

'Lack of Location Is My Location'

LIGON, GLENN

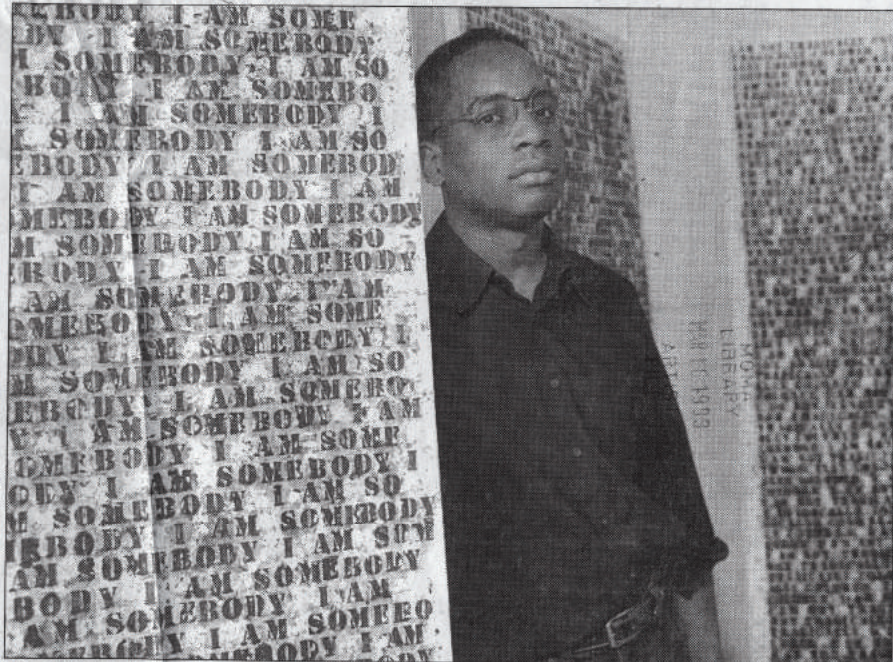
By ROBERTA SMITH

GLENN LIGON'S WAY WITH words — other people's words — is bringing him a lot of attention these days. At the moment, the work of this 31-year-old artist can be seen in the Whitney Museum of American Art's Biennial exhibition and in a group show at Art in General, a gallery at 79 Walker Street in the TriBeCa section of Manhattan. Five paintings will be shown in July at the Jack Tilton Gallery on 57th Street. "Interrogating Identity," a group show that includes nine paintings by Mr. Ligon and was initiated by the Grey Art Gallery and Study Center at New York University, will travel to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis later this year.

The "found language" that Mr. Ligon chooses for his lush yet quietly confrontational paintings focuses on the experience of being black. An avid reader since childhood, he selects words, phrases or short sentences that "stay in my head and have a kind of poetic resonance." They may come from a poem by Rita Dove, the writings of Zora Neale Hurston or newspaper coverage of the Central Park jogger case. "I remember the very day that I became colored" — a phrase from a Hurston essay called "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" — is stenciled more than 60 times in black paint on a white ground in one work at the Whitney. (Mr. Ligon paints on doors because of the way their proportions evoke the human body.) "Passing," the title of a 1929 novel by Nella Larsen, is the repeating word in a painting to be shown at Tilton.

After graduation from Westeyan in 1982, Mr. Ligon, who now lives in Brooklyn, began his career as an abstract painter. By the mid-1980's he felt that "too much of my life was left out when I walked into the studio." A year in the Whitney Museum's independent study program — notorious for its radical political stance — left him with an interest in art concerned with social issues. He began to think about ways to use language to insinuate the black experience into painting. "I'm interested in making language into a physical thing," he says, "making it have this real weight and force to it."

Mr. Ligon's best efforts negotiate an unusually effective course between the visual and the linguistic, the visceral and the cerebral, and the personal and the political. The fields of repeating words convey anger, hon-



Nancy Siesel for The New York Times

Glenn Ligon with several of his works—lush yet quietly confrontational paintings that focus on the experience of being black

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esty and dignity without being accusatory. The repetition gives the language tremendous power; it doesn't so much make a simple statement as delineate a complex psychic condition. Mr. Ligon confesses to having "this obsessiveness about reading" and to repeatedly rereading the few books he found at home when he was growing up: "I'm not interested in saying it just once." With repeated use of the stencil, the

paint begins to clot and smear, mutating the simple black-and-white contrast into myriad shades of gray and the words into semi-legibility. The resulting visual static can remind you of a decaying gravestone or the burnout on a video screen. But mainly the accumulating grays seem appropriate for an artist who says he's "not interested in a clear pro or con."

"I grew up living in a housing project in the South Bronx and attending a private school on the West Side," he says. (Through his mother's persistence, he and

his brother had scholarships from the first grade on.) "Lack of location is my location. I'm always shifting opinions and changing my mind."

Does Mr. Ligon consider himself a political artist? "I don't have any problem with the term if it means you're doing art about real life and about what's most important to you. But sometimes it's used as a pejorative to criticize work that pushes a specific agenda. I hope my work is more open-ended, more about questioning positions than establishing a single position." □

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