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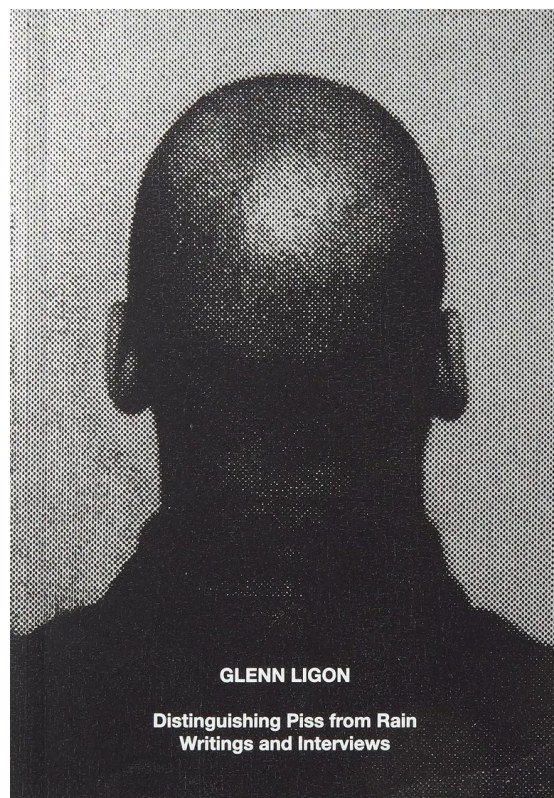
ART BOOKS

Jonny Trunk's *Audio Erotica*

Art Books

Glenn Ligon's *Distinguishing Piss from Rain: Writings and Interviews*

A collection of writings that showcases the artist's style of auto



theory or critical memoir, but
through the eyes of a visual artist.

By Erica N. Cardwell



Distinguishing Piss from Rain, an impressive collection of new and previously published nonfiction writings and interviews by artist Glenn Ligon, delivers the authorial brilliance for which the artist is known. The book is comprised of recent writing and interviews along with work anthologized in Ligon's first book of writings, *Yourself in the World* (2011). Ligon gave a talk at the College Art Association's annual conference in 2004 on David Hammons's *Concerto in Black and Blue*, an installation on view at Ace Gallery in 2002–03. Scott Rothkopf, who curated Ligon's first retrospective but was then an editor at *Artforum*, heard this talk, and published a longer version of it in *Artforum*. In the preface of *Distinguishing Piss from Rain*, Ligon describes this as the moment he became known as an “artist who writes.”

*Distinguishing
Piss from Rain:
Writings and
Interviews*
Glenn Ligon
James Hoff, Ed.
Hauser & Wirth
2024

“Black Light: David Hammons and the Poetics of Emptiness” introduces Uncle Tossy, a recurring and seminal figure in Ligon's writing. As is the case with much of his long form essays, Ligon uses numbers to structure his fragmentation, shifting through varied topics and references with what writing teachers often refer to as an effortless economy of language. The final line of the first section in the essay is an intentional declarative and the inadvertent thesis for much of his work: “When I first saw the work of David Hammons, with its attention to the poetics of emptiness, I saw in it echoes of my Uncle Tossy's life.” Throughout the collection, this comparative style of discerning parallel themes from two Black figures is a useful schema for

Ligon's analysis of culture. His voice is gentle, yet attentive, all conveyed with his careful light-touch lyricism that makes the reader feel as if Ligon is speaking directly to them.



Ligon's grandfather Sylvester Hooks in the mid-1940s, Washington, DC

Sound and Vision 2013

Look the part, be the part, motherfucker.

—Proposition Joe, *The Wire*, season 1, episode 9

My grandfather wore a tie every day. Well into his eighties, confined by age and temperament to an upstairs bedroom in the house he had purchased with savings from a job as a railroad porter, he would bathe, shave, and dress in a white shirt, tie, suspenders, and a pair of sharply pressed trousers, only to spend the day in an armchair with a quilt over his knees, listening to radio evangelists or reading the daily papers. He had left a sharecropper's plot in Bishopville, South Carolina, in the mid-'40s for Washington, DC, his clothes and whatnot stuffed into a few cardboard suitcases. Staying with relatives until he got established, he would soon send for the wife and eight children he left behind. I have a photograph of my grandfather from that time posing in a white suit, wide-brimmed hat, and patterned tie against a painted backdrop of a suburban house. The photograph was taken long before he actually had a house to stand in front of, but for him it was an image of the future he had arrived in and something to send back to the folks at home to say "I made it, I'm here, I'm doing OK." For my grandfather and an estimated six million other Black people, it became clear that there were no prospects in the segregated South, and between World War I and the beginning of the 1970s they fled for, as the author Richard Wright would put it, "the warmth of other suns." The life to come was in Washington, DC, or New York, or Detroit, or Oakland, or Chicago. It didn't matter much that, in the end, those utopias never lived up to their promise. What mattered was that Black life and Black possibility were not as brutally suppressed in those spaces as they were in the South. My grandfather's portrait, with its optimistically painted scene of middle-class American life, was an image of a future he had willed into reality.

