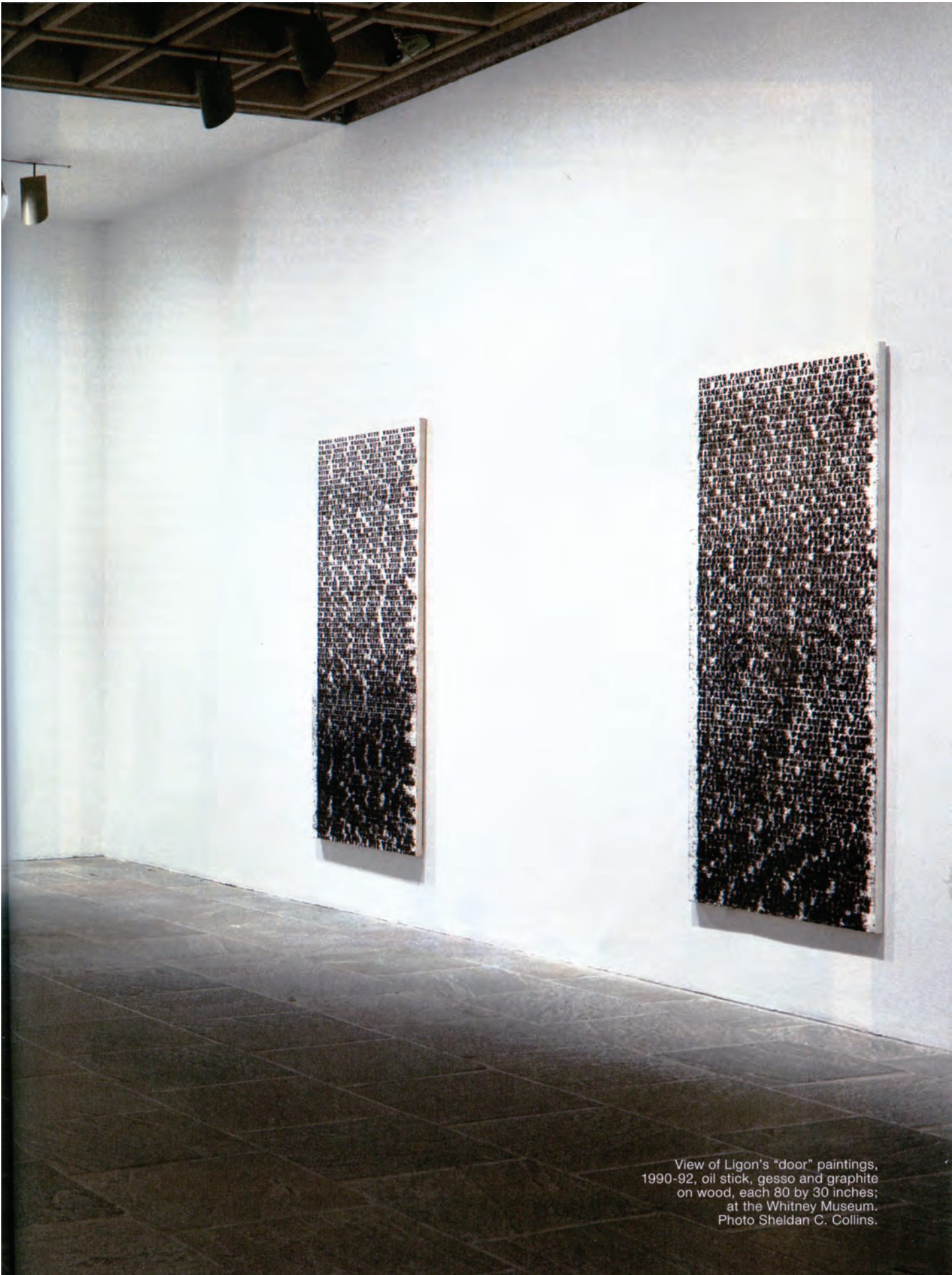
What one's imagination fears of other people is, of course, by the fact of one's own personality and it is one of the duties of black-white relations that, by means of what the white man imagines the black man to be, the black man is enabled to know who the white man is.

—James Baldwin

It is not that Mapplethorpe is unaware of the political implications of a white man showing physically magnificent black men, and such images demand and a presence to these pictures. But the ambivalence is represented by a posture toward celebration and awe, in which the artist leans toward his subjects with as much feeling as the camera allows.

—Alan Brinkley





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.



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

Left, *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.

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

ONE OF THE MOST MYSTERIOUS AND MAGNETIC QUALITIES OF LIGON'S WORK IS ITS CAPACITY TO BE ENDLESSLY REREAD, ITS INTERPRETATIONS CHANGING CONTINUALLY OVER TIME.



RAN AWAY, Glenn, a black male, 5'8", very short hair cut, nearly completely shaved, stocky build, 155-165 lbs., medium complexion (not "light skinned," not "dark skinned," slightly orange). Wearing faded blue jeans, short sleeve button-down 50's style shirt, nice glasses (small, oval shaped), no socks. Very articulate, seemingly well-educated, does not look at you straight in the eye when talking to you. He's socially very adept, yet, paradoxically, he's somewhat of a loner.

"Stranger" paintings, they feel like close siblings.

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

LIGON IS A QUINTESSENTIALLY AMERICAN ARTIST—IN HIS HUMOR, HIS DELIGHT IN TEXTS HIGH AND LOW, AND HIS RELENTLESS MINING OF NATIONAL HISTORY.

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.

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. **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, Saida Hartman, Bennett Simpson and Franklin Sirmans, and a conversation between the artist and Thelma Golden.

CARLY BERWICK is an art writer based in Jersey City.

was being cool. I remember
it wasn't back in those days cause
black wasn't beautiful yet.
Remember? You couldn't even say
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I remember when black wasn't
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My parents go "That nigger crazy."

When Black Wasn't Beautiful #1, 2004,
oil stick, synthetic polymer and graphite
on canvas, 30 inches square. Collection
Susan Hancock.