

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Jesc Bunyard, "Glenn Ligon: Encounters and Collisions," *Hunger TV*, 8th April 2015



When I met the director of Nottingham Contemporary, Alex Farquharson, he had just started to eat part of an artwork.

The artwork in question was 'Untitled (USA Today)' by Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Gonzalez-Torres is perhaps most known for his artworks using pieces of wrapped candy. In this instance there is an endless supply of the cellophane wrapped sweet, so no harm in eating in one really. Seems like Alex thought the same.

The work is currently being exhibited in an extraordinary show at Nottingham Contemporary. Although the exhibition is billed as a solo show: 'Glenn Ligon: Encounters and Collisions', it's a group solo, but one that also forms a portrait of Ligon and his work.

Glenn Ligon is currently most known in Britain for being Barack Obama's favourite artist. Ligon's work explores American history and society as well as issues of racial and sexual identity. Although Ligon is positioned as a painter, he often works within different media including video, neon and installation. Ligon often references works within arts and culture within his own practice, and the exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary examines the links Ligon has with other artists; ranging from Bruce Nauman to Steve McQueen to Lorna Simpson. The show probes into American history and sexual and racial politics, and shows work which ranges from the key names of Abstract Expressionism to the imagery of The Black Panther Party.

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Glenn Ligon has curated the show and has created an incredibly considered exhibition. This is an outstanding exhibition and one that will root Ligon firmly within the consciousness of the British public. Here director Alex Farquharson discusses the show's approach and correlation to American and British politics.

What the thought-process behind starting this exhibition?

Well I approached Glenn. He had a big retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum of Art. There was an amazing catalogue produced for that, a lot of the introduction essays illustrate works from art history that he has a relationship with. One senses it in his works, but there were things that I wouldn't think of when looking at his work, for example De Kooning. That gave me a wider sense of the art history that has inspired him, which he is related to. At the same time they produced another book, a smaller volume called 'Yourself in the World', which was of Glenn's writings and interviews. Some artists write, but I think particularly for an artist with a lot of visibility in the art world it's quite unusual to keep writing and to keep making that an important aspect in relation to their practical work. I was also interested in the ways that Glenn had connections to wider cultural figures. It gave me a sense that there could be a wonderful group exhibition curated by Glenn, seen from the perspective of his practice.

The exhibition has taken two years to put together; it's an incredible understanding. It's a lot of time out from making his own work, it's not a decision he took lightly, but he could see a bigger project within it and has been committed to realising it in the best possible way. You can see that in the way it's installed.



Charles Moore - Alabama Fire Department Aims High Pressure Water Hoses at Civil Rights Demonstrators, Birmingham

Yes, I was looking in particular in the first gallery, there's his America piece ('Untitled', 2006, neon, paint and powder-coated aluminum) next to Felix Gonzalez-Torres' 'Untitled, USA Today' and that interplay is extraordinary. The show hits you in that room...

Yes, I think that each room has a different feel. I think the show is very well calibrated, in terms of meaningful relationships between things.

THOMAS DANE GALLERY



Glenn Ligon, Untitled

But the show doesn't feel forced, it allows you to make your own connections between the works. There's a lot here but I think Glenn has somehow given it all space. I think Glenn is a fantastic installer of work, and as we know now, a fantastic installer of other people's work. The care he has taken to really show things in an aesthetic and sympathetic light as possible but also in a meaningful way is impressive.

There's been a shift towards 'artist as curator' recently and I think that this exhibition shows the potential and possibilities of the movement...

Absolutely. In this exhibition, I think it's an example of where the artist is almost writing with the artworks, constructing beautiful sentences out of them. At the same time it doesn't compromise one's relationship with an individual work. The work can be what it wants to be as part of this wider context. I think what makes it unusual, as an artist/curator show, is that it doesn't stop at it being about Glenn. When one's going around a show there is that sense of collective, that in a way everyone has: that sense of a collective of influences and relationships. It's made up of all these pairings, him and something else, there's this great intimacy about the importance of each of individual things to him. It's not a great mass of things, each of these are important in different ways. Rather than writing an essay in the catalogue, he wrote a series of letters to individual artists.

The exhibition is quite socio-political and it's coming at a time when we're in the run up to the general election. Immigration is a major buzzword at the moment. Was the timing on purpose; was it fortuitous that this has happened? Do you accept or resist the link?

I'm afraid it didn't occur to me two years ago that this would be happening during an election! There's no direct link with the debate around the general election in this country.

