

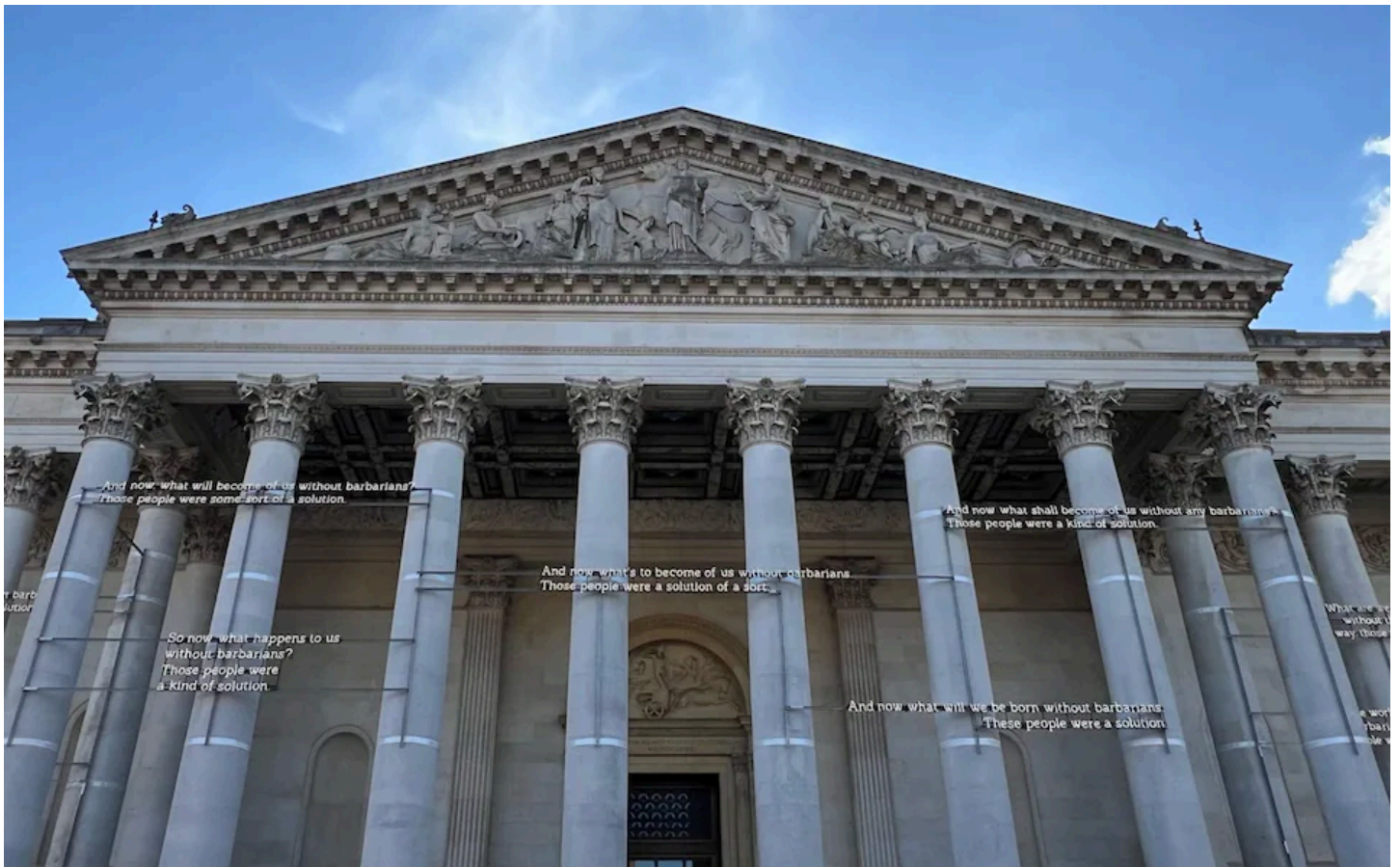
Q | News Sport Business Money Opinion Ukraine

See all Culture

## Glenn Ligon: the Fitzwilliam is transformed – to revelatory effect

With an impressive nine-part neon sculpture, this exhibition is a defining example of how to bring new relevance to historic collections

★★★★☆ 4/5



Waiting for the Barbarians on the Fitzwilliam façade Evgenia Siokos

Evgenia Siokos

19 September 2024 4:31pm

For at least the 800th time, Cambridge drifts back into Michaelmas Term, opening its cloisters to swarms of sweaty students and their perilous bicycles. The Fitzwilliam Museum, however, is roaring forth with the opening of Glenn Ligon's *All Over The Place*, a seminal exhibition that challenges the relationships between artists, curation and institutions.

