

ART VIEW/Holland Cotter

Stories About Race, Politics and Himself

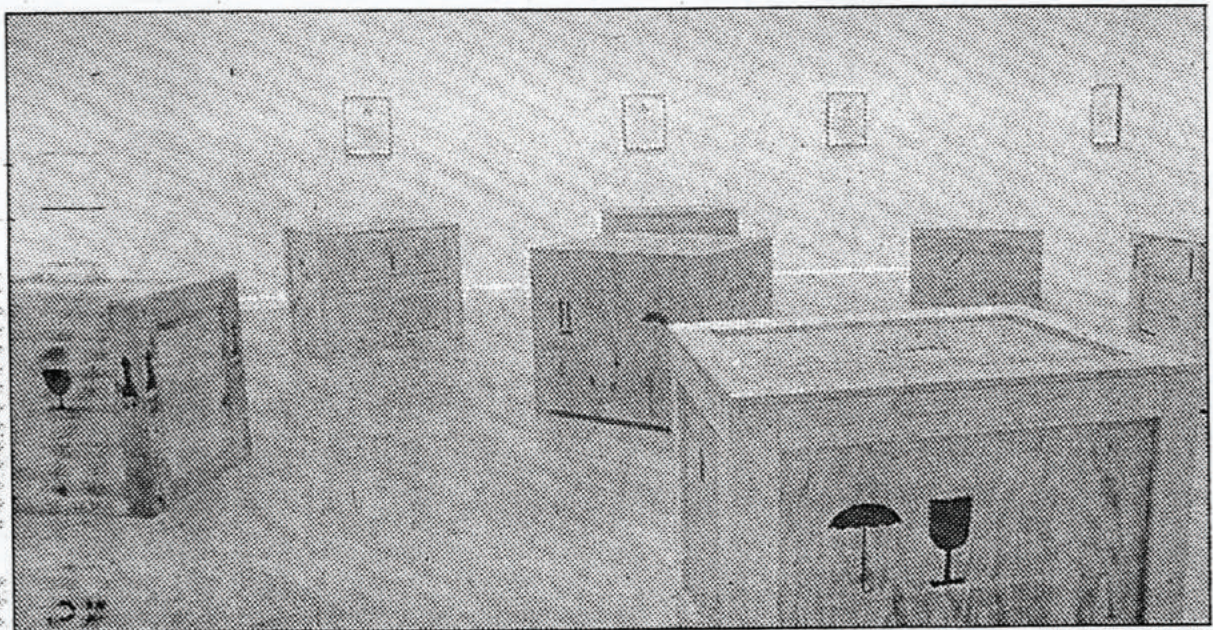
GLENN LIGON, 37, IS ONE OF the more visible members of a generation of young American artists who in the 1990's have been intent on injecting a new content — personal, political, racial, sexual — into art.

His work has taken pride of place in some of the decade's more contentious and memorable shows. For the 1993 Biennial at the Whitney Museum, for example, he produced an elaborate installation of photographs and texts examining the racist implications of Robert Mapplethorpe's genitally fixated homoerotic pictures of black men.

In "Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary Art" at the same museum, he offered a series of eight paint-

