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# National Gallery of Art Acquires Glenn Ligon Painting

By CAROL VOGEL NOV. 15, 2012

A black-and-white text painting by the African-American artist Glenn Ligon hangs in the White House, in the private quarters of the Obamas, on loan from the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington.

Mr. Ligon, a favorite of the president and first lady, was the subject of a midcareer retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York last year, and his work has been collected by the likes of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Tate Modern in London.

Until now, however, the National Gallery of Art in Washington had owned only a suite of etchings and a print portfolio by Mr. Ligon. This week it announced that it had bought a painting, "Untitled (I Am a Man)." A reinterpretation of the signs carried by many of the 1,300 striking African-American sanitation workers in Memphis in 1968 — made famous by Ernest Withers's photographs of the march — it came straight from the artist's collection through Luhring Augustine, his Chelsea gallery. Years ago Mr. Ligon saw one of the actual signs in Representative Charles B. Rangel's office, and that inspired the painting.

Using phrases from real events or from the writings of figures like James Baldwin and Malcolm X is a Ligon trademark. "Untitled (I Am a Man)," from 1988, is the first example of his use of text.

"Glenn was 28 when he painted this," said Molly Donovan, associate curator of

modern and contemporary art at the National Gallery. “That was roughly 20 years after that incident in Memphis, and it was that historic moment that brought Martin Luther King to Memphis.”

The painting will go on view Tuesday in the National Gallery’s East Building concourse.