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DEATH DRIVE AND SUBLIMATION

STAGING A RAID

Daniel Culpan on Glenn Ligon at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

Glenn Ligon, "Waiting for the Barbarians," 2021

Long-established institutions that are entangled in colonial history have increasingly come to address and confront their own past with decidedly decolonial programming. Institutions can be criticized for delegating this work to artists with diasporic roots whom they invite to take part. However, this does not necessarily diminish the value of these initiatives. The Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge recently embarked on one such project with Glenn Ligon, who reframed and restaged selected works from the collection, placing them in dialogue with his own art. Quite successfully, as Daniel Culpan declares in a review that demonstrates the continued and renewed urgency of Ligon's work.

"And now, what will become of us without barbarians? / Those people were some sort of a solution." In bright white neon, a series of fragments – various translations of the last two lines of Constantine P. Cavafy's 1898 poem "Waiting for the Barbarians" – float across the grand portico of Cambridge's Fitzwilliam Museum. In the subtle but plangent variation of these lines, which places stress and emphasis on different parts of this imagined dialogue, the viewer is positioned from the outset in the role of interpreter. Yet the unresolved sense of Cavafy's words invites ambiguous readings. Who are the "barbarians," and who – by implication – is the civilized "us"? What is the "solution" to a culture inseparable from barbarism? And, more specifically, what does this mean in the context of a 200-year-old museum of antiquities, the bequest of an Anglo-Irish viscount?

So the tone is set – tilting, insurrectionary, full of playful and pointed questions – for Glenn Ligon's exhibition "All Over the Place." As its title suggests, the artist has staged a kind of raid on the collection, reimagining existing displays and infiltrating the galleries with his own works, in order to, as the press release states, "bring to the fore previously hidden narratives, subtly changing and renewing the meanings of historic works." In the process, Ligon upends ideas of authority, taste, and the unspoken, if strenuously policed, politics of the modern museum, using his own subject position – Black, queer, US-American – to counter the assumptions of British institutional art curation.

On the ground floor, a wing of the Fitzwilliam houses its vast collection of Japanese and European (mainly British, Dutch, and German) porcelain. Ligon has chosen to spotlight certain works, revealing what they artfully both conceal and project. *Two Chinese Boys with Cabbage Leaf Hats* (ca. 1750), jauntily bright figurines in enameled porcelain, strike poses in glass-fronted cabinets. Yet these "Chinese" boys, while playing upon a caricatured type, are actually products of the Meissen manufactory in eastern Germany. As with the gilded dishes elsewhere, made in the Kakiemon style but produced in 18th-century England, we see how "Orientalist" tropes were borrowed from China and Japan to denote refinement and wealth in the West, while consolidating an idea of Europeanness based on trade and colonial power.

All the more striking for their contrasting effect, nine untitled bulbous black vases Ligon created in 2019 are arranged on a plinth at the center of the room. The glazed surfaces of the vessels are blistered and bubbled like tar; lopsided and bulging, they eschew uniformity. As with many of his works, Ligon provides his own commentary, adding a textual layer to their air of cerebral abstraction. Here, the artist's words are mounted on one of the plinths, explaining how he was inspired by Korean *baekja daeho*, nicknamed "moon jars" in English. Collaborating with Jaeho Choi, a Korean-born ceramicist based in Japan, Ligon flips aesthetic convention, casting the jars in black instead of white. As a result, the works become an investigation into how the idea of color is culturally conditioned ("dark greys, deep browns and indigo blues were all described to me as *black*," Ligon writes in the text, referring to his time spent in Shūnan working with Choi). If our perceptions set the limits of our world, then they both form us and are formed by forces larger than ourselves.

Upstairs, in a gallery usually devoted to Italian art spanning the 14th to the 16th century, the viewer is confronted with an almost empty wall. Stripped of its usual works, the wall reveals its original wallpaper, faded to the color of old British pennies, brighter gold rectangles indicating where the paintings have been removed. We're left to contemplate a literal series of absences: an alternative, vanished history that illuminates the subtext behind what a museum decides to show – or hide. At the mid-center of the wall, Ligon has kept one work that symbolizes this dynamic of what's hidden in plain sight: in *Adoration of the Kings* (ca. 1520), Balthazar appears as a Black man, as was often the case in depictions of the three magi. However, a tentativeness hovers over the scene, underlined by a description in a wall-mounted object label (written by the institution, not Ligon) of Balthazar's "negro page," depicted as a darker-skinned boy. Must even a Black king adopt a kind of ersatz whiteness in order to pass? Ligon refuses the accepted ambivalence of this image of Blackness, hovering somewhere between representation and erasure: "he looks like a brother to me," he asserts in a wall text titled *Black Is … Black Ain't*.

Throughout the show, Ligon thumbs his nose at a certain kind of stifling decorum employed by institutions to airbrush inconvenient history.