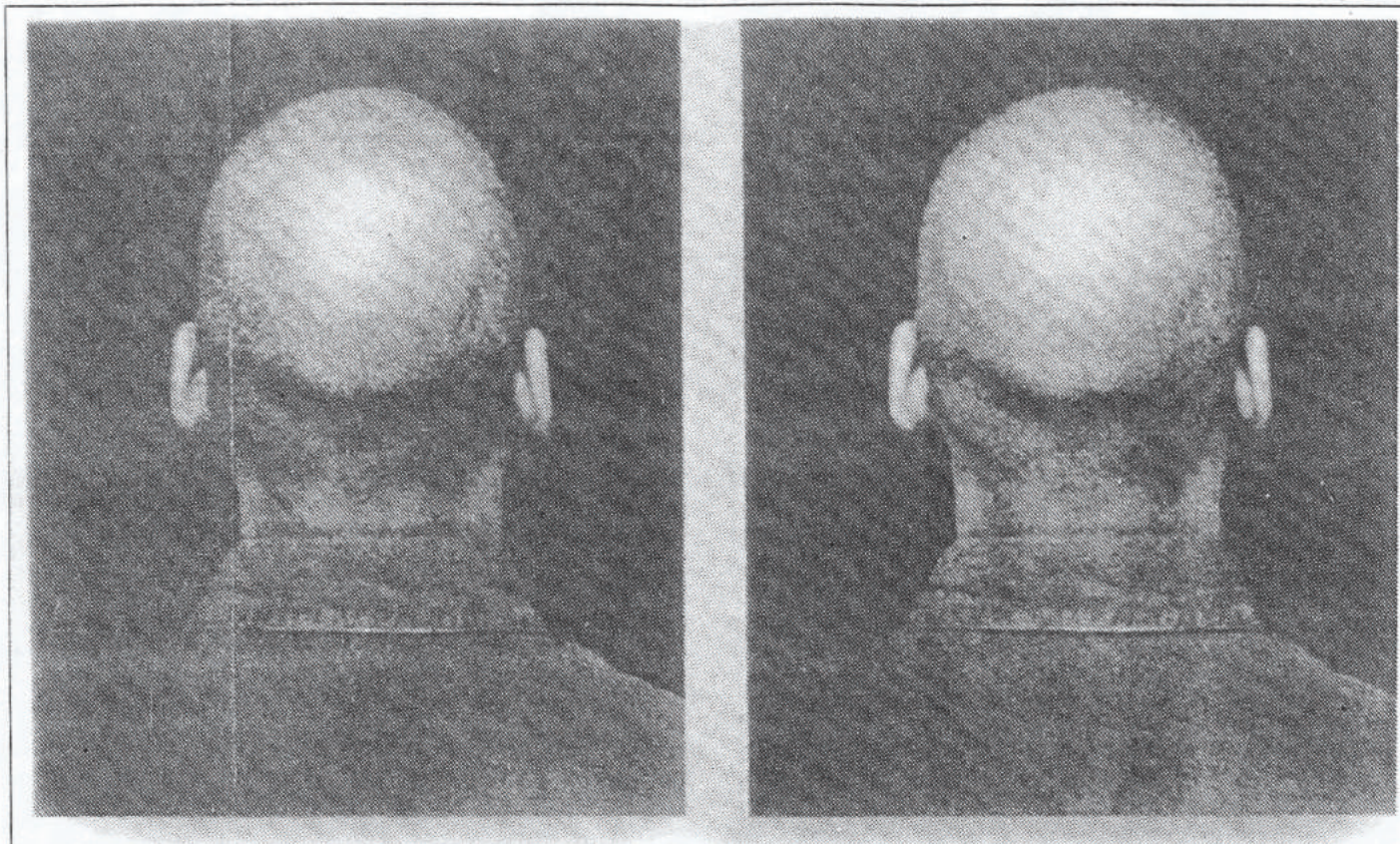
ings in which newspaper profiles of the teenage black and Hispanic defendants in the Central Park Jogger case were stenciled in oil stick on canvas. The results had the lush, hands-on look of early Jasper Johns and, disturbingly, turned reportage into an object for slow, and possibly skeptical, scrutiny.

Both works are included in a tightly edited survey of the artist's career to date titled "Glenn Ligon: Unbecoming," on view at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia through March 8. The show, organized by Judith Tannenbaum, the curator of the Institute, is a hybrid affair: less than a retrospective, more than an update. But by bringing together for the first time a selection of works from 1988 to the present, it gives a sense of the shape and texture of the



Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden

CN SLAVERY The artist's 1993 work "To Disembark" is on view in Philadelphia.



Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia

FACELESS "Self-Portraits," 1996, by Glenn Ligon, consists of two identical photographs of the back of the artist's head.

artist's accomplishments.

A few things are obvious. Mr. Ligon has an eye for provocative, tough-nut topical subjects and is willing to let them stay complicated. His formal touch is clean and reductive but offers a surprising degree of visual resistance, due in part to the proliferation of words that demand to be read as well as seen. His art is art-historically erudite and eclectic, with references ranging from Minimalist sculpture to conceptual installation to vernacular traditions.

Anyone who has caught his work piecemeal in recent years will have already figured out most of this. But, as overviews tend to do, the concentration of material at the I.C.A. adds something new to the mix. It shifts the emphasis away from Mr. Ligon's

**Glenn Ligon's art
may be political and
erudite, but it is
always grounded in a
gay black man's life.**

reputation as a "political" artist and reveals him, first and foremost, to be an alert and versatile storyteller.

Narratives, concentrated in a phrase or an image, are everywhere here: historical sagas, family vignettes, bits of fiction, docu-

mentary events, situational jokes. And so is autobiography: the episodic, gradually self-revealing story of Mr. Ligon's own life as a gay black man in America.