Bronx-born, New York City-based conceptual artist Glenn Ligon (b. 1960) is well-known for text-based paintings that distort the visual boundaries of the written word, using literary excerpts from 20th-century American authors such as James Baldwin and Gertrude Stein, to the point of abstraction. Ligon is an Abstract Expressionist in spirit. Though a few of these works are on display here, they are far from the most noteworthy elements.

As visitors approach the façade of the Grade I listed Fitzwilliam Museum, the signs of disruption (in the exciting Silicon Valley sense) are immediately visible. The star of the show for many will be Ligon's nine-part neon sculpture, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (2021), temporarily attached to various columns of the neoclassical portico. These sculptures spell out nine different English translations of the last lines of Constantine Cavafy's 1898 poem 'Waiting for the Barbarians.'

Now what will become of us without barbarians?  
Those people were some kind of solution

Through this act of showmanship, the viewer is initiated into a disarming space, in which assumptions about conventional truths are playfully dispelled and room is made for subjectivity and intellectual curiosity.



Glenn Ligon's *Untitled* (2019) Glenn Ligon; Courtesy of the artist, Hauser & Wirth, New York, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, Thomas Dane Gallery, London, and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris

Inside, *All Over The Place* interweaves the artist's paintings, prints, ceramics and neon sculptures, spanning over 30 years of his career, with works of art and objects from the Fitzwilliam's own collection. These objects range from a 12th-century French manuscript of Horace's works and a 16th-century *Adoration of the Magi* to a selection of Frank Auerbach's early experimental dry-points from the

1950s and Degas etchings created from his cancelled plates.

Ligon was intrigued by the “curatorial expertise”, and wanted to “amplify what’s already known...to add another layer to the narrative of an object/work”. He has succeeded in doing so. The Fitzwilliam embodies the static late 18th to 19th-century conception of a museum as a Grand Tour treasure box focused on the preservation and conservation of art for the public good. With the virtue of having over 500,000 artworks and objects in one place comes the inevitable truth that many pieces are kept in store and, the viewer, inundated by the intense visual stimulus, is often reduced to a passive observer. Ligon’s triumph lies in providing an antidote to this passivity. The artist’s

“site-specific interventions” offer tangible portals through which to shorten the distance between object and viewer.

This is most powerfully exemplified by Ligon’s reconfiguration of the porcelain collection in the Lower Marlay Gallery. Rough black subversions of white Korean ‘moon jars’, created with the help of a Korean-born ceramicist, shake the stasis from the kempt porcelain; “let’s bring them down from the high shelf they’re on and make these connections more explicit”. Erasmus Darwin’s Wedgwood copy of The Portland Vase is alone worth seeing in its new context.



Now it is winter again, a year later, and I am here again. Everyone in the village knows my name, though they scarcely ever use it. knows that I come from America though, this, apparently, they will never really believe. black men come from Africa—and everyone knows that I am the friend of the son of a woman who was born here, and that I am staying in their chalet. But I remain as much a stranger today as I was the first day I arrived, and the children shout 'Neger! Neger!' as I walk along the streets. It must be admitted that in the beginning I was far too shocked to have any real opinion. In so far as I reacted at all, I reacted by trying to be pleasant—to make a good part of the American Negro's education (long before he goes to school) that he must make people like him. This judge-and-the-workman-with-you-arent-you-worked-about-as-well-in-this-structure-as-I-am-in-the-structure-for-which-it-was-designed-thing is to say that he did not work at all. No one, after all, can be liked whose human weight and complexity cannot be, or has not been, admitted. My smile was simply another attempt—of politeness—what allowed them to see my teeth—they did not, really, see my smile.

Glenn Ligon's Stranger #90 (2018) Glenn Ligon; Courtesy of the artist, Hauser & Wirth, New York, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, Thomas Dane Gallery, London, and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Photographer Credit: Ronald Armstutz

However, the heavy-handedness of the “interventions” of over a dozen small canvases from Ligon’s ongoing series Study for Negro Sunshine (Red) with the canonical paintings and furniture of the Italian and Spanish Galleries, betrays a perhaps too literal conception of ‘juxtaposition’. Ligon is loud and clear about his desire to use curatorship as a means of challenging the conventions of artistic interpretation. In this instance, Ligon defies boundaries at the expense of aesthetic sensibilities; from the art historian’s perspective, this is called progress.

For those whose jaws ache at the thought of condemning another major exhibition to be “woke rubbish”, consider this show to be a defining example of how historic collections can find new relevance in the shifting perspectives of the modern world without resorting to bathetic and remorseful performances of self-flagellation; All Over The Place is a celebration.

---

*From Sept 20; info ([fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk](http://fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk))*