This is undoubtedly the case for Cambridge University in general, which benefited from its historical links to the slave trade, and the Fitzwilliam Museum in particular: a large part of the museum's collection was inherited from Richard Fitzwilliam's grandfather, Sir Matthew Decker (1679–1749), who earned his fortune trafficking Africans to the Spanish colonies through his South Sea Company. Yet, in recent times, the Fitzwilliam hasn't shied away from confronting its past. "All Over the Place" follows last year's "Black Atlantic: Power, People, Resistance" exhibition, underlining the museum's commitment, however modish, to posing uncomfortable questions – if not always offering simple answers – about its legacy.

In Ligon's needling and irreverent series *Study for Negro Sunshine* (2018–ongoing), the phrase "negro sunshine" – taken from a patronizing description of a Black character in Gertrude Stein's 1909 book *Three Lives* – is inscribed over and over in black oil stick on a red background. It's as if there's something behind the phrase that won't cohere; its repetitions don't produce clarity, but rather the words become clotted and illegible. Almost 20 of these paper-based works buzz between the works of "Old Masters" such as Titian Vecellio and Nicolas Poussin, like agitated wasps spoiling a banquet. Because of the works' odd angles and placement on the gallery walls, the viewer must strain their neck or stand on tiptoe to get close. Spectatorship becomes less a passive act than a reckoning with uncomfortable positions enshrined by "Great Art."

In many of the works on display, Ligon frequently riffs on an idea in order to explode it. In a room of the gallery displaying the collection of Henry Rogers Broughton, 2nd Baron Fairhaven (1900–1973), the artist has curated over 80 flower paintings. Spanning the 17th to mid-19th century, including works by Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568–1625), Rachel Ruysch (1664–1750), and Anne Vallayer-Coster (1744–1818), they teem from the walls, lush and extravagant. In the accompanying wall text, Ligon explains how "museums are, among other things, displays of wealth and abundance associated with colonialism and slavery." This point flirts with sententiousness; in recent years, talk of "decolonizing" the art world has become de rigueur, parroted by everybody from activists to the crassest art-market players. Yet by indulging a certain type – the complacent aesthete, with their gourmandizing eye – with the ultimate salon, Ligon deprives them of their apolitical fantasy. If you want mere beauty, he seems to suggest, then you can drown in it.

Ligon's own canvases ask pointed questions in oblique ways. What does eloquence both express and dissemble? What lies in the gap between language and image? And how does this operate in a United States that enshrines freedom of speech – yet allows some to speak with impunity and others with the threat of violence? In *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background)* (1990), a quote from Zora Neale Hurston is etched in black oil stick on a white canvas. The text slips into confusion as it repeats; the "thrown," in particular, takes on a more aggressive insinuation. The work's only constant is an omnipresent whiteness: a kind of conspicuous absence, signifying something far from neutral. Similarly, in *Static #5* (2023), excerpts from James Baldwin's 1953 essay "Stranger in the Village," an account of his visit to remote Switzerland, are stenciled in white oil on a white gesso background. Ligon has then rubbed black oil stick over

"Glenn Ligon: All Over The Place," Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, 2024–25

the indented letters, creating a kind of braille: indecipherable to the eye, yet leaving an indelible trace. The work almost parodies a certain idea of purity: a whiteness that never questions itself or even has an identity of its own but only exists in relation to what it is not – a negation in search of a self that can speak. In *Debris Field #15* (2021), language seems to have evacuated itself altogether, becoming black marks on a white background, like footprints in snow.

Baldwin's text is also translated onto the canvas of *Mirror #9* (2006). Rendered in etching ink and overlaid with coal dust (a recurring material in Ligon's oeuvre), the canvas is turned into a seductive monument. No longer legible, the text is pushed toward total abstraction: a series of glittering patterns. *Silver Nobody Knew Me #1* (2006) features a transcription of "Africa," a 1982 skit by the US stand-up comedian Richard Pryor: "I went to Africa. I went to the motherfucking land to find my roots, right? Seven hundred million black people! Not one of those motherfuckers knew me." Daubed in white acrylic over silver, Pryor's speech has lost none of its scabrous power. Turning the racist paradigm inside out, he takes stereotypes out of the mouth of the oppressor,

Glenn Ligon,
"Condition Report," 2000

his invective full of egomania and rage, alienating both the bigot and the liberal.

In a room housing a collection of engraved portraits, including works by Edgar Degas and etchings by Frank Auerbach (the latter proofs of an unrelenting physicality, often scratching through the paper itself), Ligon turns to a kind of playful self-referentiality. *Condition Report* (2000) combines two side-by-side reproductions of the artist's 1988 painting *Untitled (I Am a Man)*, depicting the eponymous statement (the "am" emphatically underlined) in black letters. In the version on the right, we also see the annotations made on the original image by a painting conservator in order to "correct" the work ("hairline crack," "blackspot"). Ligon parodies what it means to be "authentic" – whether as a person or a work of art – and thereby questions authenticity itself. What happens when we betray the roles that society demands we play? What possibilities emerge from these slippages between representation and reality?