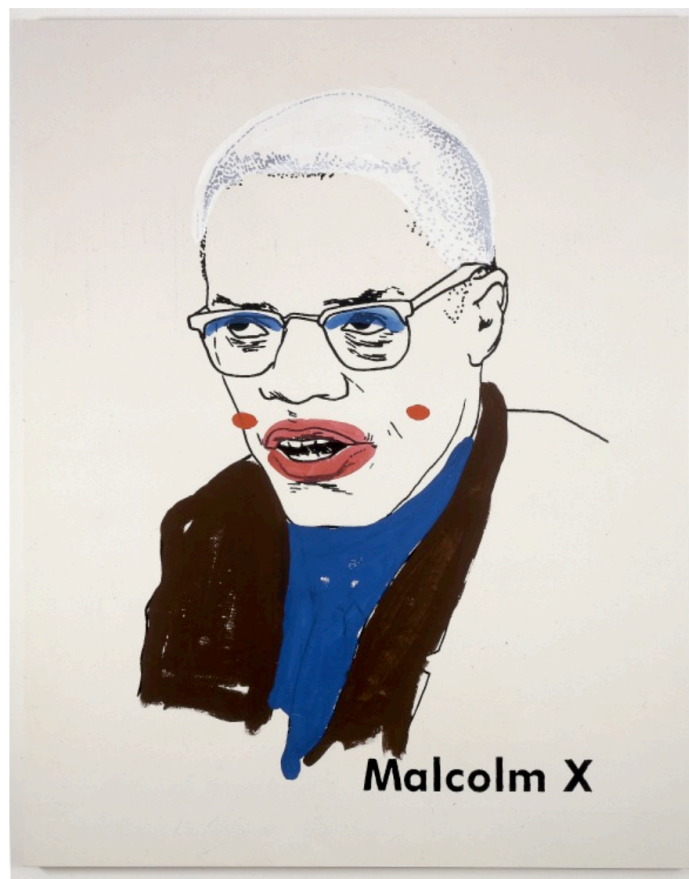
I think we find it quite difficult to have that debate because the counter argument against immigration is quite extreme...

Yes, how much of the argument is actually truly free of racism? When you're thinking about immigration, who is more welcome than others and why? What do they look like? How wealthy are they? How European are they? How African are they? The debate is very rarely free of race, and of course there are very complicated issues surrounding the existing settled population's access to over-stretched social services, to jobs. It seems to me that when it rises to a political level that the complexity of those issues is just not addressed. A few years ago it almost would have been beyond the pale for all parties to be talking about

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

immigration as if it's the number one issue. Cultures, including Nottingham life, are clearly enriched by it being a multicultural society.

This exhibition shows culture and society as something that is always evolving and in flux. That's different from saying anything goes, but what it is saying is that nothing is fixed and stable.



Glenn Ligon, Malcolm X

Yes, I was looking at 'Newspaper' by Robert Gober, with the headline about gay marriage. That work does highlight how we have progressed in all areas of acceptance.

Two steps forward, one step back! Yes we have come a long way but I think at the same time, things can progress and regress. We have to be aware of that. Actually a lot of the work from the sixties and seventies is a reminder that there were times that were more progressive than now, particularly in American history. Which is not to say that the sixties and seventies were perfect! However, after a lot of the progressive gains, Regan was trying to revive fifties America and Thatcher was reviving Victoriana.

Again here is this idea of Utopia, of what was Britain and America was/is perceived to be...

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

In terms of the show, Glenn's work is largely concerned with American history and art history, but outside of America it's had a particular resonance in Britain. Which I think has to do with a crossover of ideas. When he was first exhibited here, the context in which the work was shown was important to him. There was a lot of discussion around the idea of black diaspora, particularly between New York and London in the 90s when Glenn's work was first emerging. The Steve McQueen work 'Bear' was in a show called Mirage that Glenn's work was also shown in. I remember that show well and those works are the two that I remember best. The show was dealing with the crossover of race and sexuality, and how the one would make you think differently about the politics of the other. Like Lorna Simpson and Zoe Leonard. Lorna is making work from a Black female perspective, Zoe Leonard making work from a Lesbian perspective but not being Black, or Felix Gonzalez-Torres, a Gay American-Cuban, his lover being ill with AIDS and dying. They're all addressing a lineage of art and introducing difference into mainstream art positions.

Glenn Ligon: Encounters and Collisions is at Nottingham Contemporary until 14th June.

The exhibition will then transfer to Tate Liverpool from 30th June until 18th October.



Alighiero Boetti, Mappa

<http://www.hungertv.com/feature/glenn-ligon-encounters-and-collisions/>