

Wadsworth Atheneum  
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

*Glenn Ligon / MATRIX 120*  
*August 30 - November 15, 1992*

**You see, whites want black a  
of black life can be held, can  
vocabulary is based. But they**

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## 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  
"The Burning of Paper Instead of Children," 1968

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  
be contained, in the American  
y won't let you do that. And w**

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"<sup>1</sup> or "having to learn to express yourself in someone else's language."<sup>2</sup> 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."<sup>3</sup>

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."<sup>4</sup> 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

ng as if it were an official versi  
vocabulary. As it is, the only v  
when you go along, you find y

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."<sup>5</sup> 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 yourself very quickly painted in

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."<sup>6</sup> 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."<sup>7</sup> For Ligon, "The door is shaped for the human body, and it has an immediate, familiar resonance."<sup>8</sup> 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, s  
by doing great violence to th  
to a corner; you've written yo**

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,"<sup>10</sup> 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

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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,"<sup>11</sup> 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."<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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

- <sup>1</sup> Glenn Ligon. In conversation with Andrea Miller-Keller, 13 February, 1992.
- <sup>2</sup> Conversation, 13 February, 1992.
- <sup>3</sup> Audre Lorde. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984, p. 112.
- <sup>4</sup> Ligon in Roberta Smith, "Lack of Location is My Location," *The New York Times* June 16, 1991, p. H27.
- <sup>5</sup> Ligon in a published interview with Jennifer Huget, June 1992, *Atheneum* Autumn 1992, p.6.
- <sup>6</sup> Conversation, 13 February 1992.
- <sup>7</sup> Conversation, 13 February 1992.
- <sup>8</sup> Ligon, *Atheneum*, Autumn 1992.
- <sup>9</sup> Glenn Ligon. In conversation with Andrea Miller-Keller, 7 August 1992.
- <sup>10</sup> Conversation, 7 August 1992.
- <sup>11</sup> Conversation, 13 February 1992.
- <sup>12</sup> Quincy Troupe. "Last Testament: An Interview with James Baldwin," in *Conversations with James Baldwin* by Fred L. Standley and Louis H-Pratt. Oxford, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1989, p. 285.
- <sup>13</sup> 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. 291** (*Language*), 1988. Collection of Emily Fisher Landau, Long Island City, NY.

**No. 316** (*European*), 1988. Collection of Emily Fisher Landau, Long Island City, NY.

**No. 000** (*Inside Looking Out*), 1989. Private Collection, New York City.

**No. 167** (*Sailors*), 1989. Private Collection, New York City.





No. 121 (*Negro*), 1990. Courtesy of the artist and Max Protetch Gallery.

No. 276 (*Honeycomb*), 1990. Collection of Emily Fisher Landau, Long Island City, NY.

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. 417 (*Sweetheart*), 1990. Collection of Emily Fisher Landau, Long Island City, NY.

No. 511 (*Honey*), 1990. Private Collection, New York City.

No. 609 (*Numbers*), 1990. Collection of Emily Fisher Landau, Long Island City, NY.

No. 752 (*Colored People*), 1990. Collection of Emily Fisher Landau, Long Island City, NY.

No. 762 (*Man*), 1990. Collection of Emily Fisher Landau, Long Island City, NY.

**Untitled**, 1990, oil and acrylic on paper, 37" x 30".  
Collection of Max Protetch, New York City. (Text from James Baldwin in David Estes, "An Interview with James Baldwin," 1986.)

**Untitled** (*I do not always feel colored*), 1990, oil and gesso on wood panel, 80" x 30". Lent by The Bohlen 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 Bohlen 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 #2**, 1991.

**Prologue Series #5**, 1991.

**Prologue Series #7**, 1991.

**Prologue Series #9**, 1992.

**Prologue Series #10**, 1992.

**Prologue Series #11**, 1992.

**Prologue Series #12**, 1992.

**Prologue Series #13**, 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*



- Kimmelman, Michael. "At the Whitney, a Biennial That's Eager to Please," *The New York Times* April 19, 1991, p. C1+.
- "Interrogating Identity," *The New Yorker* April 29, 1991, p. 18.
- Harris, Patty. "Artists and Minority Identity," *Downtown* May 29, 1991, p. 22A+.
- Smith, Roberta. "Interrogating Identity," *The New York Times* May 17, 1991, p. C26.
- Nesbitt, Lois. "Interrogating Identity," *Artforum* vol. 29 no. 10 (Summer '91), p. 115.
- Smith, Roberta. "Lack of Location is My Location," *The New York Times* June 16, 1991, p. H27.
- Aletti, Vince. "Choices," *The Village Voice* June 18, 1991, p. 99.
- Larson, Kay. "A Shock to the System," *New York Magazine* July 29, 1991, p. 51.
- Temin, Christine. "The Art of Questioning Identity," *The Boston Globe* August 4, 1991, p. A1+.
- Temin, Christine. "Interrogating Identity: The View from the Outside," *The Boston Globe* August 13, 1991, p. 49+.
- Harrison, Helen. "Skin Pigmentation as a Determinant of Attitudes," *The New York Times*, Sunday, December 1, 1991, sec. 12 p. 22.
- Colpitt, Frances, and Phyllis Plous. *Knowledge: Aspects of Conceptual Art* (exhibition catalogue), University Art Museum at Santa Barbara (Santa Barbara, CA), 1992, p. 19+.
- Hilty, Greg. "Thrown Voices," *Doubletake: Collective Memory and Current Art* (exhibition catalogue), Hayward Gallery (London, England), 1992, p. 16+.
- Rose, Bernice. *Allegories of Modernism: Contemporary Drawing* (exhibition catalogue), The Museum of Modern Art (New York, NY), 1992, p. 107.
- Alemayehu, Louis, et al. "Interrogating 'Identity,'" *Artpaper* vol. 11 no. 6 (February '92), p. 13+.

### ***Selected Bibliography by Glenn Ligon:***

- Ligon, Glenn. "Profiles," *Third Text* no. 14 (Spring '91), p. 53+.
- Ligon, Glenn. "Insert: Glenn Ligon," *Parkett* no. 30 (December '91), p. 139+.

Text on front panels based on James Baldwin in David Estes, "An Interview with James Baldwin," 1986.