

## FEATURE

*Artist interview*



FACE ME I FACE YOU

*"My work is not an illustration of my thoughts, or an endpoint... it's a way of figuring out what I think"*

Ligon's Palindrome #1, 2007

“**E**verything that needs to be said has already been said,” the French novelist André Gide wrote. “But since no one was listening, everything must be said again.” If contemporary art could have a single mantra, Gide’s aphorism would make a good candidate. Appropriation art, the dominance of the readymade, the recycling of well-worn images and ideas: these strategies are familiar to even the most casual visitor to a contemporary art gallery. Yet few artists would take Gide’s remark literally. Many are happy to redundantly reuse ideas that were heard loud and clear the first time around. The American artist Glenn Ligon, on the other hand, tends to take Gide’s quip at its word: at his best, Ligon focuses only on rehearsing what is long lost or what was perhaps never understood in the first place.

## GLENN LIGON

*The same, but different*

*Multiple sources, reinterpretations and reoccurrences are what motivates the US-born artist, whose first UK solo show is about to open in London. By Pac Pobric*



### Warm Broad Glow II, 2011

The phrase "negro sunshine" comes from Gertrude Stein's 1909 novel *Three Lives*. In it, Stein describes the character Rose Johnson as a cheerful black woman, even if she "had not the wide, abandoned laughter that makes the warm broad glow of Negro sunshine". Ligon liked the complexity of the remark. "Stein uses a stereotype and then undermines it," he says. "She's using the stereotype of the happy black person and subverting it in the next sentence."

Insofar as he is content to borrow from an array of sources, Ligon is a thoroughly Post-modern artist. When I meet him at his Brooklyn studio, he is at work on a group of new pieces. (All of the works will be on display at London's Camden Arts Centre in a show of new art opening on 10 October – the artist's first solo UK exhibition.) One new work recycles video from the comedian Richard Pryor's 1982 stand-up film "Live on the Sunset Strip"; others, including a neon installation and two paintings, borrow from the 1966 piece "Come Out" by the composer Steve Reich. Reich's work, in turn, relies on a 1964 audio recording by Daniel Hamm, who was accused, convicted, and later acquitted of murder. "That's my work," Ligon says, referring to his multitude of reference points. "I'm interested in moments where there is a kind of return, or where certain things reoccur. And they're not exactly the same, but they're related."

### The shrine, smashed

Yet Ligon did not always sample so freely. When he was a student on the Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Program (ISP) in the mid-1980s, at the height of Post-modernism's influence on studio practice, he stood out for failing to fit in. As far as most of his classmates and teachers were concerned, Ligon's heroes at the time – Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline – were the institutionalised adversaries of scrappy, politically inclined contemporary art. "Painting was the enemy," Ligon later told the jazz composer Jason Moran, and indeed it was for a generation of artists who celebrated the collapse of Modern art's grand narrative. A cultural revolution was taking place, and by the time Ligon finished at the ISP, the shrine of Abstract Expressionism had long been smashed. On its ruins, a new idea took root: that the lone, individual genius had disappeared, leaving behind a medley of ideas, forms, texts and



### Biography

#### GLENN LIGON

**Born:** New York City, 1960

**Education:** Wesleyan University, 1982; Whitney Independent Study Program, 1985

**Represented by:** Luhring Augustine, New York; Thomas Dane, London; Regen Projects, Los Angeles

**Selected solo exhibitions:** 2014 "Come Out", Thomas Dane Gallery; "Glenn Ligon: Narratives", Schmucker Art Gallery, Gettysburg College, Pennsylvania

2012 "Neon", Luhring Augustine 2011 "Glenn Ligon: America", retrospective originating at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York 2010 "Glenn Ligon", Michael Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town 2008 "Glenn Ligon: Figure/Paysage/Marine", Yvon Lambert, Paris

**Selected group exhibitions:** Forthcoming "Come As You Are: Art of the 1990s", Montclair Art Museum, New Jersey; "Rauschenberg: Collecting and Connecting", Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina 2014 Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art; "Bloodflames Revisited", Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York 2013 "NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star", New Museum, New York; "Blues for Smoke", Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles 2011 "The Bearden Project", Studio Museum in Harlem, New York 2010 "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture" National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC

documents that were ripe for reuse. With the "death of the author", as Roland Barthes put it, came the birth of the reader, who was now free to take the scattered remains of culture and build something new. But these constructions weren't "new" in the modern sense. Originality was rejected as the vestige of an outdated branch of thought. Instead of the lone artist preaching the divine word, a multitude of voices could be collaged to create a chorus of echoes.

