

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Florence Waters, "Encounters and Collisions: Glenn Ligon looks back on history in his latest, exploratory exhibition," *Wallpaper*, 7th April 2015



'Untitled (from the Troubled Waters Portfolio)' by William Eggleston, 1980.
Courtesy of Eggleston Artistic Trust and Cheim & Read, New York

▶ ↗ ■■■ 4 OF 12

Two years ago, Glenn Ligon started writing letters to artists whose work had made an impression on him in his life, asking if he could borrow that particular work for an exhibition.

Some of these short letters - written simply and adoringly, almost like teenage fan letters - are published in the catalogue of the show, now open at the Nottingham Contemporary. They reveal so much about the nature of this wonderful, highly personal exhibition curated by Ligon.

While some of the letters were sent to living artists, others are letters that Ligon would have sent those of the past, as if they were still around. To Jean-Michel Basquiat, for example, he writes: 'We met once... I was shy and you were famous.' He goes on to write that he was an aspiring artist at the time (the late 70s) and didn't know any black artists. He says he knew Basquiat's paintings were important but he didn't know why.

Ligon, who was born in the Bronx in 1960, has put his search for identity as a gay, black man at the centre of his own practice. This exhibition reveals the delicate process by which he found a formal and intellectual vocabulary to explore his identity by borrowing from images and icons.

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The show features work by 45 different artists from Andy Warhol to Steve McQueen, as well as Black Panther Party posters, press shots and footage from the 1963 Birmingham Riots.

Seven of Ligon's own works are present, including the 1991 painting 'I lost my voice I found my voice'. This is the message and the rhythm that drives the show. Travelling through the past 50 years of art history and 50 years of Ligon history, you begin to witness how the artist has responded and 'found' a voice to explore different trends, from his early interest in abstract painting to his discovery of conceptual art and film.

There are four rooms, each exploring a different stage in Ligon's own investigations. 'I was interested in how abstraction can be black but is not black,' the artist once said of his early interest in figures such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning.

In one room hangs a stark, eight-foot Franz Kline abstract in broad black and white brushstrokes; a film featuring Bruce Nauman painting himself white and then black; and 'Valentine', a phallic semi-abstract work in flesh tone and black by de Kooning which Ligon says he used to visit 'every six months or so' at MoMA in New York.

On one level, this show is a curatorial coup, tying together different themes with works from various global collections. But it's also a revealing and sophisticated study of the way in which images are used by society, and how their meaning extends far beyond their gallery contexts.

<http://www.wallpaper.com/art/encounters-and-collisions-glenn-ligon-looks-back-on-history-in-his-latest-exploratory-exhibition/8678#115280>