

BROOKLYN RAIL

former flag. He walks by a wall covered in revolutionary fists as a young girl or woman stands cautiously nearby, her head shown twice in the artist's signature style, her hands in these same fists, perhaps bridging the gap between the nation's past and future.

Elmur notes that while he primarily paints scenes from Sudan, offering his take on a country in crisis, his works transcend borders, and in this way his latest exhibition does not focus on loss or devastation; rather, in *The Land of the Sun*, Elmur preserves moments of continuity by focusing on the relationships and daily routines he himself has witnessed, growing up in a village, and watching his people's stories unfold. The figures in each painting hold and influence the spaces they inhabit, serving as both memory and prophecy, bringing balance to the two in equal measure.

Charles Moore is an art historian and writer based in New York and author of the book *The Black Market: A Guide to Art Collecting*.

JULIUS EASTMAN & GLENN LIGON

BY CHARLES MOORE

Evil Nigger
52 Walker
January 24–March 22, 2025
New York

When American visual artist Glenn Ligon (b. 1960) agreed to participate in an exhibition alongside the late Julius Eastman (1940–90), he crafted *Sparse Shouts (for Julius Eastman)* (2024), an homage to the musician's highly structured, repetitive compositions and a way to honor the conductor's sparse instructions, which often included vague written directions (along the lines of "sparse shouts"), leaving much up for interpretation. Ligon's installation began with a title and culminated in thirteen variations of the word "speak," each one rendered in neon lettering and mounted on the wall, blinking in tandem with a score of Eastman's improvised vocals playing in the background, engaging the viewer in a multisensory experience that begins frenetically and eventually softens. Structurally, the artist's *Sparse Shouts (for Julius Eastman)* resembles the multimedia artist's 2005 work *Untitled (negro sunshine)*, which is also featured in the show; the latter phrase, Ligon notes, has long "stuck in [his] head," allowing him to explore the fluidity of race, putting the words "negro sunshine" on full display, steeped in neon light. And so, the viewer is forced to reckon with these words.

Those aren't the only words called into question. On view at 52 Walker from January 24 through March 22, 2025, *Julius Eastman & Glenn Ligon: Evil Nigger* celebrates the same improvisation and chance on which Eastman founded his career. Named after his *Evil Nigger* (1979) composition, which premiered on four pianos

at Northwestern University in 1980, the song opens at a rapid, entrancing pace, with a simple downward melody that repeats on a cycle throughout the piece. Playing in a minor key until about halfway through, the melody eventually shifts into all keys, moving from a tonal state into a cacophony of sound, later thinning out into a cloud before dissipating entirely. The composition is equally bold and hypnotic, hinting at certain areas of unification, only to meander in an entirely new direction. The exhibition also includes an archival digital print of Eastman's score, signed and dated, framed and positioned front and center with the composer's signature annotations, as well as a five-part print of the "Thruway" series, the composer's only unpublished score to date.

Three self-playing Yamaha Disklavier, pianos perform *Evil Nigger* every hour, while an antique Weber piano is positioned in the vicinity; combined, the instruments comprise a work of their own titled *Fifty-Two Niggers* (1979/2025), along with the Mac mini, audio interface, and MIDI cables and extension cords that make possible the show's auditory elements. The late Eastman, who gave his pieces controversial names to reflect the scrutiny he felt as a gay Black man, made a career of creating joy in dark times; in a like fashion, Ligon has long integrated Black culture and resilience into his visual works, noting that society remains steeped in white supremacy, and that the likes of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd are not a part of our shared history but occupy center-stage

in the present political climate. The artist elaborated that the name would have to spark discussion rather than stifle it, yet that there could be no posters advertising it, and that digital promotions would have to undergo careful testing to avoid being flagged as hate mail or spam. He noted that people in the art world may recognize *Evil Nigger* as the title of an Eastman composition, but the general public would likely be horrified. Yet there is so much to be horrified by nowadays, and so Ligon considered how he might weave Eastman's ideas into his own practice and challenge constructions of race, gender, and sexuality in the process.

Ligon calls his contributions "ham-fisted," noting that after launching his career as an abstract expressionist, he found the vocabulary of gestural marks to be inadequate; he instead preferred to find inspiration in the texts he was reading, among them Toni Morrison's 1992 novel *Jazz*, which inspired his freestanding neon sculpture *Untitled (America)* (*For Toni Morrison*) (2024), a neon-on-metal-support installation representative of the sound of sucking teeth, an expression associated with the Black diaspora. James Baldwin's 1953 essay "Stranger in the Village," meanwhile, published in the author's *Notes of a Native Son*, provides the same density to which Ligon is drawn. Much of the visual artist's work revolves around illegibility and erasure, themes central to pieces like *Stranger #98* (2023) and *Redacted #11* (2023). Both are marred with oil and coal dust, a waste product

Ligon now uses as a material, the deep black eclipsing the canvases. *Untitled* (2012) showcases the word "AMERICA" in black ink, backwards and upside down on burnt paper, offering a similar sense of masking. Compelling and consistent, the artist offers the same insistence that's long been imbued in Eastman's work, and the pronounced contrast of the black tones and piercing neon light honors the visibility—and come-and-go relevance—of Black authors like Baldwin. Just as Eastman's music resists easy categorization, Ligon's works challenge the viewer to confront the fluidity of language and identity.

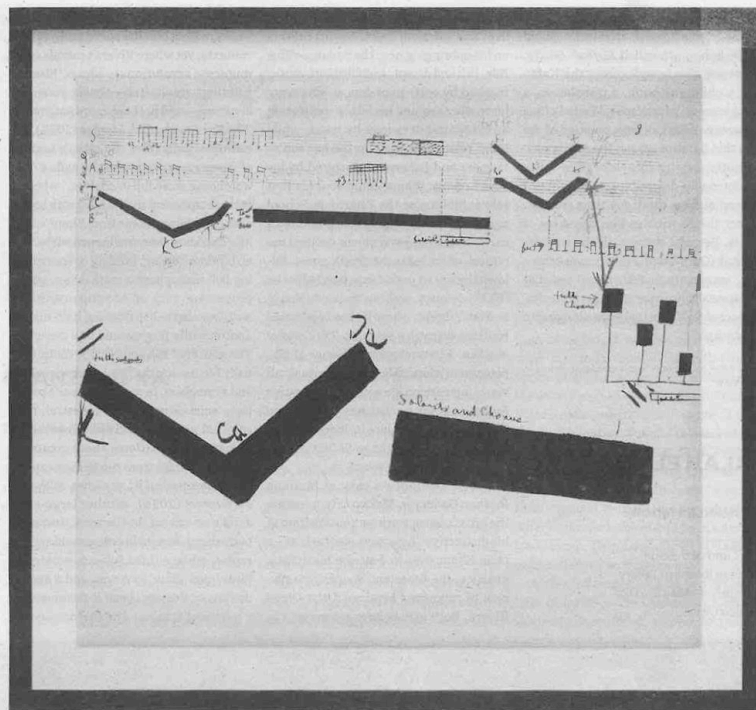
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RALPH LEMON

BY LEE ANN NORMAN

Ceremonies Out of the Air
MoMA PS1
November 14, 2024–March 25, 2025
New York

In his first major New York museum exhibition, Ralph Lemon makes an offering of more than sixty works spanning film and video, performance, drawing, installation,



Julius Eastman, *Thruway Player 8*, 1970/2025. Pigment print, 19 7/8 x 22 3/4 inches. © The Estate of Julius Eastman. Courtesy of The Estate of Julius Eastman and 52 Walker, New York.