

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Thorpe, Vanessa. 'From pop art to the present: the dreams that shaped America,' *The Guardian Online*. 5 March 2017

theguardian

From pop art to the present: the dreams that shaped America

The British Museum's new exhibition features the work of uncompromising US artist Glenn Ligon



A curator hangs one of 10 screenprints of Marilyn Monroe by Andy Warhol. Photograph: Guy Bell/REX/Shutterstock

For Glenn Ligon, the provocative American artist, Barack Obama's tenure in the White House was notable not just as the first time a black man took the reins of power in the US, but because the president knew about art. And the admiration went both ways: Obama hung Ligon's work in his private quarters in the White House. This weekend the uncompromising art of the 56-year-old New Yorker favoured by the former president is to take its place in an unusual and timely art show at the British Museum that looks at American ideals and the reality behind them.

The exhibition of the museum's modern and contemporary prints – The American Dream – and ranges from the dawn of pop art to the present. It covers a range of more than 200 works from 70 artists working between 1960 and 2014. While the show does not mention the current US president by name and delivers no overt message, much of its content is clearly political. The final section of the show will look specifically at the effect of "the war on terror" and the financial crash of 2008. Questions of race, feminism, Aids and identity are all addressed by many of the artists, who include stars of the post-war scene such as Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns.

11 DUKE STREET, ST JAMES'S, LONDON SW1Y 6BN

TEL +44 (0)20 7925 2505 FAX +44 (0)20 7925 2506 info@thomasdane.com

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Contemporary prints, which are relatively cheap and accessible, have been collected by the museum since Hogarth's time. Works for this show have been acquired by curators since the success of the 2008 exhibition, *The American Scene*: from Hopper to Pollock, although many prints have not been displayed until now because of their size.



Glenn Ligon at an exhibition of his work. Photograph: Stefanie Keenan/WireImage

Ligon's work often reproduces lines of text from famous books and essays about the experience of being black and gay in America, printing them again and again across a canvas. "The political," the artist has explained, "gets turned, through repetition, into a kind of abstraction."

While he continues to use paint, Ligon has also turned to other methods, such as collage and neon light, for examining what he regards as his country's illusory offer of equality and prosperity. In the early 1990s, he used Robert Mapplethorpe's idealised photographs of nude black men and contrasted them with quotes from philosophers, activists, and religious leaders. More recently he made a neon sign of the word AMERICA – but displayed them either upside down, reversed or with the light switched off.

Obama's chosen Ligon work, the painting *Black Like Me #2*, repeats the single phrase "All the traces of the Griffin I had been were wiped from existence" in black paint until it blurs into a black mass. The line comes from the white writer John Howard Griffin, who posed as a black man in the southern states of America in 1959 and was widely mistreated.

Ligon was introduced to Obama unexpectedly one evening at a fundraising event in Harlem, New York, and impressed the artist with his attitude to art. "They live with art, they take their children to look at art, they're not scared of artists. This is not some bullshit," Ligon has said. The president knew *Black Like Me #2* and told him he had a further set of prints hung at the White House, but these had been moved because of potential light damage and he missed them.

Ligon was both reassured and gratified: "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." Speaking at the Art Basel fair in Miami last December, Ligon talked about how he had to "unlearn" his belief that making art meant being white. He also told his audience about his frustration that black artists were still excluded from the established history of art. Explaining his position on those who attempt to label art that criticises society or expresses a minority view, Ligon told the story of a friend who was asked if he was a political artist. "No," he replied, "I'm a citizen."

<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2017/mar/05/british-museum-american-dream-ligon>