You see, whites want black art of black life can be held, can vocabulary is based. But they...
Glenn Ligon/MATRIX 120

knowledge of the oppressor
this is the oppressor's language

yet I need it to talk to you

Adrienne Rich, from the poem

Glenn Ligon is a young artist whose powerful and poetic paintings bring issues of identity to center stage. Over the past several years Ligon's works have focused on how individuals understand themselves and, in turn, how they are understood and represented (or, indeed, misunderstood and misrepresented) by others. Ligon often does this by quoting short, carefully selected phrases or sentences from a variety of literary sources, including

artists to mostly deliver something that can be contained, in the American way they won't let you do that. And yet it was,

Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Jean Genet, and Mary Shelley. Sources for Ligon's explorations of identity range from Ellison's Invisible Man and Shelley's Frankenstein to The New York Times' s portrayals of the eight young men accused of raping a jogger in Central Park.

Ligon's ruggedly elegant paint surfaces and evocative texts combine to make some of the most impressive new paintings of this decade. The artist was born and grew up in the South Bronx, attending private schools. He graduated from Wesleyan University in 1982. Not surprisingly, issues of identity have interested the artist since childhood. Of particular concern to Ligon is the notion of "coming to voice" or "having to learn to express yourself in someone else's language." This has also been a preoccupation of many contemporary writers who address issues of cultural and political oppression, including such influential lesbian poets as Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich. Ligon quotes Lorde, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."  

For a number of years Ligon was exclusively an abstract painter. His participation during 1985 in the Whitney Museum of
American Art Independent Studies Program, known for its emphasis on theoretical texts and its encouragement of an analytical critique of both art and the art world, seems to have politicized Ligon's relationship to his own work. Soon after completing this program, he began to wrestle with the fact that in pursuing abstraction "too much of my life was left out when I walked into the studio." Reconciliation for Ligon came through the introduction of language into his work.

The thirteen works that make up his Dreambook Series (1988-1990) mark a graceful transition from Ligon's years as an abstract painter to his better known recent works, which feature language on the front line. The Dreambook paintings offer both abstract painting and referential meanings. Each work presents a beautiful, lushly painted monochromatic surface. As a group they demonstrate Ligon's accomplishments as a painter just at the moment of his decision to relegate his painting virtuosity, strictly and sometimes literally, to the background. Equally important in each of these works are the stencilled words and

three-digit numeral combinations that are featured against the painted ground.

For many viewers, these words and numbers may seem enigmatic both separately and in their pairings, one to the other. Ligon has taken these images from actual Dreambooks, commonly available in African-American urban centers. These popular, pocket-size publications allow individuals to look up key images from their dreams and find ready interpretations. Each subject is linked also to a three-digit number, allowing the reader to "play one's dream" in the widely syndicated (but not legally sanctioned) numbers game. Given the Dreambook Series's genesis in such a culturally specific reference, Ligon joins a noteworthy tradition of self-assured African-American artists -- from Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker to Julie Dash and Carrie Mae Weems -- who affectionately embrace the vernacular in African-American cultures, despite its unfamiliarity to other audiences. These artists are first addressing those conversant with the rich diversity in African-American communities, though others will find the work meaningful. Such assertions of cultural identity in mainstream venues challenge -- more than does either theory or
polemics -- the dominance of Eurocentric cultures.

Well read and widely read, Ligon has always been a fast and voracious reader. He often rereads favorite books and has enjoyed doing so since childhood. This practice is translated into his recent work. Usually, each of Ligon's paintings feature one brief quote that he hand-stencils and repeats, again and again, line by line, and edge to edge, over the entire surface of the work.

Using a plastic stencil of the alphabet and working the canvas from the top to the bottom, Ligon welcomes the way the letters and words become increasingly smudged and even obliterated as his stencil collects and drags the wet oilstick downward. Says Ligon, "I spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to keep this smearing from happening, until I realized that it was interesting. It seemed to coincide with my way of reading the text, my way of obsessively rereading. The idea of saying something over and over and not being heard. The idea of being heard and not being heard."5 The effect of this process is a many-layered, viscerally commanding surface in which paint and language face off, each

on of the black experience. But way that you can deal with it is

asserting a variety of meanings. Ligon is pleased that any viewer "will readily know how these paintings were made... The act of writing is the only thing that makes the painting."6 He cites painter Frank Stella's often quoted statement, "What you see is what you get."

