



Malcolm X

Glenn Ligon, *Malcolm X (version 1) #1*, 2000, flashe paint and silk screen on canvas, 96 x 72".

## GLENN LIGON

D'AMELIO TERRAS

Maybe it's because his black-and-white text paintings referred so clearly to Jasper Johns's early work, but Glenn Ligon's brightly colored new paintings bring to mind a notable episode in recent art history (one less universally admired than Johns's alphabets and therefore all the more interesting): the early-'80s collaborations between Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat. Or, as the boxing-themed ad for a 1985 exhibition of that work aptly suggested, Warhol *vs.* Basquiat. Whatever the personal chemistry that fueled that relationship, one could hardly imagine a more irresolvable stylistic discrepancy than that between the older artist's detached, silk-screened appropriations and his protégé's raw, scribblelike gestures. But in retrospect, that appearance might have been deceiving: Warhol always tended to romanticize his Americana subjects more than he let on, and Basquiat preferred to play the caustic outsider, but both were concerned

# ARTFORUM

OCTOBER 2001

with transcribing the noise of the culture.

Ligon's new paintings, likewise, combine straightforwardly appropriated images—taken from “black-themed” coloring books published in the '70s—with furiously gestural markmaking. Is he trying to play both roles at once, to be both Warhol and Basquiat? The trick up Ligon's sleeve is that even his most spontaneous-seeming gestures are copied: He gave selected coloring-book pages to kids and let them go crazy with their Crayolas. His own task, after having the uncolored pictures enlarged and silk-screened onto canvas, was to mimic on a grand scale what the kids had done. So the exhibition title, “Colored,” evokes multiple layers of reference—and of ambivalence. It refers to what the children did, to the emergence of color in Ligon's work, and of course to the old-fashioned euphemism for Black that had definitively passed from currency by the era of coloring books featuring images of Malcolm X and Isaac Hayes or spelling exercises in which *s* stands not just for “sun” but also for “soul” (and “shades”) and in which *c* may still be for “cat”—but now it's a cool cat.

What's surprising is how appropriation and copying here have so little to do with Johnsian or Warholian detachment. These are fierce paintings. What was memorable about Ligon's earlier work was the smoldering quality of its ashen palette, but here the slow burn has burst into searing flame. If Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* was one paradigm for Ligon before, the more salient figure now might be the nameless protagonist of Ellison's late story “Cadillac Flambé,” who made a ritual holocaust of his beloved car as a symbolic revolt against

indignity. In *Boys with Basketball (version 1) #1*, 2001, the basketball catches fire, while the brilliantly colored halo patterns surrounding the main figure in *Harriet Tubman (version 2) #1*, 2001, may be glorious emanations of some kind of physical or spiritual energy—and yet they seem to consume the bearer of that energy. In *Malcolm X (version 1) #1*, 2000, the ambivalence reaches corrosive intensity: The Black Nationalist hero's cheeks are red circles, his lips bright pink, and his hair white. The child whose coloring Ligon copied may have been too young to know who Malcolm X was, but that doesn't make the image any less disquieting.

—Barry Schwabsky