

GLENN LIGON

REGEN PROJECTS - LOS ANGELES

In 1953, James Baldwin recounted his experience as an African American visiting a small village in Switzerland. His essay “Stranger in the Village” is a story of isolation and alienation that provides unique insight into the condition of strangeness that black people experience in a white world.

Decades later, Glenn Ligon has again shared Baldwin’s words and themes, using them as source material for his work.

It is Ligon’s trademark to use language in paintings and it is not the first time he has delved into Baldwin’s “Stranger in the Village.” In an eponymously titled series of works started in the late ’90s, Ligon quoted the novelist in text-based works on canvas. Baldwin’s words, almost illegible, were encrusted with oil, acrylic and coal dust.

Now, for this abundant solo show on the occasion of Regen Projects’ 20th anniversary, Ligon has returned to Baldwin’s essay and realized a new group of paintings as a continuation of the “Stranger” series.

If words were dissipating into coal dust in the previous paintings, in these new paintings the texts have begun to com-

pletely fade away. Sentences from previous paintings have now been silk-screened onto flat black, white and brightly colored yellow, red, blue and pink canvases; flocked with coal dust, the words are inundated by this black material, and what remains of the already barely legible text is largely our memory of it—a chimera.

Ligon turns text into abstract, color-field compositions. Reflections on race and identity—the echo of Baldwin’s chronicle—are not lost but encrypted into material strata that figuratively evoke history.

Arranged rhythmically around the gallery’s four walls, the paintings as a whole read like a text; their relative mass and reiterated elements (they are all the same size, using the same technique with varying colors and gestural forms) give the show a stately, literary pace.

Sharing a similar textual ambiguity, the adjacent room features the word “AMERICA” written in reverse and spelled out in neon. The second gallery further compounds the show’s collective meaning with a screening of a 16mm black-and-white short film from 2008: *The*

Death of Tom is a reinterpretation of the last scene of Edwin S. Porter’s film *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1903), rendered here in abstract shapes made of lights and shadows.

Sonia Campagnola

GLENN LIGON, Figure #21, 2009. Acrylic, silkscreen and coal dust on canvas, 152 x 122 cm. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles. © Glenn Ligon.

