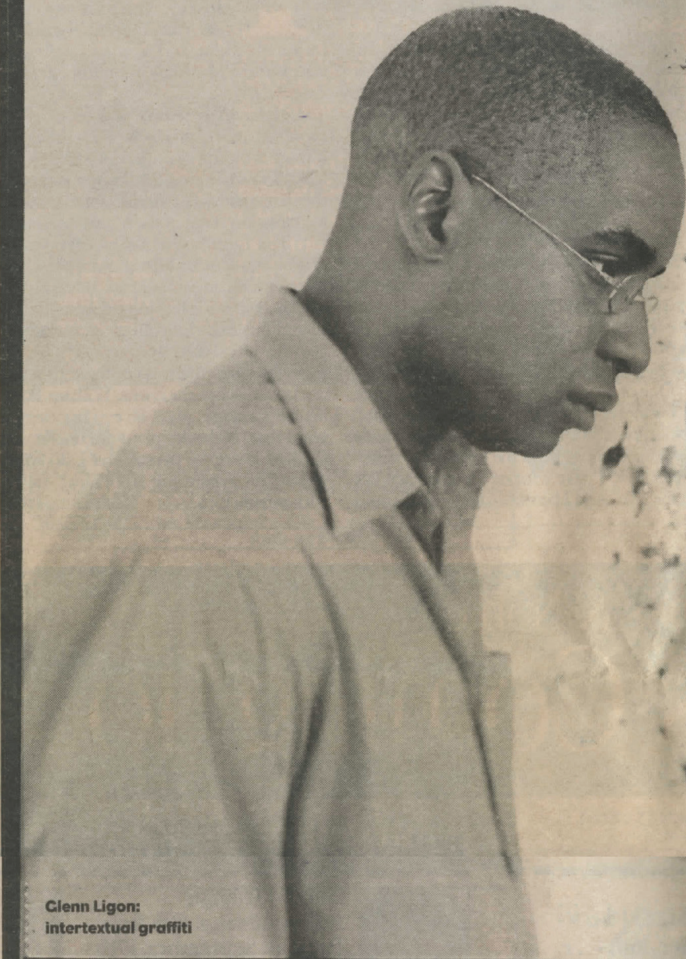


THE FALL ARTS SEASON



Glenn Ligon:
intertextual graffiti

I passed the
set with me
two weeks
iers, obvio
Now it is w
though the
will be the
son of a wo
ger today
the streets
reaction.
of the Ame
This
the work
has not be
no in

gan at the Walden School, continued at Wesleyan University, and really picked up steam at the 1991 and 1993 Whitney biennials. These days, he can be found in a roomy Williamsburg studio, where he graciously allows me to contemplate the meaning of his existence. There, we're surrounded by several works in progress, two silk-screened self-portraits and three nearly completed paintings on the floor that repeat jokes from the Richard Pryor canon: one about niggers and white women, another about niggers and Martians, a third on niggers and black nationalists. "I love the way Richard Pryor was able to speak about anything through his own life," he says, "even bringing his own sexual dysfunction into his routines." On these last pieces, Ligon is still working out technical problems in the way of color schemes and line breaks.

Ligon's focus is on a drawing for the Brooklyn show whose copiously stenciled text, taken from a James Baldwin essay, has been rendered damn near unreadable by his trademark smoky veil of smudge marks. The work Ligon is best known for involves variations on this technique. For the Whitney's "Black Male" show, he re-created the legendary wooden box abolitionist Henry "Box" Brown used to ship himself out of slavery with. Other surfaces he's used to contemplate black male identity have included a punching bag and the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe. Most recently, for an extensive exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Ligon debuted a series of 12-foot-long silk screens adapted from photos of the Million Man March. Ligon altered them by removing all the slogans from the banners and signs. For Ligon, as for many of us, the event evoked an ambivalent mix of pride, confusion, impotence, and hope. "People went there for very different reasons than Farrakhan's organization had imagined, and I think in some ways Farrakhan inadvertently provided the space for black men to start dialoguing and healing in some weird way. The question is, can that healing happen with all the absences that were also structured into the event?"

For Ligon, engaging the march and its absences was also about engaging the invisibility of black gay men within a politicized black communal context. A more direct response was developed for *Masculine Masquerade*, a 1994 MIT book that featured a Ligon scrapbook interspersing graphic images from black gay porn with his own family snapshots and pictures found in flea markets and junk shops. "That piece came out of the Mapplethorpe work. One of my critiques was that, in Mapplethorpe, there's no sense of place for those men. I'm also interested in black pornography, so the solution was to show the most highly sexualized representations of black gay men in that space. In general, I think the one thing that can't be represented in a black family album is gay desire. You can sometimes represent being gay but not sexuality. My family knows I'm gay, but they don't want to hear about what I do. That work also allowed me to inject humor into discussions of race and sexuality, which is one of the things that drew me to Pryor but which I hadn't gotten to in my own practice."

Ligon wryly recalls that a common response to the family album was "Does your mother know about this work?" As if I was literally putting her together with this porn star. The literalness people bring to those pictures is really funny to me, given the way that most people treat their family photos is to stuff them into a box." —GREG TATE

MICHAEL KENNETH LOPEZ

BRING THE WORD

Not so long ago, KRS-One dropped science on hip-hop's future. In the next phase of the culture's development, reckoned The Edutainer, dance and the visual arts would loom larger than music. KRS probably didn't have Savion Glover or painter Glenn Ligon in mind when he let that prophecy fly, but Glover's *Bring in Da Noise* performance kicks more innovative bass than any MC flow we've heard this year. Ligon is nobody's idea of a graffiti writer, but I'd advance the argument that he visually tackles race, sex, history, and language in ways resonant with oldskool hip-hop irreverence and intertextuality. If you believe hip-hop is as much a realm of ideas and a repository for metaphor as an arena for rhythm and attitude, artists like Ligon, Gary Simmons, Lorna Simpson, and Kara Walker are digging way deeper right now than any rapper. For evidence of this, check

out Ligon's exhibition of drawings opening September 21 at the Brooklyn Museum.

Like KRS, Ligon, 35, grew up in the South Bronx, but his journey from the Boogie Down to the world beyond be-