



LACMA presents first comprehensive mid-career retrospective of Glenn Ligon



Installation view of Glenn Ligon: America at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. ©Glenn Ligon. Photo: ©2011 Museum Associates/LACMA.



LOS ANGELES, CA.- The [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#) presents the first comprehensive mid-career retrospective of Glenn Ligon (b. 1960), widely regarded as one of the most important and influential American artists to have emerged in the past two decades. Organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art by curator Scott Rothkopf, in close collaboration with the artist, the exhibition surveys twenty-five years of Ligon's work, from his post-graduate days in the Whitney Independent Study Program until the present. Glenn Ligon: AMERICA premiered at the Whitney (March 10–June 5, 2011); following LACMA's presentation, it will travel to the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth (February 12– June 3, 2012).

LACMA's presentation is curated by Franklin Sirmans, the Terri and Michael Smooke department head and curator of contemporary art. The exhibition features approximately one hundred works, including paintings, prints, photography, drawings, and sculptural installations, as well as striking recent neon reliefs—one of which, Rückenfigur (2009), was added to LACMA's collection in 2010 and was on view in the recent exhibition Human Nature: Contemporary Art from the Collection. LACMA also acquired another work of Ligon's the same year, The Death of Tom (2008).

The retrospective debuts previously unexhibited early works that shed light on Ligon's artistic origins, and for the first time reconstitutes major series, such as his seminal "Door" paintings, which launched the artist's career. Loans are drawn from important institutional and private collections, including the artist's, as well as several Los Angeles collections. Ligon has had a strong following in Los Angeles for several years due to a string of gallery exhibitions at Regen Projects dating back to 2004.

Throughout his career, Ligon has pursued an incisive exploration of American history, literature, and society in a body of work that builds critically on the legacies of modern painting and more recent conceptual art. A leading member of a generation of artists who came to the fore in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Ligon is best known for his series of text-based paintings referencing the writings of noted authors such as Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, and Jean Genet, among others. These iconic black-and-white paintings—with their play between abstraction and legibility, light and dark, disembodied text and painterly physicality—signaled the arrival of a singular artistic vision that synthesized questions of identity with key concerns from recent art history, such as the role of appropriation and language in art.

Exhibition overview

Ligon has dealt with a wide range of source material, which will be highlighted in the exhibition. One gallery will re-create the bulk of his landmark multimedia installation To Disembark (1993), which explores the aftereffects of slavery in America through a series of prints in which Ligon casts

himself as a slave on the lam and a group of crates playing music that allude to the story of Henry Box Brown, a slave who famously shipped himself to freedom. Another gallery will feature Notes on the Margin of the Black Book (1991–93), Ligon's moving reflection on the cultural debates surrounding the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe; this stunning, fifty-foot-long piece remains a milestone of the art of the 1990s. A group of paintings reflect on Louis Farrakhan's controversial Million Man March. Also on display will be several brightly colored paintings borrowing quotations from Richard Pryor's stand-up routines, which are both funny and troubling in their frank social critique, and a group of six majestic canvases that treat quotations from James Baldwin's essay "Stranger in the Village" in oil stick and glittering coal dust.

Other bodies of work employ images and texts related to early civil rights demonstrations, political figures such as Jesse Jackson and Malcolm X, and 1970s coloring books targeted at African Americans. The final dramatic gallery will present three twelve-foot-long neon works featuring the word AMERICA. Although deeply pointed and courageous, Ligon's artistic voice is more subtle than strident, more investigative than declarative, the breadth of his subject matter matched by the wide range of mediums he employs.

Glenn Ligon

Born and raised in the Bronx, New York, Ligon earned his B.A. from Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, and studied at the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program. He has presented solo museum exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris (1993); the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC (1993); the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (1996); the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2000); the Studio Museum in Harlem (2001); and the Power Plant, Toronto (2005), among other venues. His awards and honors include a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship (2003); the Skowhegan Medal for Painting (2006); the Academy Award in Art from the American Academy of Arts and Letters (2006); the Studio Museum's Joyce Alexander Wein Artist Prize (2009); and a United States Artist Fellowship (2010). His work is found in the collections of LACMA, the Whitney, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Art Institute of Chicago, the High Museum of Art, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Walker Art Center, and many more.

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