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Glenn Ligon interview

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The American artist talks about the genesis of his new London exhibition, 'Call and Response'



Part of Glenn Ligon's installation 'Come Out'

Arriving early at the Camden Arts Centre to interview the American artist Glenn Ligon, I pause for tea in the café. There, Ligon is sitting alone on a high stool checking his phone. In designer jeans, black trainers and a blue-and-white striped shirt, he is the picture of elegant, self-contained calm. Yet the jubilant paisley swirls decorating that shirt collar betray the vivid imagination that has made him one of the most important artists in the US.

Ligon turns out to be friendly, grounded and blessed with a fluent lucidity that makes him a joy to interview. Such clarity of expression is intriguing given that his art is known for pushing language and ideas beyond the edge of what can be read or understood.

Entitled *Call and Response*, this exhibition is no exception. Key works include two long silkscreen paintings that hang opposite each in a cavernous white-walled gallery and consist of a single phrase, "come out to show them", repeated in black on a grey background. At times clear, at others hazy and obscured by swatches of ink, the words ebb and flow as if caught in a broken searchlight, whispering their mysterious message. This could be art made by ghosts. Or about them.

"A lot of my work is about text taken to the point of abstraction," he observes.

Now in his 54th year, though looking a decade younger, Ligon came to international attention at the Whitney Biennial in 1991 with text-based paintings such as "How it Feels to be Colored Me" and "I Am Not Tragically Colored". The words were lifted from a 1928 essay by the African-American writer Zora Neale Hurston but their appearance, stuttering from legibility into incoherence, were Ligon's own expression of the complexities of identity.

Since then he has consolidated a reputation for translating issues of race, sexuality and class into a challenging yet compelling poetry. Although he is both black and gay, his work is free of the narcissism that can afflict other artists who also dwell in territory where the personal slips into the political.

"I don't know if I would describe myself as a political artist," he says with courteous conviction. "A friend of mine said: 'He's not a political artist, he's a citizen.' I'm interested in what citizenship is in a democratic country, and the responsibilities that come with it."

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“The right to question, for example, [and] to think about our history and the way we position ourselves against the past. How the past is present,” he pauses. “That’s what this work is about.”

The story behind *Call and Response* would be poignant at any moment but after the unrest sparked by the shooting of a young black man by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, this summer, it feels like a scar cut open to reveal a livid wound. The phrase in the paintings was originally uttered by Daniel Hamm, one of six young black men arrested, beaten and imprisoned for allegedly committing a murder during the Harlem Race Riot of 1964. The situation of the “Harlem Six” galvanised civil rights activists and shone a light on the injustice suffered by citizens of colour at the hands of the police and judiciary.

What kindled Ligon’s imagination was *Come Out*, a work by minimalist composer Steve Reich that took Hamm’s phrase and layered it so that it is almost incomprehensible. In its entirety, Hamm’s sentence reads: “I had to, like, open the bruise up, and let some of the bruise blood come out to show them” and refers to the moment he had to try and convince the police that he had been beaten.

Ligon was magnetised by Reich’s work because it embodied both his formal and intellectual concerns. “Nothing really changes,” he says dryly, citing the “stop and frisk” laws – “James Baldwin was writing about them in 1966” – which see so many black men humiliated on the street.

Some artists driven by a social conscience tilt into faux-sociology, philosophy or reportage. But Ligon channels his ideas through a visual sensibility – “I’m a formalist. I’m interested in the history of painting” – honed since childhood, when his mother sent him to drawing classes at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Growing up in a working-class community in the South Bronx, it wasn’t the obvious choice of after-school activity. His mother was a nurse’s assistant in a psychiatric hospital. His father worked for General Motors. “My mother was the driver [of my interest in art] but she didn’t think you could be an artist because it wasn’t financially viable,” Ligon recalls. When he announced he was going to pursue art as a career, it caused “heart palpitations” in the family.

By then, however, he was committed. After a BA at Wesleyan University in Connecticut he enrolled on a study programme run by the Whitney Museum. His first “big heroes” were Abstract Expressionists such as Franz Kline and Jackson Pollock, who combined “maximum formal issues with maximum expression of one’s interior life”.

Realising that “that wasn’t really where [my] work was meant to go” but determined to hold on to “a real love and interest in painting”, Ligon sought a “vocabulary that Abstract Expressionism couldn’t hold [...] and that brought me to language.”

“I’m interested in those moments when language fails,” he explains. “One has a responsibility [as an artist] but too often people expect art works to be the history books they haven’t read. And I don’t think that’s art’s job.”

So what is? For the first time in our conversation, he is lost for words. “That’s a very hard question.” Another pause. “Art points to things. It’s a way of giving people not the standard way of looking at the world.”

We walk through into a gallery where two neons hang from the ceiling like sculptures. Spelling out respectively the words “bruise” and “blues”, on one side they are the colour of a sky darkening to twilight, on the other they have been painted black. Suspended in the empty room, they confront each other like two elegiac reproaches for a tragedy that has repeated itself across history as relentlessly as the texts in Ligon’s paintings.

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