

# Glenn Ligon

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James Meyer

**THE LATE 1980s AND EARLY '90s** is a time without a name. Eras become knowable after the fact: Only recently have scholars and younger artists turned their attention to that relatively undefined art-historical moment. The moment in question witnessed the rise of AIDS activism and an expanded institutional critique (with its "minings" of public institutions and engagement of sites beyond the white cube), the Whitney Biennial of 1993 and the first manifestations of an art of relational exchange. Glenn Ligon and his generation—my generation—emerged in this milieu. Bracketed by such events as the AIDS crisis, the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, the dismantling of apartheid, and the decline of the art market, the art world of the early '90s was a scene in transition. Artists and critics had absorbed the critical positions of an earlier moment. The field of postmodernism had been drawn in sharply etched lines. The critics associated with the journal *October* had staked out a polemical divide between a painting suffused with mythical subject matter and a masculine authorial presence (the expressionisms of Julian Schnabel, Anselm Kiefer, Georg Baselitz), and an art of appropriated images and texts that sought to challenge patriarchy and rhetorics of authority (the discursive practices of Cindy Sherman,

Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince). In one version of that argument, painting was declared obsolete outright. The "end of painting" arguments of the Constructivists and Conceptualists enjoyed a belated (and ultimately short-lived) revival. Tainted with Romantic associations of uniqueness and authenticity, painting (the argument went) could not compete with more contemporary formats such as the Picture or video, which allowed the artist to dismantle sexist, homophobic, and racist constructions in the very formats in which they were disseminated. In fact, postmodernist techniques proved to be extremely effective in raising awareness of the AIDS epidemic and the callous lack of governmental response to the crisis. At the time, the acerbic posters and videos of ACT UP seemed to me the most fitting response to a dire situation, a point of view captured by the Gran Fury poster that read WITH 42,000 DEAD / ART IS NOT ENOUGH / TAKE COLLECTIVE DIRECT ACTION TO END THE AIDS CRISIS (*Art Is Not Enough*, 1988). So when I encountered Ligon's paintings for the first time, during the early 1990s, I simply couldn't understand how an artist of demonstrably political intention could imagine that painting words on a canvas could change anything. I could not see his work.

The Whitney Independent Study Program was ground zero for such debates during the '80s, when Ligon was enrolled there. His forays outside painting, such as his seminal *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book*, 1991-93, reveal an incisive grasp of poststructuralist ideas. Combining ninety-one pages from Robert Mapplethorpe's *Black Book* (1986) with seventy-eight quotations from multiple sources, the work unsettles any single reading of Mapplethorpe's project: The attempt to grasp the photographer's "intention" only leads to further interpretation. As the Whitney retrospective—installed with unusual lucidity by curator Scott Rothkopf—makes apparent, by the time Ligon exhibited this work in 1993, he had already come into his own as a painter. (The Mapplethorpe piece appears in the fourth gallery of the exhibition.) It would seem, at first glance, that Ligon felt ready to explore the photographic

This page, from left: View of "Glenn Ligon: AMERICA," 2011, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Six works from the "Door Paintings" series, 1990-92. Photo: Sheldon Collins. Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (I Am a Man)*, 1988, oil and enamel on canvas, 40 x 25". Glenn Ligon, *Untitled*, 1985, oil, enamel, and graphite on paper, 30 x 22 1/4". Opposite page, from left: Glenn Ligon, *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* (detail), 1991-93, ninety-one offset prints, each 11 1/2 x 11 1/2"; seventy-eight text pages, each 5 1/4 x 7 1/4". Glenn Ligon, *Sun (Version 2) #1*, 2001, silk-screen ink, oil stick, and gesso on canvas, 48 x 36". Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (There Is a Consciousness We All Have . . .)*, 1988, oil, synthetic polymer, oil stick, and graphite on two sheets of paper, overall 30 x 44 1/4".





image only after he had completed the “Door Paintings,” 1990–92, in which samplings of prominent African-American texts are stenciled repeatedly, with ever-decreasing legibility. In truth, *Notes* and the “Door Paintings” were largely—if not precisely—contemporaneous creations. While Ligon was making his quintessentially postmodernist critique of Mapplethorpe, he was also, unlike most of his contemporaries, simultaneously posing those same sorts of questions in *paintings*. Ligon reconceived postmodernist tactics in a new way. He extended the critique of representation to race and homosexuality, as many participants in the “multicultural” 1993 Whitney Biennial

