

ARTS

Licence to disrupt a Cambridge treasure house

Artist Glenn Ligon was given freedom to rearrange the Fitzwilliam Museum's works — and add in his own. He talks to Caroline Roux

On the day I meet the American artist Glenn Ligon, he arrives a little late, clad in navy blue and slightly out of breath. He's spent longer than expected touring the Wren Library at Trinity College in Cambridge. He had, he tells me, been delighted to find both the hand-written manuscript and the first edition of AA Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* on public display there and then dismayed that he couldn't take a picture. Pooh, it turns out, is the intellectual property of Disney in the UK. "It certainly made me consider the question of ownership all over again, and what I've managed to say about that, here at the Fitzwilliam," muses the 65-year-old Ligon.

We are standing outside Cambridge's fabulous treasure house. The Fitzwilliam Museum contains more than 500,000 works, from antique bas-reliefs from Persepolis to outstanding Cézannes, and Ligon has been given licence to raid and rearrange its contents, popping up in eight of its high Victorian galleries in various ways.

The result, called *Glenn Ligon: All Over the Place*, starts even before you enter, the upward-curving pillars of its grand portico now embellished with lines of illuminated type in bright white neon, outlined in black. "What will become of us without Barbarians? Those people were some kind of solution", reads one of the seven slightly different translations of the same lines glowing on the facade.

The words were written in 1898 by the modernist poet CP Cavaly — gay, Greek and unrecognised until later life. The poem from which they come is called "Waiting for the Barbarians", and although Cavaly's barbarians are not real, they imply a marginalised other, whose role was only



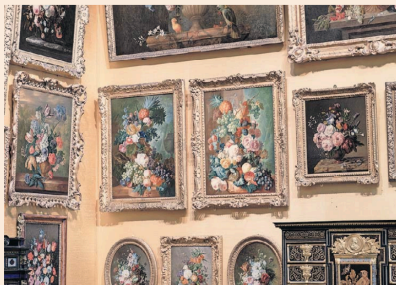
Clockwise, from above: Glenn Ligon; flower paintings, and 'Adoration of the Kings' (c1520), at the Fitzwilliam — ROH-H

noticed once they were no longer there.

"I assume whatever idea I have, someone will say no," says Ligon, who was born in the Bronx. Instead, he explains as we walk into the museum's opulent foyer, he spent three years — off and on — in this building, diving into its dusty depths, and bringing unlikely things to the surface, encouraged to do so by the increasingly keen curators. "They really let me poke about," he says.

He hasn't run riot, but rather performed a delicate dance through its gal-

leries and archives: light-footed, sometimes humorous, occasionally dark. In a corridor usually lined with early Italian art, for example, he has removed a series of religious paintings that had hung there for decades. Left behind are golden-coloured squares of the original walkover, shielded from the light for nearly 100 years, highlighting the stagnant immutability of the museum display. He has hung a single picture, bright and small — the "Adoration of the Kings" (c1520) — in which Balthazar is



dark-hearted abundance of empire; in Ligon's best-known works, he prints the same lines over and over, until they are an inky black, sticky surface where meaning becomes drowned out.

At the Fitzwilliam, it is Ligon's text work "Study for Negro Sunshine (Red)" that dominates. In places you can't escape the jet-black oil-stick letters on a deep red background, the phrases lifted from Gertrude Stein's novella *Three Lives*. "I think she liked the opposition of the idea — negro and sunshine, brightness and darkness — but she was also talking about a surface joys she had no interest in the inner lives of Black people whatsoever," says Ligon of the words used to describe the disposition of a Black woman in the novel.

"Negro Sunshine" is all over the Italian room, multiple wood-framed versions dotted around the heroic old masters. That Ligon wanted his work hung too close, too high, too uncentred, was

shown as a dark-skinned man, a single figure, according to Ligon, that represents the entire continent of Africa.

"I think that this gallery can hold the presence of Blackness and the absence of the Medici paintings," says Ligon, perhaps questioning the mind-blinding excess of work which museums traditionally offer us.

In another gallery, though, he has filled the walls, top to bottom, with 80 flower paintings — voluptuous, and mostly 17th-century Dutch, works that were largely extracted from storage and required serious conservation. Flowers tumble from baskets, flourish out of Grecian urns, are paired with ripening peaches and bunches of grapes.

"They had 15 paintings there before," says Ligon. "But my own work is about repetition. If I repeat something over and over again, does it turn into something else?"

The more you look, the proliferation of fruits and flowers putrefies into the

at first a challenge for the museum's technicians, who work to well-regulated rules of display. "Then I heard there was a little problem with the word 'negro', that it's triggering," says Ligon. He points out an adjacent painting: a rendering of the rape of Lucretia by Titian. "No trigger warning," he says, eyebrows raised.

It's not just the mechanisms of display that Ligon has disrupted, though he's done so royally in the ceramics gallery, where cabinets line the room, stuffed with airless displays of porcelain. "We had to get special insurance to have them so close to the edge of the table," he explains of his series of moon jars, free-ranging across a large low plinth, that he made with a Korean potter living in Japan over several years in the late 2010s. They are black versions of the

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traditionally luminous Korean archetype; Ligon describes his as "lumpy and imperfect; they absorb the light". They touch, too, on ideas of blackness. "The potter would point at something I would call ubergrey or brown and say it was black. I had to expand my idea of what black was, and I thought that was fabulous," says Ligon.

More importantly, he has questioned the very idea of perfection, the fundamental mantra of museology, instead finding scored-through *Degas* prints in his archive files, never intended for display, and getting excited about the tiny annotations in the margins of priceless old manuscripts. Art, after all, is about process and Ligon's own is shown in the browsing pages of Baldwin novels from which he took words, so thickly spattered with printing ink as to appear redacted.

"I've just found out that all Baldwin's works are online now so this is from a bygone era. No more books," says Ligon.

There has been much talk of late around the accessibility of museums, to whom they are really available, and how to "open them" — solutions include an interpretation that emphasises diversity and comparisons with the contemporary world, or the giddy excitement of interactive experiences. But here's another idea. Invite an artist into an institution, give them three years, and don't say no.



Glenn Ligon's 'Study for Negro Sunshine (Red) #15' (2019)

To March 2, fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk

