



A neon sculpture from 2008 is among the works by Glenn Ligon, including black-and-white text paintings, in this New York Conceptual artist's retrospective at the Whitney Museum.

Messages That Conduct an Electric Charge

Sometimes a career survey doubles as a scan of social history. This is true of Glenn Ligon's retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, a tight but ample show that refers back to America's slaveholding past and forward to the Obama present but focuses on the late 1980s and 1990s, a too-seldom-revisited stretch of recent art.

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Mr. Ligon, who is 50 and was born in the Bronx, did his first breakout work in 1985. At that point, halfway through Reaganomics and already well into the AIDS crisis, a tide of what would come to be called identity politics was building but had not yet penetrated the gated New York art world. The 1985 Whitney Biennial didn't have a single African-American among its 84 artists. Outside the gates, though, the cultural waters were stirring. A new generation of black artists was rewriting existing scripts about race. Young gay artists who'd seen the inside of a closet only long enough to pack up and get out were making art about the options ahead of them.

Mr. Ligon, just a few years out of college, was committed to painting in a brushy, romantic, abstract expressionist mode. But he was also acutely aware, as a gay black man, of the political ferment around him. His problem became how to make a traditional language of painting expressive of who, and what, he was.

His initial solution was to keep painting, with de Kooning-esque strokes, but to add new content in the form of words, specifically brief anecdotes lifted from gay pornographic literature and incised with a pencil point into his pigment-swiped surfaces. Like graffiti scrawled in wet cement, or the Latin phrases written on a Cy Twombly painting, the words were a defacement, but they were also a territorial marker, a tag that made his art really his. Four of these small paintings are among the earliest pieces in "Glenn Ligon: America" at the

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Glenn Ligon: America

ON VIEW Until June 5, Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, at 75th Street, (212) 570-3600, whitney.org.

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Above, Glenn Ligon's works from his Coloring series. Below, detail from "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background."

Messages Conduct Electric Charge

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Whitney. And they are the first in what has become a long line of language-based works by an artist who is equally an object maker and a conceptualist, and as interested in the past as in the present.

He modeled another early painting, "Untitled (I Am a Man)" from 1988, on a historical artifact: the simple placard, with the words "I Am a Man" in black on a white ground, carried by striking

black sanitation workers in Memphis in 1968, and documented in a famous photograph by Ernest C. Withers.

But Mr. Ligon's oil-on-canvas version isn't a copy of the placard; it's a re-invention of it — the words are differently spaced; the surface is differently textured — as a semi-abstract painting. It's a new kind of object, with an old history, and you perceive it in stages: first as words, a reading experience; then, as you get closer, as a looking-at-art experience; then, holistically, as a thinking experience. (If you linger over his work a little, give yourself to it, you'll get something from it. The temptation, with visually reticent art, is to breeze through the show, but that's like keeping your iPod on at a concert. You get a sense of what's going on, but you're pre-programmed and sticking with that.)

The shift back and forth between reading and looking, object and idea, is the basic dynamic emphasized by the show, which has been organized by Scott Rothkopf, a Whitney curator. And it represents an effort, very much of the current, formalist, post-'90s moment, to position Mr. Ligon as being as much a craft-conscious painter as a social commentator.

The positioning is valid, because the dynamic is demonstrable even early on. And it grows more complex and nuanced as the range of texts he uses expands to include fiction, autobiography, the popular press and oral history, and as his forms become more varied, moving into photography and sculpture.

Always, though, language is at the center. In 1988 Mr. Ligon made a series of paintings using epigrammatic passages taken from dream-interpretation guides popular among African-Americans when he was growing up. He stenciled the phrases, character by character, with oil stick, a thick, viscous medium that creates a slightly raised, braillelike relief, and used colors that suited the words. For example the phrase "Honeycomb: To suck honey from a honeycomb denotes pleasure" is stenciled in copper-colored letters on a brown-gold ground.

This series would be his last use of color in text painting for quite a while, with the exception of a group of pictures based on scabrous racial jokes by the comedian Richard Pryor done in eye-aching complementaries (electric blue on bright red, etc.). Black and white would become the norm, and stenciling a primary expressive medium.

In several paintings beginning in 1990



Mr. Ligon covered wooden doors or door-shaped canvases with stenciled sentences pulled from different sources: an autobiographical essay by Zora Neale Hurston (“I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background”); Genet’s play “The Blacks” (“I’m Turning Into a Specter Before Your Very Eyes and I’m Going to Haunt You”); a poem by Jesse Jackson (“I Am Somebody”).

In each painting the single line is repeated over and over, continuously, in black letters on a gessoed background, with a few paintings white on white, or ivory on ivory. As the words wind down from the top, the stencil becomes increasingly clogged with pigment so that individual characters turn smudgy, and words grow progressively less legible and the bottom of the painting is a kind of miasma.

The effect is most extreme in pictures that quote from James Baldwin’s 1953 essay “Stranger in the Village,” an account of his stay in a tiny Alpine hamlet where, he claimed, no one had ever seen

ONLINE: GLENN LIGON

An interactive feature on selected works in the exhibition:

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a person with black skin. His tale of enforced visibility and vulnerability ends with a vision of social transformation, specifically in America: “The world is white no longer, and will never be white again.” But Mr. Ligon makes Baldwin’s words all but unreadably dark, by stenciling them with a mixture of black paint and coal dust that cakes and clots on the canvas surfaces like epidermal growth and gives off a spooky sheen.

If the use of stenciling inevitably brings Jasper Johns to mind, the sparkle effects recall Andy Warhol’s diamond-dust silk-screened paintings of shoes and shadows. In the late 1990s Mr. Ligon borrowed Warhol’s silk-screen-

painting format in a set of large-scale photographic images of the 1995 Million Man March on Washington, an event that promoted black male solidarity but was pointedly unwelcoming to gay men.

And in two installations he leaves painting behind altogether. One, “To Disembark,” from 1993, is based on a 19th-century account by a slave named Henry Brown, known as Box, of his escape from captivity by having himself mailed from Virginia to Philadelphia in a wooden crate.

Like a monument to Brown, four shipping crates sit in a Whitney gallery; from inside one comes the voice of Billie Holiday singing the anti-lynching anthem “Strange Fruit.” On the walls hang a series of witty, sometimes chilling “wanted” posters for fugitive slaves, with Mr. Ligon himself the runaway subject, as if he couldn’t, even now, be free and clear of the past.

The sound of Holiday’s melismatic wail carries into a second installation, “Notes on the Margin of the ‘Black Book,’” a mural-like display of Robert Mapplethorpe’s eroticized photographs of black men from the late 1980s and early 1990s. Some viewers find the series deeply racist. Mr. Ligon indicates his own ambivalence by annotating the pictures with printed commentary by theorists, artists, politicians, gay-bar patrons and so on.

The sheer range of informed opinion suggests that there is no “right” reaction. Mapplethorpe wanted to cause trouble, and he did. He was no hero but no villain either.

In any case, for Mr. Ligon, who embraces the logic of ambiguity, heroism is as contingent a category as history, race and gender. In 2000 for a commissioned community project in Minneapolis, he distributed copies of 1960s and ’70s black pride coloring book to schoolchildren. He asked them to color the pictures, and he made silk-screens of the results. The child who colored in an African beauty named Salimu did a nice, respectful job. But Malcolm X came out

looking like a clown — white skin, cherry-red lips, dots of rouge — and Frederick Douglass disappeared under a rain of scribbles.

The retrospective ends as it started, with words. A big one, “America” is spelled out three times in neon in the final gallery, each version slightly different, none quite right. One has backward letters, another flickers as if running out of power; the third is painted black and emits only pinpoints of light.

There’s a fourth neon piece downstairs in the lobby, consisting of the words “Negro Sunshine” — the phrase is Gertrude Stein’s (and a racial stereotype as she used it) — and facing the street. Like everything by Mr. Ligon, “Negro Sunshine” can be read in differ-

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ent ways. It can evoke the optimism that initially greeted the Obama presidency but that now can seem hard to sustain. Or it can refer to changes in American attitude — a real loosening up — toward race and gender since Mr. Ligon came on the scene in the mid-1980s. Or it can express a viewer’s appreciation of the probity and plentitude of his art.

“This sober, tender-hearted, very searching history of a family’s progress, comprehends in its picture of life which is distinctively American, a psychology which is universal.”

The words are Marianne Moore’s. She was writing about Stein’s epic novel “The Making of Americans.” I’ll borrow and apply them to Mr. Ligon’s work.