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sought to do. And he discovered that painting, the action of covering a canvas, was an apposite means for exploring these themes. The graphic imagery of that era (Barbara Kruger, ACT UP) was rapidly taken in. Ligon took a reverse course: *Slowing down* the processes of seeing and reading, he troubled the modernist distinction between these modes of cognition. (Clement Greenberg once remarked that he didn't want to “think” in front of an artwork.) He did not so much “appropriate” his textual or formal sources as work through them in his own hand. (Even Ligon's encounter with Jasper Johns isn't appropriation: Substituting oil stick and coal dust for encaustic, and literary texts for Johns's serial lettering, he revised the look and meaning of Johnsian technique.) In other words, painting became a strategy for teasing out the ambiguities of writings and remarks touching on race and same-sex desire,

however “well meaning.” (Even the most iconic and respected black literary voices would be subjected to the artist's cool scrutiny.) To achieve this aim, Ligon reexamined the signature formats of postwar modernism, already consigned to the sepulchre of art history by the '80s, such as the allover and the monochrome, and the stenciled canvas: He became a painter of signs, a sign painter.

There is a history of sign painting. Once Picasso and Braque inscribed stenciled letters in Analytic Cubism's shallow space, the distinction between fine painting and commercial painting could be productively dismantled. The fine artist could benefit from the sign painter's “modernist” awareness that a painting is a flat surface after all. (In the Cubist *papier collé*, as Yve-Alain Bois has shown, flatness and depth are ideas evoked by a sheet of newspaper: Sign painting has become an arrangement of signs, a semiological activity.) In the works of sign painters to come—Johns, Ed Ruscha, John Baldessari, Christopher Wool, and Mel Bochner—the cohabitation of the word or phrase (hand-painted, stenciled, varied in hue and intensity) and an abstract field forces us to see and read the words simultaneously. “The closer you look at a word,” wrote Karl Kraus, “the more distantly it looks back at you.” This celebrated maxim sums up the sign painter's ambition to estrange—to make visible—the words and phrases we think we know.

Consider Ligon's *Untitled (I Am a Man)*, 1988. As is well known, this relatively small (forty-by-twenty-five-inch) canvas executed in oil and enamel reproduces the signs borne by striking African-American sanitation workers in Memphis in the early months of 1968. Paid below a living wage and subjected to an entrenched structural racism, the workers were moved to action when unsafe working conditions led to the accidental deaths of two of their colleagues. Martin Luther King Jr. traveled to Memphis in a gesture of support. On April 3, he delivered his famous speech “I've Been to the Mountaintop”; he was assassinated the next day.

Much has been made of the totemic status of *Untitled (I Am a Man)* in Ligon's art. Historically charged and yet personally poignant, it is seen as his inaugural work. As





Rothkopf suggests in his rigorous catalogue text, the turn to sign painting was “neither easy nor swift,” as the earliest works in the exhibition confirm. These four paintings on paper, from 1985, were among the show’s revelations. Citations of gay pornographic texts incised into a brushy ground in a meandering, Twomblyesque scrawl, these works confirm that Ligon, at twenty-five, was not shy about exploring homoerotic themes at the very moment that the AIDS epidemic had become a grim spectacle, with the revelation that Rock Hudson had contracted HIV, and with the continual demonization of gay men by right-wing politicians and pundits.

*Untitled (I Am a Man)*, the most signlike of Ligon’s efforts, marks a decisive turn from these works. Ligon replicates a flat image: His work is not a sign but a painting of one (though opaque enamel flattens the oily surface, making the work more like a sign and less like a painting). Black letters flicker against a white ground. We perceive the afterimages of single letters (I and A) and a column of three A’s stacked from top to bottom. We compare the letters AM (underlined) and AN (in the word MAN). Whose sign is it, in the end? Who claims to be “a man”? What does the famous sign, unhinged from its historical milieu, mean in 1988, or in 2011—and to whom?