In *Black Rage (back cover)* (2019), Ligon gives the same "corrective" treatment to a reproduction of the rear cover of the 1968 treatise "Black Rage," by psychiatrists William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs. There's a kind of pathos to these notes scribbled in the margins – "cracks with media loss," "blind impression," "pressure-sensitive tape" – full of double meanings. The "condition report" becomes a kind of evaluation – vigilant and fatigued – of the wider condition of race relations in the United States: a stunted, ugly discourse full of demagoguery and crude, revisionist prejudice. The margins may have widened, but the rhetoric hasn't changed. "Media loss," indeed.

"Glenn Ligon: All Over the Place," Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, September 20, 2024–March 2, 2025.

STILL – POSING

Elena Meilicke über Rineke Dijkstra in der Berlinischen Galerie

Nominell sind es die Porträts von Kindern und Jugendlichen im Tiergarten, die den obligatorischen Berlin-Bezug der Ausstellung von Rineke Dijkstra in der Berlinischen Galerie herstellen. Effektiv ist es auch eine für die Stadt momentan typische Nostalgie nach den Neunzigern, die den Blick auf Dijkstras Werk einfärbt und die Schau zu einem Publikumserfolg machte. Sie scheint die affektive Wirkung der in ihren veristischen Bildern eingefangenen subkulturellen Codes und jugendlichen Ungelenkigkeit möglicherweise zu verstärken. Diese Merkmale verbinden die sieben Fotoserien und zwei Videoinstallationen aus drei Jahrzehnten und erlauben eine Reflexion über die mediale und soziokulturelle Beschaffenheit von Dijkstras Bildern, wie sie Elena Meilicke in ihrer Review anstellt.

„Still – Moving" heißt die Ausstellung zu Rineke Dijkstra in der Berlinischen Galerie und spielt damit auf die beiden unterschiedlichen Bildmedien an, mit denen die Künstlerin arbeitet: Fotografie und Video. Dabei sind Dijkstras hinreißende Videoinstallationen oft in besonderer Weise an Bewegung interessiert, nämlich am Tanz: Arbeiten wie *The Buzz Club, Liverpool, UK/Mystery World, Zaandam, NL* (1996/97) oder *The Krazyhouse* (2008/09), von denen allerdings nur erstere in Berlin zu sehen ist, werfen einen konzentrierten Blick auf die subkulturspezifischen Bewegungsformen jugendlicher Clubbesucher*innen. In langen statischen Einstellungen und vor neutral-weißem Hintergrund in einem Hinterzimmer der jeweiligen Clubs filmt Dijkstra die Tänzer*innen abseits des Dancefloors. Jeder Hüftschwung, jedes Kaugummikauen und noch die kleinste Handbewegung treten mit fast überdeutlicher Klarheit hervor und offenbaren das unausgesprochene Regelwerk subkultureller Codes. Dijkstras Fotografien hingegen – ausschließlich Porträts, meist von Kindern und Jugendlichen, aufgenommen mit einer Großformatkamera, die detailreiche Bilder herstellt, „more realistic than reality itself",[1] wie die Fotografin sagt – kehren ihre Bewegungslosigkeit hervor und strahlen eine gewisse Gravitas, ja, Monumentalität aus. Das hat mit der Größe der Abzüge und dem langwierigen Aufnahmeprozess der Fotografien zu tun, aber auch mit den darauf Abgebildeten, die stets gerade und unverwandt aus dem Bild blicken, durch Komposition und Bildausschnitt isoliert und losgelöst von ihrer direkten Umgebung. Das Unbewegte des fotografischen Bildes tritt an Dijkstras Porträts in besonderer Weise hervor, gerade weil ihre Abbilder gleichzeitig so lebensecht und gegenwärtig anmuten, dass sie Bewegung fast erwarten lassen.

„Still – Moving", das kann auch heißen: immer noch bewegend. Auch das erweist sich als treffende Überschrift für das fotografische Werk von Dijkstra, das wie kaum ein anderes der Gegenwart und seit nunmehr 30 Jahren dafür gefeiert wird, seine Betrachter*innen in besonderer Weise zu affizieren und zu berühren. Das trifft beispielsweise auf jene Bilder zu, für die Dijkstra Menschen in Ausnahmezuständen fotografiert hat: junge Mütter etwa, nur Stunden nach der Entbindung (*New Mothers*, 1994), mit Wochenbettbinden und einem Rinnsal Blut am Bein, oder portugiesische Stierkämpfer kurz nach dem Verlassen der Arena (*Bullfighters*, 1994 und 2000). Diese Bilder zeigen Gesichter, denen die existenziellen Erfahrungen, die sie gerade durchlebt haben, anzusehen sind, mit entrücktem Blick, der zwischen Stolz, Hochgefühl und totaler Erschöpfung schwankt. Dijkstra selbst hat das Fotografieren von Menschen im Zustand der Verausgabung als den Versuch beschrieben, hinter die Konventionen der (Selbst-)Darstellung zu blicken: „I wanted to photograph them at moments when they had to abandon all posing."[2]