

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Eleanor Nairne, 'Glenn Ligon: Thomas Dane Gallery', *Frieze*, May 2014

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### GLENN LIGON

#### Thomas Dane Gallery, London

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In 1966, the civil rights activist Truman Nelson approached the composer Steve Reich with ten reel-to-reel tapes, asking him to edit them into a 'dramatic sound collage' to be performed at a fundraising benefit for the retrial of the Harlem Six. The tapes contained interviews with the characters involved in the case, which came to symbolize the rampant racism and corruption in the American criminal justice system, as six black men were sentenced to life imprisonment for a murder they did not commit. Reich excerpted a fragment from the vulnerable voice of 19-year-old Daniel Hamm, one of the men accused, describing his response to police brutality: 'I had to, like, open the bruise up and let some of the bruise blood come out to show them'. Ironically, as Reich noted much later, *Come Out* may have had its world premier as 'pass-the-hat music', but it is the case of the Harlem Six that has since fallen into relative obscurity. These two strands of history were at the heart of Glenn Ligon's recent exhibition at Thomas Dane Gallery.

This complicated field of references is one that Ligon is well equipped to tackle. Text-based work is, after all, what the American artist is acclaimed for, from his earliest text painting in 1988, *Untitled (I Am a Man)*, which is based on the signs carried by striking sanitation workers in Memphis in 1968. As the title of this exhibition indicates, Ligon is drawn to what might emerge through the process of translation. Yet the colloquial connotations of 'coming out' (a nod to the artist's own sexuality), are so explicit that these two words, endlessly reiterated, seem to undo themselves, encouraging a degree of scepticism about what might resist revelation. In an interview with *Art Journal* in 2001, the artist clearly articulated this point: 'given the cultural context the literature and photos I am using comes out of, the demands on those texts and images, I am interested in when they fail to communicate'.

Ligon's texts are so burdened with meaning that they buckle from the load and, like Reich's soundscapes, become more about process and form than semantics. This can, in turn, enable a more subtle engagement with complex subject matter, such as black identity; as Huey Copeland has noted, Ligon's work proposes a kind of 'reading askance [...] meant to refigure the self even as it is contained in

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For a single room of just six works, Ligon's *Come Out* was strangely captivating. Three small and three large canvases were screen-printed with the repeated refrain: 'Come out to show them.' The large works, hung in the order in which they were made, are monumental landscapes of text, each over six metres in length and two metres in height. In *Come Out #1* (all works 2014) the leading is aligned to make the monosyllabic words look like brickwork; in *Come Out #3* the picture plane is so densely printed that the words are almost lost under a blanket of undulating toner; and in *Come Out #2* the layers drift askew creating an inebriated haze. Ligon's shifting aesthetic mimics the complex composition of *Come Out* (1966): beginning with three renditions of Hamm's full sentence – each punctuated by a second of silence – the phrase 'come out to show them' is then subjected to Reich's phase-shifting effect, in which two recordings of the same excerpt are brought slowly out of sync, with the discrepancy widening to become a reverberation and then almost a canon, before the two voices are split into four and then eight, continually looping until the words become indecipherable.

the box of blackness'. In this respect, the inclusion of three preparatory works did more than just flesh out the body of work or play with the equivalence of six works for the Harlem Six. The three canvases, each the size of a sheet of A0 paper, are divided into vertical bars that resemble a test card. *Come Out Study #3*, for example, has a column of text that melts into a matt background with only the gleam of the odd character decipherable under the light; a column of layered unaligned text that looks like a Cyrillic script; then a column of words, suddenly legible, that seem to cascade down the canvas; and a final column in which the text descends back into a dense black. Scrutinizing these studies (aware that the artist did so too in order to make decisions about the larger compositions) the viewer becomes alive to all the expression stifled beneath their surfaces. The endlessly repeated words become a call, an incantation, for the truth about the Harlem Six – five of whom were released after several years of campaigning, but one of whom continues to serve a life sentence on the basis of a forced confession – to finally come out.

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ELEANOR NAIRNE

