



Glenn Ligon

Glenn Ligon is an American conceptual artist whose work explores race, language, desire, sexuality, and identity. Ligon engages in intertextuality with other works from the visual arts, literature, and history, as well as his own life. Ligon's work is greatly informed by his experiences as an African American and as a gay man living in the United States.

Ligon was born in 1960 in the Bronx. At the age of 7, his divorced, working-class parents got a scholarship for him and his brother to attend Walden School. Ligon graduated from Wesleyan University with a B.A. in 1982. After graduating, he worked as a proof-reader for a law firm, while in his spare time he painted in the abstract Expressionist style of Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock. In 1985, he participated in the Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Program. He currently lives and works in New York City.

Untitled: Four Etchings, 1992

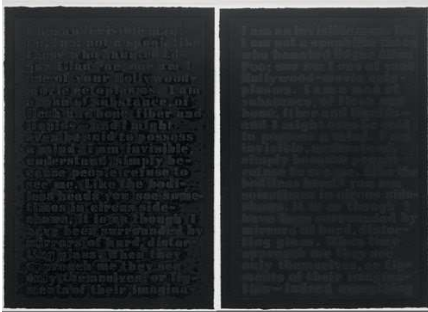
Etching with soft-ground, aquatint, spitbite, and sugar lift

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MIA Label

Glenn Ligon's art mines the history of African-American culture, from slave narratives to the "Million Man March" on Washington, D.C. In this portfolio of four untitled aquatints, Ligon addresses the issue of lingering racism in America by appropriating passages from the writings of renowned black authors. The two prints with black text on white paper feature excerpts from Zora Neale Hurston's 1928 essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me." Ligon writes, "The prints play with the notion of becoming 'colored' and how that 'becoming' obscures meaning and also created this beautiful, abstract thing." The pair of prints with black text printed on black paper feature an excerpt from Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel "Invisible Man," which describes blacks in America as ghosts, present and real, but remaining unseen because of pervasive racism. Together, the four prints symbolically represent the continued separation between the races.



<https://www.nga.gov/collection/gallery/ggafamer/ggafamer-129857.html>

From the Tour: African American Artists: Collection Highlights

African-American artists working in the 1980s and 1990s often focused on black identity as culturally and socially constructed. Artists including Glenn Ligon moved from using the black figure to employing text as a way to explore perceptions and understandings of race. In *Untitled: Four Etchings [A–D]*, Ligon quotes from Zora Neale Hurston's essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" (1928) and Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952). Selections from both literary works are written in the first person, often repeating the word "I." In the process of deciphering the text, the viewer becomes the "I" and thus inhabits the person questioning himself/herself and his/her identity.

Untitled: Four Etchings [A] (above) and *[B]* repeat, over and over, sentences from Hurston's essay: "I do not always feel colored" [A] and "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background" [B]. As the viewer reads, the texts become increasingly difficult to decipher. Smudged and broken type interferes with legibility, suggesting the viewer's literal and intellectual struggle to read the sentence and understand its implications.

Etchings *[C]* and *[D]*, both black type on black paper, also make the reader work to comprehend the meaning. Their nearly identical texts taken from Ellison's monumental novel are almost indiscernible—"invisible" like the story's protagonist.

Text [C]:

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus side-shows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only themselves, or figments of their imagina-

Text [D] is the same, except that it ends:

...figments of their imagination—indeed everything

Although Ligon's work spans sculptures, prints, drawings, mixed media and even neon signs, painting remains a core activity. His paintings incorporate literary fragments, jokes, and evocative quotes from a selection of authors, which he stencils directly onto the canvas by hand. In 1989, he mounted his first solo show, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," in Brooklyn. This show established Ligon's reputation for creating large, text-based paintings in which a phrase chosen from literature or other sources is repeated over and over, eventually dissipating into murk. *Untitled (I Am a Man)* (1988), a reinterpretation of the signs carried during the Memphis Sanitation Strike in 1968 — made famous by Ernest Withers's photographs of the march —, is the first example of his use of text.



Ligon gained prominence in the early 1990s along with a generation of artists like Lorna Simpson, Gary Simmons, and Janine Antoni. In 1993, Ligon began the first of three series of gold-colored paintings based on Richard Pryor's groundbreaking stand-up comedy routines from the

1970s. The scatological and racially charged jokes Ligon depicts speak in the vernacular language of the street and reveal a complex and nuanced vision of black culture.

In 1994, the art installation *To Disembark* was shown at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. The title alludes to the title of a book of poetry by Gwendolyn Brooks. "To Disembark" functions in both works to evoke the recognition that African Americans are still coping with the remnants of slavery and its ongoing manifestation in racism. In another part of the exhibition, Ligon stenciled four quotes from a Zora Neale Hurston essay, "how it feels to be colored me," directly on the walls: "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background," "I remember the very day that I became colored," "I am not tragically colored," and "I do not always feel colored." Ligon found Hurston's writing illuminating because she explores the idea of race as a concept that is structured by context rather than essence.

In *A Feast of Scraps* (1994–98), he inserted pornographic and stereotypical photographs of black men, complete with invented captions ("mother knew," "I fell out" "It's a process") into albums of family snapshots including graduation photographs, vacation snapshots, pictures of baby showers, birthday celebrations, and baptisms, some of which include the artist's own family. Like almost all of Ligon's art, this project draws out the secret histories and submerged meanings of inherited texts and images.

For *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* (1991–93), Ligon separately framed 91 erotic photographs of black males cut from Robert Mapplethorpe's 1988 "Black Book," installing them in two horizontal rows. Between them are two more rows of small framed typed texts, 78 comments on sexuality, race, AIDS, art and the politically inflamed controversy over Mapplethorpe's work launched by then-Texas Congressman Dick Arme. Another series of large paintings was based on children's interpretations of 1970s black-history coloring books.



Since 2005, Ligon has made neon works. *Warm Broad Glow* (2005), Ligon's first exploration in neon, uses a fragment of text from *Three Lives*, the 1909 novel by American author Gertrude Stein. Ligon rendered the words "negro sunshine" in warm white neon, the letters of which were then painted black on the front. In 2008, the piece was selected to participate in the Renaissance Society's group exhibit, "Black Is, Black Ain't" and appeared on the Whitney Museum's facade in 2011.

In 2009, Ligon completed short film based on Thomas Edison's 1903 silent film *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Playing the character of Tom, Ligon had himself filmed re-creating the last scene of Edison's movie, which also provided his film's title: "The Death of Tom." But the film was incorrectly loaded in the hand-crank camera that the artist used so no imagery appeared on film. Embracing this apparent failure, Ligon decided to show his film as an abstract progression of lights and darks with a narrative suggested by the score composed and played by jazz musician Jason Moran.

Ligon's work has been the subject of exhibitions throughout the United States and Europe. Recent solo exhibitions include the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2000).

In 2012, Ligon was commissioned to create the first site-specific artwork for the New School's University Center building, designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, on the corner of 14th Street and Fifth Avenue in Greenwich Village. The work will feature about 400 feet of text from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* rendered in pink neon lights, running around the top of a wall in the center's first-floor café.

In 2009, President Barack Obama added Ligon's 1992 *Black Like Me No. 2*, on loan from the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, to the White House collection, where it was installed in the President's private living quarters. The text in the selected painting is from John Howard Griffin's 1961 memoir *Black Like Me*, the account of a white man's experiences traveling through the South after he had his skin artificially darkened. The words "All traces of the Griffin I had been were wiped from existence" are repeated in capital letters that progressively overlap until they coalesce as a field of black paint.