Ligon's paintings frequently measure 80" x 30", taking their dimensions from the discarded hollow-core doors he once inherited when using a studio at P.S. 1. Three of these original paintings on doors are in this exhibition: Untitled (I do not always feel colored) (1990); Untitled (I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background) (1990); and Untitled (I remember the very day that I became colored) (1991). He points out that these works combine "found language" with "found objects."7 For Ligon, "The door is shaped for the human body, and it has an immediate, familiar resonance."8 He has subsequently used these same measurements with canvas and, most recently, with linen. These dimensions also approximate the vertical rectangle of a printed page.

There is an interesting paradox in Ligon's repetition of texts. It is a device that simultaneously underlines and undermines
meaning. Ligon intends it to draw the viewer's attention to the work, and it does. Repetition emphasizes, giving the words power. But, ironically, this repetition also becomes chant-like, blurring the original meaning just as the text is literally blurred when the stencil moves accumulated paint down the surface. After reading numerous repetitions of the same words, the viewer is likely to stop reading and to start seeing the text. At that point, the viewer visually breaks the text into pieces and brings additional associations to the painting. In his repetition of the text, Ligon not only allows the viewer to engage with the author's original idea but also offers an opportunity to think and feel a variety of uncharted personal responses to parts of sentences and, even, parts of words.

The text, increasingly obscured as it moves down the painting, modestly and somewhat mysteriously draws a veil over itself. Communication is occluded. Contemporary students of language have made a case that there is a constant slippage between text and meaning, that signification is unstable and negotiable, the vocabulary won't hold it, so by doing great violence to the to a corner; you've written you depending on who is speaking and who is reading. These large paintings by Ligon facilitate for the viewer an intimate understanding of the deconstructivist quandary over the elusiveness of meaning.

In the Prisoner of Love series (1992), Ligon uses a quote from Jean Genet's last book (of the same name) published in 1986. In this text, Genet, a well known French writer who, as a gay man, artist, and former criminal, identified himself as an "outsider," explores the dilemmas that face stateless Palestinians and blacks in the United States. Intending to express solidarity with the culturally marginalized yet central position of African Americans, Genet writes, "They are the ink that gives the white page a meaning." Not surprisingly, Ligon, for whom literature is of great import, is drawn to Genet's poignant metaphor that uses the imagery of language and printed text. But Ligon, in an act of what he calls "cultural translation," changes the pronoun from they to we to fit his own viewpoint as a black American: "We are the ink that gives the white page a meaning." Ligon makes a significant intervention in Genet's text: he chooses to inhabit, to re-personalize the text, and, in so doing, he reminds us what's
at stake. "They" is a demographic entity. "We" suggests to the reader how many heartbeats make up the African-American communities. Ligon puts breath into the text.

Next, in a move that seems to mark an important shift in Ligon's relationship to borrowed texts, he alters the quote even further: "Why must we be the ink that gives the white page a meaning? ". Here Ligon becomes an inquisitor, interrogating the text and actively contesting nothing less than the current political order. The use of a question reasserts the idea that meaning is not fixed but is continually being constructed and challenged. Fixed meaning is understood to be one way in which the dominant culture maintains its dominance.

Language in art has a rich history in the twentieth century. The surrealists explored language extensively, largely through the aleatory, engaging chance and welcoming the unexpected. In recent years, contemporary artists have consciously appropriated language (and images) for their own use. Here Ligon has appropriated Genet's text for his own purposes. Appropriation is

simply. No true account really
the assumptions on which the
urself into a corner.

the seizure of power, and power taken is of a different strength and character than power given.

Pursuing a continuing interest in "making language concrete," Ligon has created his first wall drawing in this exhibition. He features a quote from James Baldwin in which, near the close of his life, the celebrated author describes the restrictive expectations imposed by whites on black artists to deliver "an official version of the black experience. . .when you go along, you find yourself quickly painted into a corner; you've written yourself into a corner." Ligon has aptly configured a right-angled wall drawing, in which he physically enacts Baldwin's words by both painting and writing into the corner, not by coercion but by choice. Placing visitors to his exhibition into conversation with Baldwin's quote, Ligon effectively paints and writes himself out of a corner.

Andrea Miller-Keller
Curator of Contemporary Art
7 Conversation, 13 February 1992.
10 Conversation, 7 August 1992.
13 For Ligon, it is additionally significant that his wall drawing is just one room away from an important wall drawing by Sol LeWitt.

PLEASE NOTE:
Glenn Ligon will deliver a MATRIX lecture about his work on Sunday, September 20, 1992 at 2:00 p.m. in the Aetna Theater. A reception in his honor will follow the talk. This event is free with museum admission.