Ligon was initially somewhat sceptical about his training, but by 1990, it started to seep in. That year, he drew on the writings of Zora Neale Hurston, whose words he painted directly onto canvas, literally inscribing content into his art. Today, the reclamation of ideas remains Ligon's major strategy. "I use other peoples' texts because they're available," he says. "And they said things better than I could say them."

Ligon's art has been rigorously Post-modern in its wide web of references, from Gertrude Stein's novels to Louis Farrakhan's Million Man March; in its pointed critiques of American history and race relations, which animate seemingly all of Ligon's work; and in the artist's use of an array of media, spanning painting, sculpture and film. The core of his practice is that he continually defers absolute meaning, pushing it into the background in favour of doubt and uncertainty up front. "[The work] is really about the process of history," he says, and that process is continually unravelling and always open to question. Problems that appeared to be solved crop up again and again. Neither history nor culture has a single direction; they are open-ended and unstable. "My work is not an illustration of my thoughts, or an endpoint," he says. "It's a way of figuring out what I think about various things."

Ligon's work shuttles around even when it makes a temporary stop. When he borrows, for

example, a joke from Richard Pryor and paints it onto a canvas, as he has done on numerous occasions since 1993, he knows that the genuine humour of the text will be haunted by what's behind the punch line. In the first place, he says, "a lot of the interest in the joke paintings – beyond the humour – is how people look at those works with Richard Pryor's routines in their heads." Pryor's voice carries the pictures. "It's not a sound piece, but it is interested in sound because of the echo of Pryor's performance in the viewer's mind." And then, further still in the background, is the knowledge of Pryor's desperate life situation. He was raised in an Illinois brothel and sexually abused as a young man. Early in his career, he was told by white comedians to not "mention the fact that you're a nigger. Don't go into such bad taste." By the late 1960s, drug addiction set in and never really went away. In all, the comedian "embodied the voice of an injured humanity", the critic Hilton Als wrote. His racially pointed humour, Als continued, "was a high-wire act: how to stay funny to a black audience while satirising the moral strictures that make black American life like no other."

### Body language

In a new video installation, Ligon has isolated sections of Pryor's stand-up to focus on the comedian's body language. "I stripped all of [the] sound out, and all of the audience reactions, so you just see Pryor on stage," he says. "Each screen focuses on different parts of his body. He's an incredible physical performer, if you look at him. And part of his comedy is about his phonetic movement, and a sort of restlessness."

Ligon is similarly restless in his hunt for cross-references. The other works in the show – including Ligon's largest ever painting, at 8ft by 50ft – deal with another chapter of black American history: the criminal trials of a group that came to be known as the Harlem Six. In 1965, six black youths were convicted of the murder of Margit Sugar, a Hungarian refugee who owned a clothing store with her husband in Harlem. For the police, it was an open and shut case. The youths, they said, had entered the store, stabbed Sugar in the heart, injured her husband in a *mêlée* and then fled from the scene. The trial was brief and the evidence

appeared clear; the boys even admitted to the murder. All six were sentenced to life in prison.

