

Glenn Ligon

REGEN PROJECTS

In his newest suite of paintings, titled "Figure" (echoing his 2001 self-portrait series of the same name), Glenn Ligon continues his formal investigation of James Baldwin's 1953 essay "Stranger in the Village," a searching analysis of the author's experience of extreme estrangement and isolation as the only black man living in a remote Swiss village. The new paintings further Ligon's continual, laborious reading and rereading of the self through the language of another. He bases all twenty canvases on his own 2002 painting *Masquerade*—a nearly illegible rendering of a page from Baldwin's text, in which the author describes the village's disturbing practice of raising communal funds to buy "African natives for the purpose of converting them to Christianity." Ligon, going "off book," as the exhibition title has it, quotes himself quoting Baldwin, and the double mediation that results degrades graphic form into entropic abstractions on the verge of decipherability, challenging the viewer to make out anything at all.

Silk-screened with large gaps in the printing and idiosyncratic streaks over differently colored grounds—white, silver gray, neon pink, red, yellow, blue, dark brown, and black—the blocks of text flicker between emergence and disappearance, making the series recall the permutations of color and density in Andy Warhol's "Shadows," 1978–79. As a charged counter to Warhol's use of diamond dust within some works from that series, Ligon has scattered each canvas with glittering bits of coal dust so that the textured accretion obscures language further and throws the indecipherable abstractions into sparkling relief. The masking effected by the coal dust also resonates with Baldwin's here-unreadable account of the white villagers' alarming employ of blackface in their obscene fund-raising drives. The surfaces appear as fragile and fugitive, as ravaged and ruptured, as the explosive emotional and psychological content of the text. Only a small fragment has transferred to the particularly unreadable *Figure #6*; "There is a custom in the village . . ." it begins. The rest is barely there at all, having melted and sagged beyond recognition into patterns of darkness, passages of blackness.

Shadows also overtake Ligon's lyrical cinematic quotation *The Death of Tom*, 2008, a twenty-minute film that

played on loop in the gallery's smaller space. In it, the artist set out to re-create the last scene of Thomas Edison and Edwin S. Porter's 1903 silent film adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In a rather loaded and parodic move, Ligon cast himself as Uncle Tom reenacting the Edison-Porter film's final tableau in which a stage actor in blackface pantomimed the protagonist's dying visions of heavenly salvation and his ensuing death. But, as the artist discovered after developing the footage, the film had been improperly loaded, inadvertently converting the racially fraught melodrama into an abstract play of blurred light and shadow. An improvisatory piano score by jazz musician Jason Moran accompanies the fluttering grays, banded blacks, and pulsing orbs that flash with ghostly light. As with the paintings' disfiguring of the odious village custom described by Baldwin, Ligon's *Death of Tom* targets a particular narrative moment in which race and religion intersect most uncomfortably and suspiciously, where whiteness aggressively "saves" blackness through so-called Christian charity. Dumbstruck abstraction may be the only way to adequately respond to and grapple with such a deeply misguided and racist history. Mesmerizing and transformative, the film is another instance of Ligon moving from presumed legibility to something wholly abstract and defamiliarized, ineffable and shifting, contingent and personal.

—Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer

Glenn Ligon,
Figure #20, 2009,
acrylic, silk screen,
and coal dust on
canvas, 60 x 48".