Works in MATRIX:

Dreambook Series, all of the following works are oil on paper, 30" x 22 1/4":

 No. 000 (Inside Looking Out), 1989. Private Collection, New York City.
 No. 167 (Sailors), 1989. Private Collection, New York City.
Untitled (How It Feels to Be Colored Me), 1991
No. 121 (Negro), 1990. Courtesy of the artist and Max Protetch Gallery.
No. 333 (History), 1990. Collection of Emily Fisher Landau, Long Island City, NY.
No. 348 (Speechless), 1990. Collection of Emily Fisher Landau, Long Island City, NY.
No. 511 (Honey), 1990. Private Collection, New York City.
No. 752 (Colored People), 1990. Collection of Emily Fisher Landau, Long Island City, NY.


Untitled (I do not always feel colored), 1990, oil and gesso on wood panel, 80" x 30". Lent by The Bohen Foundation, New York City, promised gift to the Whitney Museum of American Art in honor of Thomas Armstrong, New York City. (Text from Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," 1928.)

Untitled (I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background), 1990, oil and gesso on wood panel, 80" x 30". Collection of Max Protetch, New York City. (Text from Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," 1928.)

Untitled (I remember the very day that I became colored), 1991, oil and gesso on wood panel, 80" x 30". Collection of George C. Wolfe, New York City. (Text from Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," 1928.)

Untitled (How It Feels to Be Colored Me), 1991, oil on canvas, 80" x 30". Collection of Linda and Ronald F. Daitz, New York City. (Text from Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," 1928.)

Prisoner of Love #1 (We are the ink that gives the white page a meaning), 1992, oil and gesso on linen, 80" x 30". Lent by The Bohen Foundation, New York City.

Prisoner of Love #2 (Why must we be the ink that gives the white page a meaning?), 1992, oil and gesso on linen, 80" x
30". Lent by The Bohen Foundation, New York City.

Prisoner of Love #3 (They are the ink that gives the white page a meaning), 1992, oil and gesso on linen, 80" x 30". Lent by The Bohen Foundation, New York City. (Text from Jean Genet, Prisoner of Love, 1986.)

Prologue Series, all of the following works are oil, gouache, and pencil on paper, 20" x 16". Courtesy of the artist and Max Protetch Gallery. (Texts from Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, 1952):

Prologue Series #9, 1992.
Prologue Series #12, 1992.

Untitled (James Baldwin), 1992, acrylic, oil, and pencil on wall in MATRIX, approximately 10'3" x 10'. Courtesy of the artist and Max Protetch Gallery. (Text based on James Baldwin in Quincy Troupe, "Last Testament: An Interview with James Baldwin," 1988.)

Selected One-Person Exhibitions:

BACA Downtown, Brooklyn, NY How It Feels to Be Colored Me '90; P.S. 1 Museum, Institute for Contemporary Art, Long Island City, NY Glenn Ligon: Winter Exhibition Series '90; White Columns, NYC Glenn Ligon '91; Jack Tilton Gallery, NYC '91; Max Protetch Gallery, NYC '92; Whitney Museum of American Art at Phillip Morris, NYC Good Mirrors Are Not Cheap '92.

Selected Group Exhibitions:

Bronx Museum of the Arts, Bronx, NY Artists in the Market Place '84; Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Studies Program, NYC Student Exhibition '85; The Drawing Center, NYC Selections 46 '89; P.S.1 Museum at The Clocktower, NYC Public Mirror, Art Against Racism '90; El Bohio, NYC Art of Resistance '90; Stedman Art Gallery, Rutgers University, Camden, NJ Rutgers
National '90 Works on Paper '90; Salena Art Gallery, Long Island University, Brooklyn, NY Works on Paper '90; The New Museum of Contemporary Art at Marine Midland Bank, NYC Spent: Currency, Security and Art on Deposit '90; P.S. 122 Gallery, NYC New Work '91; Soho Center for Visual Artists, NYC Text Out of Context '91; Art in General, NYC Positions of Authority '91; The Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University, NYC Interrogating Identity '91 (traveled also to Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA '91; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN '91-'92; Madison Art Center, Madison, WI '92, and Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College, Oberlin, OH '92); Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC 1991 Biennial Exhibition; White Columns, NYC We Interrupt Your Regularly Scheduled Programming '91; Amalie A. Wallace Gallery, State University of New York at Old Westbury, NY Color Theory: Renée Green, Byron Kim, Glenn Ligon '91; University Art Museum, University of California at Santa Barbara Knowledge: Aspects of Conceptual Art '92; Hayward Gallery, London, England Doubletake: Collective Memory and Current Art '92; The Museum of Modern Art, NYC Allegories of Modernism: Contemporary Drawing '92.

Untitled (I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background) detail, 1990

Selected Bibliography about Glenn Ligon:


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