

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Hannah Duguid, 'Glenn Ligon: When Barack Obama is your biggest fan', *The Independent*, March 11, 2014



Glenn Ligon was amazed when the President told him he has one of his paintings in the White House, he tells Hannah Duguid.

The American artist Glenn Ligon sat in the audience at a Harlem fundraiser for Barack Obama's second election campaign and watched the President sing part of an Al Green song. It turned out that Obama had a pretty good voice. Then Ligon felt a tap on his shoulder, and turned to see who was there. A member of the National Democratic Committee leaned into his ear and asked if he had a moment to meet the President. Taken aback, Ligon replied: "Sure."

Backstage, he heard Obama talking from behind a screen, and saw a line of people waiting to be photographed. He stepped forward to be introduced by an aide who said: "Mr President, this is the artist Glenn Ligon. His painting *Black Like Me #2* is in your personal quarters in the White House." To the artist's amazement, Obama replied: "Oh yes. We have a set of prints too, but we had to rotate them out because of light issues and I really miss them."

"I thought to myself, 'the President of the United States knows what's in his house,'" says Ligon. "It's not just decoration. He looks at it and knows when it's not there. It was touching to realise that visual art is an integral part of his and his family's life. It's not just window dressing, not something you have to talk about because people expect you to. It was a really great way to meet him."

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Every president is allowed put up work they like. The painting *Black Like Me #2* is an overtly political painting. A single phrase, "All the traces of the Griffin I had been were wiped from existence", is repeated in black paint over white, growing darker until it abstracts into a black mass. The line is from a book by the white writer John Howard Griffin, who painted himself black in 1961 and set off to the South to see how people treated him – not well as it turned out.

Ligon's latest series of paintings, *Come Out*, also refer back to the 1960s and a moment in black history. They also use black text, which slips into abstraction at times. At first sight, in the Thomas Dane gallery in Mayfair, these giant monochrome canvases seem close to paintings by the US Minimalist Frank Stella. Although there are political and historical narratives within his work, Ligon points out that he is a Formalist. Jasper Johns, Bruce Nauman, Andy Warhol and Félix González Torres are all influences.

The text used in this series – "Come out to show them" – comes from a 1966 performance by the composer Steve Reich, based on the testimony of a teenager, Daniel Hamm, who was wrongly arrested of murder during the Harlem Riot of 1964. Hamm had to puncture a bruise to prove he had been beaten by police: "I had to, like, open the bruise up, and let some of the bruised blood come out to show them."

Ligon layers the text in the same way that Reich layered voice recordings in his performance, so that eventually both sound and text almost disappear into abstraction: but not quite. "Even though the text is sometimes very dark and hard to read, it's still there, still legible in places, like the echoes in history. Things come to the surface out of the darkness," says Ligon.

His relationship to history, both in art and politics, is a fascinating juxtaposition. The pure, controlled form of Minimalist painting infused with political chaos and violence. Ligon's work embodies something particularly and complicatedly American. No wonder Obama's a fan.

Glenn Ligon: Come Out is at Thomas Dane Gallery, London SW1 (020-7925 2505) to 22 March

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/glenn-ligon-when-barack-obama-is-your-biggest-fan-9182631.html>