

# frieze

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## Glenn Ligon

### Whitney Museum of American Art

Walking into Glenn Ligon's mid-career retrospective, deftly curated by Scott Rothkopf, the visitor is greeted by a sea of hands raised in affirmation. A couple curl into fists but most rise into the air more vulnerably, with open palms and grasping fingers. Although the crowd's pledge is unknowable, what we read in the thrust of their outstretched arms is a dream of participation, the corporeal scaffolding of participatory democracy. This silkscreened image is a mere show of solidarity, a snapshot of an illusory community fuelled by the adrenaline of the 1995 Million Man March. Cryptic and abbreviated, *Hands* (1996) exemplifies Ligon's conflicted stance towards notions of collectivity and nation. It is an image of unity undercut by anonymity; a vision of democratic process riven by absences. Such ambivalences towards communitarian structures – a leitmotif of this exhibition – are ultimately spelled out, letter by letter, in the trio of neon sculptures (two untitled, and the third entitled *Rückenfigur*, 2009) that conclude the show. Inspired by the paradoxical opening lines of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) – 'It was the best of times. It was the worst of times' – the word spelled out in these final confrontations of motherland also furnish the exhibition with its plucky title, 'AMERICA'.

Of course *Hands* is an image of America too: it introduces the spectre of nation that stalks the exhibition. It also inaugurates the recurrent facelessness that troubles so many of Ligon's portraits. And in picturing this controversial gathering organized by Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam – in turn a reprisal of earlier scenes of civil rights history – *Hands* establishes a third theme of 'AMERICA': Ligon's marshalling of history as the unstable ground against which to situate his interrogations of race. Both salutation and exhortation, private summons and public pledge, *Hands* especially seems to quote David's *Tennis Court Oath* (1791), with its central tangle of thrusting hands similarly reaching for the promise of participatory democracy.

Yet even as Ligon evokes David's foundational image, the screenprinted surface and its resistance to readability align it more closely with the Warholian tradition of history painting, one in which the past is staged through degraded, third-hand silkscreens of press photographs. In this sense, *Hands* is in conversation with Andy Warhol's *Race Riots* (1963–4), one of the earliest treatments of race in postwar American art, and a group of paintings that form the crux of Anne Wagner's

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argument for Warhol as a contemporary 'history painter'.

Warhol is a crucial figure for Ligon: he surfaces everywhere, including Ligon's screenprinted self-portraits as one of America's 'Most Wanted'. These Warholian profiles, restrung to highlight the American criminalization of black maleness, function as an updated version of Ligon's earlier portrayals of himself as 'wanted': a series of prints resembling 19th-century posters reporting runaway slaves ('Runaways', 1993). In texts (written by friends) that describe the 'escaped' Ligon in ways such as 'mild-looking, with oval-shaped, black-rimmed glasses', the artist situates himself as an amalgam of America and its histories, plumbing a range of historical identities as the tools of his own self-representation. In a nearby gallery, a pair of pendant self-portraits, *Untitled (1776–1865)* and *Untitled (1865–1991)* (both 1991), reiterate this inscription of Ligon as a product of the historical landmarks of his country. Advancing from the crispness of 1776 to the smudged terminus of 1865, one painting lists the years between the American Revolution and the Civil War, while the other logs those between 1865 and the work's 1991 fabrication. Employing his trademark stencil on blood-red, gridded paper, the swelling nimbus of oil ringing Ligon's numerals here suggests less the deficits of vision – as it does in the artist's celebrated text paintings – than history as a text with a shadow, and the artist as embedded in its nexus. The other major series included here, such as 'Notes on the Margin of the Black Book' (1991–3) and the paintings based on Richard Pryor jokes, similarly register Ligon's responses to landmark representation of race and sexuality within recent American history.

Through this broad rubric of nation, and a diverse selection of work, this survey aims to counteract the flattening of Ligon's practice that has resulted from its insistent definition in terms of identity politics. But the flattening of Ligon's work has been more literal too – a result of the printing press and endless photographic reproductions which reduce it to something we literally read rather than behold. All matted paint, smears of oilstick, and coal dust, photography – even the careful details of the Whitney catalogue – simply fails to capture the way in which Ligon lets text congeal into texture, and words dissolve into paint. Emphasizing this materiality, 'AMERICA' commences with Ligon's early, fleshy AbEx-inspired works, which root his engagement with text in a form of cursive mark-making, and his layered accretions of pigment in a painterly investment in surface.

Mostly, though, paint functions as a medium of resistance for Ligon; it occludes visibility and threatens form. Nowhere is such deletion more explicit than in *Untitled (Cancellation Prints)* (1992 and 2003), where a flesh-coloured 'X' overtakes the entire white image field, demarcating the distance between the construct of whiteness and the pinkness of most European skin. This obliterating impulse equally manifests in *Self-Portrait*, the inky, black surface of which is visibly

scratched and gouged. Such signs of refusal emphasize how Ligon's numerous self-portraits are invariably exercises in effacement and retraction. The installation of the 'Million Man March' series especially foregrounds the way that Ligon turns his back on the viewer – three times in fact – in three large screenprints of the back of his head, 'Self-Portraits' (1996). These rear views echo Screen (1996), an image of the march viewed from behind that hangs nearby. Joining them is We're Black and Strong (I) (1996), a second tenebrous cluster of silhouetted figures seen from the rear, who behold the blank reverse of a looming screen before them – a stand-in for the image plane, or more precisely, its underside.

These reversals continue in the final gallery where Ligon's three black neon iterations of the word 'AMERICA', are displayed. One pulses light; the other, painted black, suffocates its neon aura; while the third has each individual letter flipped on its back. This last text sculpture – a final rear view – is officially titled Rückenfigur, the term for a figure seen from behind, often looking onto a landscape as in Caspar David Friedrich's iconic mountain contemplator. This closing gesture of self-reflection is a fitting way to conclude. For what is a retrospective but a backwards-glancing venture? Or, more precisely, a view onto one's own past through the eyes of distant, unknown figures, audience and critics alike – a host of Rückenfiguren – in whose spectral guise come to understand our own blotted past.

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