

Editors. "Artists Glenn Ligon and Gillian Wearing on Making Paintings in a Post-Truth World." Cultured Magazine (November 9, 2023) [ill.] [online]

# CULTURED

ART

## Artists Glenn Ligon and Gillian Wearing on Making Paintings in a Post-Truth World

On the occasion of their concurrent solo shows at Los Angeles's Regen Projects, the conceptually-driven artists sat down to talk about self-portraiture, reckoning with language, and the work they make when no one is watching.



Glenn Ligon, *Redacted #1*, 2023. Image courtesy of the artist and Regen Projects.

Born three years apart, in the Bronx and Birmingham, U.K., respectively, Glenn Ligon and Gillian Wearing have shaped and shifted the conventions around conceptual art since coming to prominence in the '90s. Awarded the prestigious Turner Prize in 1997, Wearing has worked across the realms of video, photography, and painting to stage disorienting interventions that probe the confines of an "authentic" life. Most associated with his text-based works that re-surface and abstract the words of figures like Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, Jean Genet, and Richard Pryor, Ligon unspools and annotates the racial, cultural, and linguistic constructions that mold collective and personal identities.

This fall, both artists are presenting new work in solo shows at Los Angeles's Regen Projects. In "DOUBLE NEGATIVE," Ligon unveils nine diptychs that feature the entirety of James Baldwin's 1953 essay "Stranger in the Village" obscured by a drove of X's, digging at assumptions around legibility and interpretation. Wearing, in "reflections," articulates new meditations on self-perception, staging herself

# REGEN PROJECTS

in paintings that paraphrase the styles and thematic concerns of artists—from René Magritte to Édouard Manet—who have informed her work through the decades. The show also features her 2018 video work *Wearing Gillian*, an “advert on identity” that tapped over 15 actors and deepfake face-swapping technology. Here, the two artists sit down to talk about self-portraiture, reckoning with language, and the work they make when no one is watching.



Gillian Wearing, "reflections" (Installation View), 2023. Photography by Evan Bedford. Image courtesy of Regen Projects



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**Glenn Ligon:** There's a funny overlap in our projects in that we're interested in portraiture, but we approach it in very different ways. Me, through quoting text that I feel very invested in, but never my words, and you quoting artworks. What's your approach to portraiture?

**Gillian Wearing:** In previous iterations of my work, I've done things called “the album” about my family

# REGEN PROJECTS

and my spiritual family—photographers and other artists that have inspired me. I would classify the body of work [in this show] as my “historical family” because it is paintings, which are unusual in my practice on the whole, and they are referencing other artists' work. It's my way of reaching out into the past.

My entry into art came when I was at art school; I didn't know much before then. I left school at 16 and I worked till I was 22 before I went to art school, so all my education started at art school. These artists like Rembrandt, Matisse, and Manet were really important to me at the time. I fell in love with them. To me, they're my historical family. When did you get your first interests in the texts that you've been referencing?



Portrait of Glenn Ligon by Paul Mpagi Sepuya. Image courtesy of the artist, Hauser & Wirth, Regen Projects, Thomas Dane Gallery, and Galerie Chantal Crousel.

**Ligon:** It was probably 1984. I went to the Whitney Independent Study program. That was text-heavy, in the sense that we were looking at a lot of artists who use text like Barbara Kruger, Martha Rosler, Yvonne Rainer in her film work... But also, we were reading lots of theoretical texts during the program. It took me a while to figure out that using text was something that was available. Those models were there, but I always said I was a painter and I wasn't interested in text.

In some ways because I was committed to being a painter at a moment when painting was dead—painting is always dead and dying, but it was at this particular moment in this particular program painting was being deemphasized as a practice—I had to figure out a way to keep painting that incorporated these ideas I was thinking about from the Whitney program. One way to do that was to be very literal: just make the text that I was reading the paintings I was making. That's how that came about. Were you a painter when you went to art school, or did that come later?

# REGEN PROJECTS

**Wearing:** I studied technical painting for two years at Chelsea School of Art before going to Goldsmiths. When I went to Goldsmiths, I loved the idea that it was a content-based conceptual course. When I started there, everyone else knew exactly how to be conceptual, and I just felt really stupid. So I kind of gave up painting, maybe I just couldn't find my way into that course. At that point, I became interested in distrust of language. I started cutting up books and cutting letters into books. That was my first revelation of what conceptual art can do: that you can question language.

In painting, I wouldn't have known how to do that. For many years, I've tried to go back to painting, but it's very difficult because it's very technical and I have deadlines for other work that took precedence. Then Covid came along and all the emails and pressure stopped, I thought, *This is the time to get back into painting*. I was able to make enough mistakes because I had time, whereas before I didn't.



Portrait of Gillian Wearing by Heine Pedersen. Image courtesy Regen Projects, Maureen Paley, and Tanya Bonakdar.

**Ligon:** I don't know if I did any good work necessarily during Covid, but looking back on it now, there is a way that I had organized my studio practice around deadlines and other people's expectations. But because the email stopped, I realized that it *is* different when I work at my pace. Different things happen.

**Wearing:** It reminds me a bit about when I left art school, and no one's interested in you at all. There's no tutor asking about you. It's quite scary as well, when no one's interested.

