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Glenn Ligon and Post-Civil Rights America

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Glenn Ligon's body of work, as assayed in his current Whitney retrospective, is one big series of unanswered questions about autobiography, race, identity, history, and art. From his early painting reworking the Civil Rights placard "I AM a Man," through giant, cryptic silkscreens depicting Louis Farrakhan's Million Man March, to recent neons that proclaim the flickering, ambiguous word "America" — supposedly some kind of sideways commentary on the mixed feelings triggered by Obama in office — the show is, as a whole, evocative but inscrutable. Its underlying message is hard to read, like the words in Ligon's signature paintings, which center on blurry, politically charged text fragments.

Some actual biography helps, though. Start here: At the age of six, Ligon was sent from his home in a Bronx housing project to attend Manhattan's progressive, arts-focused, and mainly white Walden School. That was 1966, just two years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act. Ligon would graduate from Walden in 1977, the same year that Howard Cosell announced that "the Bronx is burning" and the unfinished business of the Civil Rights movement bloomed into looting and chaos during the New York City blackout.

Ligon was by all accounts a sensitive kid, thrust into a situation that would make anyone self-conscious. He was also a preternaturally bright, if prickly, student. He went on to study art at the Rhode Island School of Design and then Wesleyan. By the mid-'80s, he was back in New York, making belated Abstract Expressionist painting as an admitted way to escape worldly concerns: "When I first started making art, paintings was one of the few spaces in my life where I felt free," he has said. Nevertheless, he became ensconced in the Whitney Independent Study Program, which pushed radical philosophy and politics, and this spurred him to merge his love of expressionism with the burgeoning conceptual interest in "identity art."

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Ligon became an established artistic commodity through two series of works shown in two successive Whitney Biennials (both on view in the current show): the 1991 installment showcased his "door paintings," which consist of tall white doors, each one printed with a single phrase about race that, repeatedly stenciled in black, becomes more and more blurry and illegible as it descends the surface: "I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background," for instance, a line from Zora Neale Hurston, or "I Am Somebody," a quote from Jesse Jackson.

But Ligon's defining piece is probably "Notes on the Margin of the Black Book," shown at Elisabeth Sussman's infamous 1993 "identity politics" biennial. Now leaping from painting into full-on photoconceptualist mode, Ligon offered a total appropriation of Robert Mapplethorpe's "Black Book," which consisted of in-your-face erotic images of gleaming, muscly African-American men. Ligon accompanied each appropriated page in the room-filling installation with small printed quotations that collectively represented the broad panorama of reactions to the controversial portfolio, from lefty denunciations of Mapplethorpe's exoticization of Black men, to poisonous Culture Wars-inspired right-wing vitriol, to reactions to the pics from patrons of a gay bar.

The rhetoric of political righteousness was in many ways thrust upon Ligon's work by the climate of this particular moment. Race was, after all, back in the news with a vengeance in the early '90s. The beating of Rodney King touched off days of bloody riots in Los Angeles in 1992. Sussman even showed the video of the police assault on King in the 1993 Biennial, thus branding the whole exhibition as an urgent response to the demons of discrimination.

Yet Ligon's work does not sit easily within such clean lines. Almost all of his art functions as a kind of conceptual double-negative, engaging with the subject matter of identity only to undercut the supposition that he is saying something clear-cut about it, offering a loaded reference and then holding it at ironic distance. The "door paintings" are illustrations of slogans beset by entropy; his "Black Book" work is confessedly about the idea that it was "too limiting" to call the Mapplethorpe works racist. Most emblematically, his image of Malcolm X from 2000 is a silkscreen of a page of the '60s leader from a coloring book, colored in by children unfamiliar with Malcolm's legacy, thereby rendering him a clown, an alien.

Another series of works is meant to mimic the frontispieces of the autobiographies of escaped slaves, only tweaked to be autobiographies of Ligon himself. One of these advertises itself as "Containing a Full and Faithful Account of His [Ligon's] Commodification of the Horrors of Black Life Into Art Objects for the Public's Enjoyment." This is an acerbic joke, in essence comparing the role of the African-American political artist to a modern-day minstrel. Taken seriously, it puts a question mark beside the whole show and any attempt to give it a progressive reading.

How to assess all this? It's easy to say that Ligon's work about identity is hard to pin down because, you know, identity is fluid — but it is not so fluid that he doesn't return compulsively to the same questions again and again. Glenn Ligon's work traces the borders of a contemporary intellectual dilemma about race and racism. The battles of the Civil Rights movement of his youth made possible a certain degree of integration in U.S. society, and gave a voice to a strata of middle-class African-Americans, Ligon included (and Obama for that matter, who put a piece by Ligon in the White House). Yet he gained artistic maturity in the era of Reagan and the long backlash against these gains; the wave of the '60s advanced only so far and then receded, leaving behind problems of vast structural inequality that America has yet to deal with. Race remains a tragically relevant issue; commentary is expected. And yet the legacy left by those who have spoken out about race in the past appears equivocal — so you "problematize" the issue. The result is a form of disillusion couched as sophistication.

Ligon has a well-known affinity for James Baldwin, a logical reference point as a fellow gay African-American intellectual. In a series of text paintings that forms the heart of the Whitney show, Ligon appropriates Baldwin's essay "A Stranger in the Village," about the experience of alienation as an African American living abroad. But whereas the anger of Baldwin's essay is radiantly lucid, Ligon's paintings render the text illegible, buried under layers of sludge made from coal dust.

Baldwin was the product of the Civil Rights generation; Ligon, its unresolved aftermath. Tellingly, one particular painting in Ligon's series leaves a gaping void at the center, cutting a hole in the very

text that is its subject matter. As the show's curator Scott Rothkopf notes, the artist considers this voided piece to be a "self-portrait." It is a metaphor for historical consciousness that has moved on, perhaps, but not necessarily turned the page.

[Interventions](#) is a weekly column by ARTINFO deputy editor Ben Davis. He can be reached at bdavis@artinfo.com

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