Among the earliest pieces in the exhibition is a modest-size painting from 1988 consisting of the words "I Am a Man" rendered in black letters on a scuffed white ground. The statement could be taken as coming from the artist himself (which, at some level, it is). But the painting is actually his oil-on-canvas version of a placard carried by striking black workers in Memphis in 1968, a cultural artifact encapsulating a rich and anguished history.

The text paintings that followed were more elaborately wrought and wove history,

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Race, Politics, Ligon

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fiction and personal narrative. A 1991 piece quotes the famous passage from the Ralph Ellison novel beginning "I am an invisible man." The words, drawn with stencils and black oil stick, fill the canvas from edge to edge in painterly profusion (Mr. Ligon began his career as an abstract artist) and bleed together as they descend into ashen illegibility.

Here, as in all the text paintings, one senses Mr. Ligon speaking through other voices, vicariously living other lives, while keeping himself at a remove. But in 1993, he started to appear in the work directly.

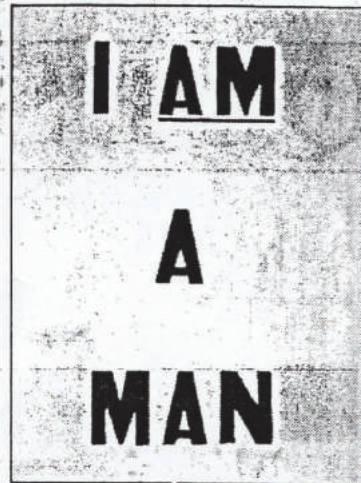
In a series of prints imitating 19th-century advertisements for the return of runaway slaves, he includes descriptions of himself written by friends. His wry recastings of abolitionist slave narratives are based on his own experiences. "The narrative of the life and uncommon sufferings of Glenn Ligon," begins one, "a colored man who at a tender age discovered his affection for the bodies of other men and has endured scorn and tribulation ever since."

The exploration of sexual identity is, in fact, Mr. Ligon's other central subject, though it has come into focus only in the last few years as he has introduced figurative images to supplement or replace texts.

Both images and words contribute to his Mapplethorpe installation at the institute. Dozens of framed pages from the photographer's "Black Book" are displayed with comments by black theorists and writers (Frantz Fanon, Isaac Julien, Bell Hooks and Kobena Mercer, among others). The interplay of racism with eroticism in the photographs is powerfully argued, though Mr. Ligon refrains from delivering a final judgment.

THE SAME RESTRAINT IS true of the installation he produced in response to the 1995 Million Man March in Washington. The gathering was conceived as an epochal public demonstration of solidarity among black men, though homosexuals, along with women, were discouraged from attending. Some gay men joined in anyway; many, like Mr. Ligon, did not.

The installation, seen only in part in Philadelphia, distills his ambivalent reactions to the march. In a mural-size silk-screen diptych, the left-hand panel carries an image of the marchers' hands raised in a collective salute; the right-hand panel is an empty black field. A second piece, titled "Self-Portraits," shows two identical photographs of the back of Mr. Ligon's head, as if asserting the necessity of standing apart, yet still being counted, even if



DUAL HISTORY "Untitled (*I Am A Man*)," by Glenn Ligon, 1988.

as a self-affirmative crowd of one.

Mr. Ligon's presence here — in a format echoing that used by another contemporary black artist, Lorna Simpson — is important, both for the "witnessing" it implies, and as a reminder of the deeply personal, even intimate nature of much of his work.

This is true even of pieces that seem to be based on historical anecdote. Three plain wooden packing crates in the 1993 work "To Disembark" evoke the life of a 19th-century slave who gained freedom by having himself shipped in a box from Richmond to Philadelphia. But from one of the crates a taped voice emerges, that of Mr. Ligon reading from Henry (Box) Brown's firsthand account of his escape.

More immediate to the artist's own life is the installation titled "A Feast of Scraps," set apart in a small room at the center of the show. It consists of several well-thumbed photo albums filled with snapshots of family weddings, graduations and the like. Some of the pictures are of Mr. Ligon's own family; others he collected from secondhand stores.

But interspersed among them are very different images: casual, clearly homemade pornographic shots of young black men, who, in this context, could easily be fathers or cousins or brothers of the people pictured elsewhere in the album, and, by implication, of Mr. Ligon himself.

The point is both simple and unfathomable: to create a new family and a new story, in which differences and desires are acknowledged and the past is brought into the present — accepted, even embraced where possible, but also reshaped and revised. It is this restless narrative that seems to lie behind the often cool exterior of Mr. Ligon's work, and it comes across with quiet passion in his show. □