# REGEN PROJECTS

**Ligon:** You actually made work that you're proud of. I was doing collages that had all these sort of body parts in them, and they're terrible. I'll never show them. In that moment where we're in complete isolation and don't talk to anyone for weeks and weeks I'm making collages at my kitchen table that have all these body parts in them, cut out of magazines. Calling Dr. Freud! *[Laughs]* It's so obvious to me now that I needed that human connection and I was trying to find it through images. Because generally my work isn't figurative at all.



Glenn Ligon, "DOUBLE NEGATIVE" (Installation View), 2023.  
Photography by Evan Bedford. Image courtesy of Regen Projects.



Glenn Ligon, "DOUBLE NEGATIVE" (Installation View), 2023.  
Photography by Evan Bedford. Image courtesy of Regen Projects.

**Wearing:** Did you start with the panels [in this show] during that period of time?

**Ligon:** No, actually. The funny thing about this work, the "Redacted" series, was that they started because I had always wanted to use the entirety of this James Baldwin essay called "Stranger in the

# REGEN PROJECTS

Village.” It was written in the early ‘50s. It's the moment when Baldwin is making a residency for himself by staying in the chalet of his lover in this remote Swiss village.

He says that, for many of the villagers, he's the first Black person they have seen. He uses the essay as a way to talk about his engagement with particular people in that village, but also in general, the idea of “the other.” What does it mean to be a stranger in any kind of context—but particularly as a Black American, his relationship to Europe as a stranger? I kept using the text over and over again, but I had never managed to make a painting that used the entire text of the essay.

So curiously, I did that, through big paintings that are 10 by 45 feet long. But in the middle of making those big paintings, I found these rolls. I unrolled them, and I realized that five or six years ago, I was going to make these Baldwin paintings using the entire text of the essay, but on a very small scale. Then I thought, *Well, they're here, this is the entire text of the essay.* And I had been thinking about this idea of redacted text.

So much of the work that I do is about taking text towards an abstraction, so to redact text is to do that in some ways. I decided to start X-ing things out to see where it went. That's how these paintings came about, just realizing that the “X” is a letter, but it's also used to redact text. “X” also has a political resonance. Malcolm X was Malcolm Little, his family name, that was derived from a plantation owner's name. He gets rid of that and becomes Malcolm X. I'm curious about the process of making your paintings here. Do you start with a specific thought of wanting to pay an homage to a particular painter, and then figure it out?



Gillian Wearing, *Me as Artemisia Gentileschi*, 2023.  
Image courtesy of the artist and Regen Projects.

**Wearing:** Some are worked out in advance, and others I don't know what the reference is going to be. For instance, there's one called, *No Reflection*, 2023. It's me sitting on a chair and looking into a mirror,

# REGEN PROJECTS

and there's no reflection. I was thinking afterwards that it felt very much like Edward Hopper, but I wasn't really using Edward Hopper as a reference at the time.

Then of course I've got this portrait of me as Artemisia Gentileschi, a female artist in the Renaissance. Her father was a friend of Caravaggio. She would have been illiterate because women didn't get educated in those times, but her father wanted her to have an art education so he got a tutor for her. The title of the show is "Reflections," so the image is of her looking into a mirror because that's what she would have used to paint a self-portrait. With the works [in your show], would you consider them self-portraits? Is it a double portrait of you and James Baldwin?

**Ligon:** It is a sort of double portrait. One of the few figurative things I've done are these portraits of Michael Jackson or Stevie Wonder, at age 7 and age 11. I thought, *Remember when you were 7 years old and you wanted to be Michael Jackson? You wanted to dress like him, you wanted to be able to sing like him.* That level of identification was so strong. As I got older, I wanted to be like James Baldwin.

I'm never going to be James Baldwin, but I can use his words as a way to inhabit his subjectivity. But at a certain point, I'm making paintings, and then I become known for these paintings that use James Baldwin's work. That initial impulse transforms into something else. Maybe this is the end of the series because I've redacted that text, so my relationship to it is quite different now over these past decades. Maybe that was just a natural evolution.



Gillian Wearing, *Gillian Wearing Young soldier with weapons removed after Frans Hals Junior*, 2023.  
Image courtesy of the artist and Regen Projects.

**Wearing:** When you're doing something, you're always in the time you're in, aren't you? You pick things up in ways that are sometimes unconscious. There's one painting I have in there which is based on a

# REGEN PROJECTS

[painting of a young soldier] by Frans Hals the Younger. What fascinated me about it was that he has his weapons, and it's like a still life. I replaced them with flowers to give it a moment of, *Is there ever going to be any resolution to what's going on in the world?*

**Ligon:** Baldwin's "Stranger in the Village" is from the '50s, but it keeps being present for me. Many other thinkers and artists come back to it as a touchstone. But also, I think we're at this moment where we can't trust language, that words fail us. In some ways, we have to start over in terms of the language we use, the discourse. I don't know who coined the term "post-truth," but that feels like the moment we're in.

The certainty some people thought language had is not there anymore. Maybe my project in general has been a bit of a pessimism about language's ability to describe, to communicate, or the notion of truth itself. We are in a particularly strange moment in relationship to language. We either need to start over, or find some other way to do it.

*"reflections" and "DOUBLE NEGATIVE" are on view through December 23, 2023 at Regen Projects in Los Angeles.*