Sun Ra was also part of the great migration, leaving Birmingham, Alabama, in 1945 for a future he was going to create. Although my grandfather wouldn't have recognized that future, a place where time travel,

Distinguishing Piss from Rain primarily features essays, using a style of auto theory or critical memoir, but through the eyes of a visual artist. His cultural

and artistic references are reminiscent of Langston Hughes and James Baldwin's creative nonfiction tendencies. This is also paralleled by contemporary writers Kiese Laymon and Hanif Abdurraqib, whose confessional narratives have reshaped the essay form in Black literature. For each of these authors, and Ligon, the confessional, first-person essay tone can be both a tool for radical exposure and a sanctuary for critical ideating.

Ligon's newer essays, several of which were written for exhibition catalogues, deliver the instincts of a literary scholar and culture critic. In the essay, "*The Wire* and the Blues" Ligon examines several of the queer characters in the television series, Omar Little, Detective Kima Greggs, and Snoop, venturing to align these characters with that often required of jazz musicians, a status that relegated folks like Robert Johnson to life on the road in perpetuity. Take Omar Little for example, brilliantly portrayed by the late great Michael K. Williams. Ligon hallows Omar's existence: "Taken as a whole, Omar is the most blues-inflected character on *The Wire*, a solitary, almost-mythic figure journeying within constricted social and economic spaces in much the way Robert Johnson and Jelly Roll Morton did."

Ligon is fundamentally intent on rendering Black people in full color. For example, the essay "Pay it No Mind" (the second on Andy Warhol in this collection) is a potent corrective of Warhol's depiction of Black trans icon Marsha P. Johnson, who he photographed for his series "Ladies and Gentleman" (1975). He begins with a question: "Did Warhol know any ordinary Black people?" From this question, he considers the two paintings Warhol made of Johnson. Rather than recognize the activist's essence, Johnson's "color," as Ligon describes, effusive and abundant in every image and story preserved, Warhol faltered. Ligon insists, "Marsha was already a star. No need to shine for Warhol, to give him her light, although she did, as if she couldn't help herself." Ligon elevates Johnson to the status she deserves

by affirming her essence and disregarding any need for validation from white, Eurocentric ideals.

This approach is also notable in the essay “Sound and Vision,” in which Ligon analyzes Afrofuturism as a way of being. He stories the lives of the musician Sun Ra, muralist Ayé Aton, and his own grandfather Sylvester Hooks, as ambitious visionaries who held fast to self-preservation by fixing their eyes on the future. “Ra’s gold-tone headdresses, ankhs, and flowing robes, like my grandfather’s suit and tie, were garments for the life to come, a life whose arrival he had decided to hasten by looking the part.” Ligon’s poetics are most earnestly deployed in “Notes on a Performance by Kellie Jones,” a loose and lyrical essay written in response to a lecture on Hammons by Jones. It reads like a list, with sections numbered one through eleven, some with only one sentence (“Went looking for the art and we were the art”) or simply a name (“Ralph Ellison”), showcasing his incisive syntax and impressionistic style.

The interviews in *Distinguishing Piss from Rain* are the latter section of the book, featuring figureheads like Thelma Golden, Phyllis Rosenzweig, and Byron Kim, to name a few. In interviews, Ligon’s responses typically arrive with gentle resistance. The tone is less concerned with publicity and more reflective—a critical mirror. In an interview with Hamza Walker, Ligon comments on the presence of Uncle Tossy in much of his writing: “Somebody said, ‘Oh that’s just your way of saying things you want to say, and you just invented this character.’ And I was like, ‘No, Uncle Tossy is real. We all have Uncle Tossy, you know? He’s not an allegorical figure.’” Uncle Tossy encompasses what Ligon’s career as an artist and writer holds central—the preservation of the invisible, ignored or distilled aspects of Black life.

Contributor

Erica N. Cardwell

Erica Cardwell is a writer and critic based in Brooklyn and Toronto.

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Critical Perspectives on Art, Politics and Culture

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