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Initial Contemplations: Glenn Ligon's For Comrades and Lovers



Photo by Callan Shattuck

Have you seen what has come of the odd and kind-of ugly white wall that once greeted guests, students, and faculty walking in to the University Center?

After the water main break in 2013, The New School finally opened the event cafe in the lower level of the University Center. The entrance is a grand set of gray, stylish stairs. As if the the steep stairs weren't risky enough for those prone to tripping, there is also a purple fluorescent installation wrapping the inner ceiling edge of the lower level that can't help but be noticed.

The New School commissioned the notable conceptual artist Glenn Ligon to create an installation with text from Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass," a collection that the American poet added to over the span of his life.

Ligon was chosen by a group of faculty and trustees assembled by provost Tim Marshall as an art advisory group, according to New School communications manager Kasia Broussalian. Ligon's work incorporates and emphasizes the university's recent rebranding efforts of "the new visual identity that embodies the progressive mission of the New School and represents a technological leap in the field of the art of type design." There is still negotiation about whether the piece is pink, fuchsia, or purple.

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While some focus more on the meaning and origin of the words lining the L2 space ceiling— others ask: approximately how much did this installation cost? So far somewhat vague details have been announced, just that the funding for the commission came out of an art budget that was included within construction funds for the University Center.

Artist and Parsons Professor Ward Shelley provided an interesting insight on the piece emphasizing its ability to provide a lasting impact, “My first impression is that is very good, and very appropriate for a university... If you are here for four years and you see it every day, it is hard to imagine you will get tired of it – the rich text has too much going on to become a one-liner symbol,” he adds, “Plus, it is beautiful to look at.”



Curators of the New School Art Collection, Silvia Rocciolo and Eric Stark

The curators of the New School Art Collection, Silvia Rocciolo and Eric Stark led a talk about the work in the event cafe on April 16. “Glenn Ligon’s iconic work is cultivating work from text; pro-creating text. Usually to speak about issues of history, race, identity, society...” Rocciolo explained, “For the New School he chose the great American poet and New Yorker Walt Whitman, to really speak to those issues.”

According to the curators, Ligon spoke about choosing to marry Whitman and the New School in his art and this piece because Whitman was all about democracy and the American experiment, linking his words to the New School’s institutional emphasis on democracy and free speech. This being said, the lines used in Ligon’s “For Comrades and Lovers” do not directly cover these topics.

While some students enjoy the installation, many are mystified by its presence, appreciating its aesthetic over other qualities. On the day of its reveal, Lang

sophomore Andrae Santos briefly expressed her first impression of the installation, “I don’t know much about it. It’s kind of hard to read, but attention grabbing.” Parsons sophomore and fashion design Monica Magliari had a more positive reaction on the piece, “I like it. I think the purple is nice at least. I mean they chose a nice purple for that. I like how it circles,” adding, “I think the neon is actually probably the only thing you could have done with that area if you wanted some sort of art [there].”

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