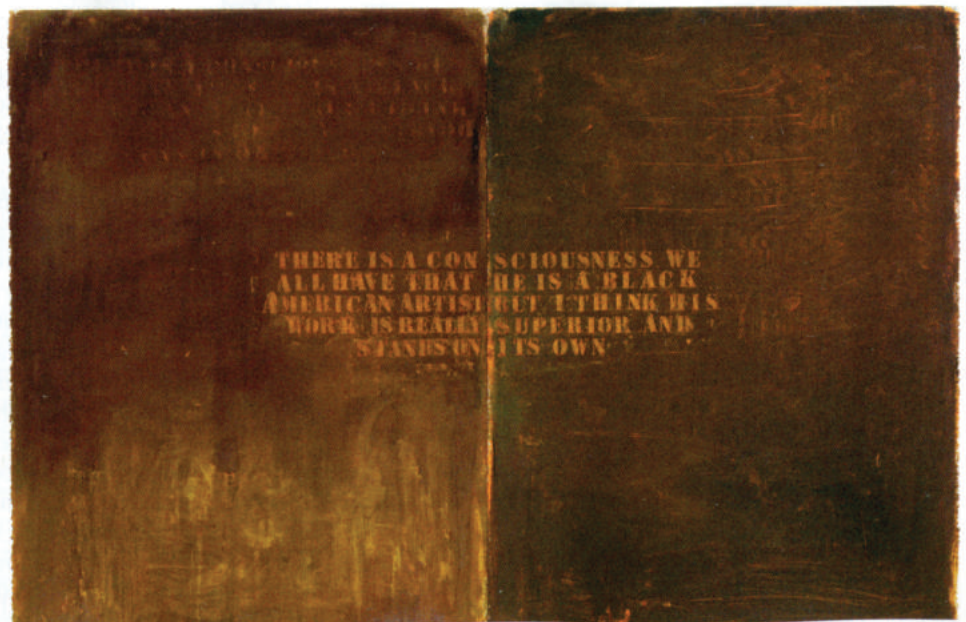
*Untitled (There Is a Consciousness We All Have . . .)*, 1988, stages such uncertainties of speaker and addressee to different effect. The work—among Ligon’s first enlisting stenciled text—presents the following remark by curator Ned Rifkin regarding the artist Martin Puryear (the text was cited in an article in the *New York Times* by Michael Brenson): “There is a consciousness we all have that he is a black American artist. But I think his work is really superior and stands on its own.” Laid down in oil stick, the citation appears in the center of a dirty amber field. The text is a sour yellow. Ligon’s palette is turbid, unpleasant; his painting is the color of vomit. Sgraffito marks energize the surface. Who are the “we” Rifkin refers to (the “we” who are “conscious” that the artist, that Puryear, is “a black American”)? Rifkin claims Puryear’s work is “superior” to the work of other

artists. (Other *black* artists?) By claiming that Puryear’s art “stands on its own,” does he mean that Puryear is well known because he is black—or *despite* that fact? Coming across this remark in the newspaper, a reader might glance over it. Painting it, Ligon reveals its ambiguity.

In the West, a sign is typically read from top to bottom and from left to right. It aspires to be seen—to be understood—instantaneously. Ligon upends this conceit. Beginning with the “Door” series, he develops a kind of *anti*-sign painting, a painting that undermines its own legibility. The first of these works was painted on a door; the other works in the series maintain the vertical orientation and bodily proportion of this support. Their surfaces are allover patterns. Repeated again and again, a single phrase—such as Zora Neale Hurston’s “I remember the very day that I became colored”—becomes murky and eventually unreadable. (In his catalogue essay, Rothkopf describes how Ligon achieved this effect: Rubbing oil stick through the same stencils repeatedly in the course of reiterating the phrases, the painter turned the stencils’ messy back sides and clotted apertures to advantage.) These were the paintings I could not “see” during the early ’90s, accustomed as my eyes were to the instrumental typography of Barbara Kruger and Gran Fury. An art of signage, of clear messages, seemed the only response an artist could make during a time of crisis. With the remarkable series based on James Baldwin’s essay “Stranger in the Village,” begun in 1996, the surfaces of Ligon’s paintings became more viscous and relieflike, and their texts were made increasingly illegible through the addition of coal dust, glue, and synthetic polymers. The less I could read Ligon’s paintings, the more I could perceive them: The course that Ligon had set out for himself during the late ’80s and early ’90s, a path that led through and out of postmodernism, had come to seem utterly convincing. □

*“Glenn Ligon: AMERICA” is on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art through June 5; travels to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Oct. 23, 2011—Jan. 22, 2012; Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Feb. 12–June 3, 2012.*

JAMES MEYER IS A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR OF ARTFORUM.



Glenn Ligon Studio