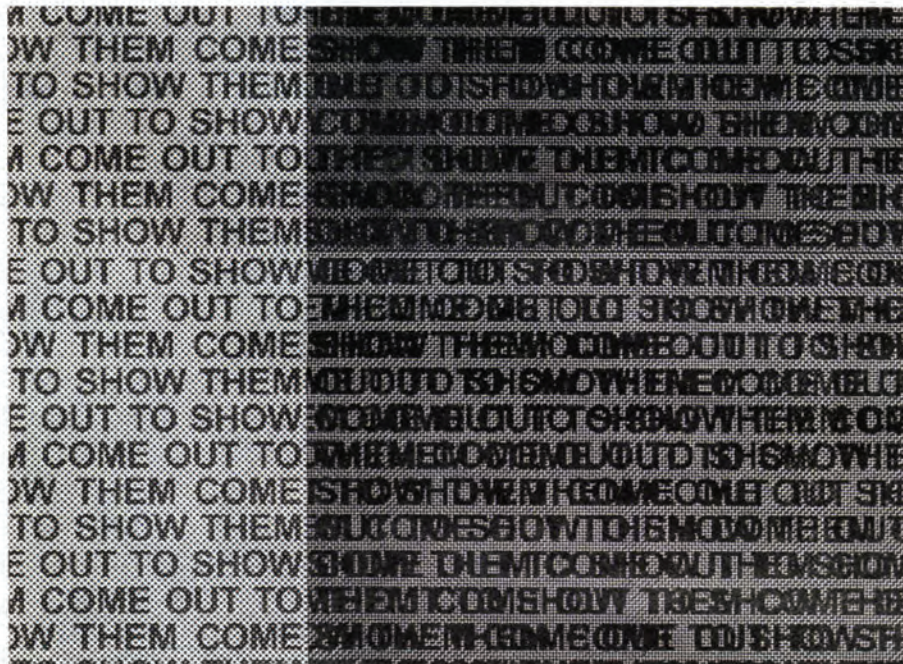
But the investigation and court proceedings were botched from the start. Over the course of the next ten years, numerous retrials and court decisions tested the initial investigation. The convictions were repeatedly thrown out and then reinstated. The prosecution held firm to their argument, but the boys had been beaten by the police when they were first picked up. Their confessions were obtained under duress and in illegal conditions. The police had missed crucial fingerprint evidence and the defendants were assigned lawyers they did not want. Today, only one of the six remains in prison.

### Picking up the pieces

Reich's "Come Out" was written as a response to the case. That year, he was invited to perform at a benefit organised for the Harlem Six's defence fund. The work he wrote used an audio recording of Daniel Hamm, one of the teenagers, explaining how he had been beaten by the police – but that story has largely been forgotten. "Everybody knows 'Come Out'," Ligon says, "but if you go on Wikipedia and try to find out about the benefit concert it was created for, it's not there." Reich's piece "becomes a way of knowing a whole history that is essentially lost". So Ligon has picked up the pieces, reworking Hamm's testimony into his art as a way of reinstalling the past.

Here, again, is Ligon the Post-modernist, careening through a seemingly infinite number of sources without settling for even a single moment. But there is also Ligon the formalist, closely reading historical and cultural texts to see what they have to say, even if they are not transparent. "There's an anxiety about objects needing to speak directly," he says. "But maybe they don't speak directly. Maybe they stage a kind of difficulty." Ligon's work raises the question of whether it is possible to read something and understand it fully. The inevitable prospect of yet another cross-reference can always obscure what we think we know. "Texts want to be read," Ligon says. "So in a way, a lot of my work stages a difficulty – as if it isn't there to be read."

• *Glenn Ligon: Call and Response*, Camden Arts Centre, London, 10 October-11 January 2015



### **Come Out, 2014**

This painting—*Come Out Study #1* (detail) — is among Ligon's newest. It is part of a series of pictures using audio from the 1966 work "Come Out" by the composer Steve Reich. In it, Reich loops a phrase uttered by Daniel Hamm, who was convicted and later acquitted of a 1964 murder with five other teenagers in Harlem. Two works from the series—Ligon's largest ever paintings—will be on display in the London show.

### **Mudbone (Liar) #3, 2004**

The comedian Richard Pryor has been a valued source for Ligon. His humour, which is always dogged by the discomfort of American racial history, provides a useful reference for the histories Ligon is compelled to explore. "His jokes are very pointed political commentary," Ligon said on the occasion of his 2011 retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art. "They're funny, but they're also cringe-worthy."

