

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

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Installation view of "Blue Black," Pulitzer Arts Foundation, 2017 Photograph © Alise O'Brien Photography
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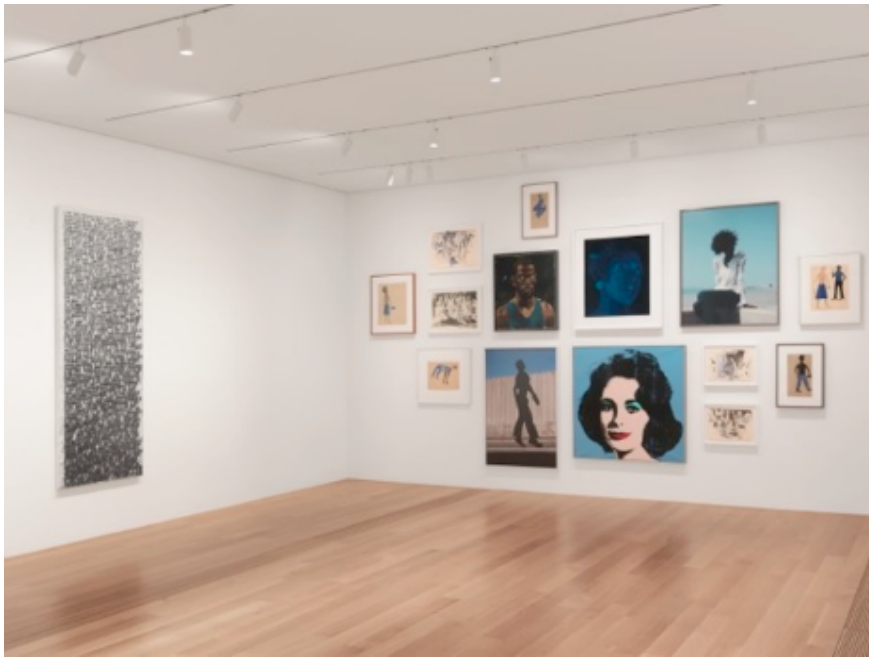
A new exhibition, curated by the artist Glenn Ligon, interrogates the various meanings of the colors, from solemnity to racial justice.

The Pulitzer Arts Foundation is situated in St. Louis's Grand Center Arts District, an area at the center of a complicated and complex divide. The racial and economic disparities are palpable. Grand Center, a predominately low-income and working-class African American community, has undergone significant change over the past several years. Decades of neglect and abandonment have yielded to major redevelopment efforts. Its proximity to cultural amenities, Saint Louis University, medical facilities, and to downtown St. Louis has attracted upwardly mobile young professionals and families, mostly white, eager to capitalize on the affordable housing stock and embrace urban living.

The museum's founders, Emily Rauh Pulitzer and Joseph Pulitzer Jr., were intentional about the location of the museum, and being a meaningful neighbor is central to its mission. The Pulitzer presents experimental, progressive, and multidisciplinary exhibitions and programs to inspire audiences to think differently about art and its relationship to their lives. The museum has no admission fee, and engages with local residents and artists to shape exhibitions and programs.

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Cara Starke, director of the Pulitzer, invited the American artist Glenn Ligon to spend time in the space and community with hopes that he would curate an exhibition with a similar thesis. Ligon's resulting show, "Blue Black," is based on the work with the same title by Ellsworth Kelly, and features 54 works varying from figuration to abstraction, to textiles, sculptures, avant-garde film, and more, including multiple works by Ligon. Through the literal and metaphorical examination of these two colors, disparate conversations emerge from the work regarding identity, race, sexuality, and power in American society.



Installation view of Blue Black, West Gallery. Pulitzer Arts Foundation, 2017
(Photograph © Alise O'Brien Photography)

I spoke with Ligon and Starke separately about "Blue Black," the process, community impact, and the dire and multivalent conversations explored in the work that reflect our collective memory, our current state as a country, and the road ahead.

Glenn Ligon, you organized "Blue Black" into three arrangements. Could you talk about the inspiration behind the word associations?

There are so many artists that use blue and black in their work, from Andy Warhol to David Hammons, Ellsworth Kelly to Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. The title of the exhibition comes from looking at the Ellsworth Kelly work "Blue Black" and it resonating with me immensely. I had an auditory vision where I heard the voice of Louis Armstrong singing "What did I do to be so black and blue?"

I decided to loosely arrange the exhibition around three different iterations of the words "blue" and "black." The first, blue black, explores colors as separate and discrete, like the Kelly piece. The second is blueblack, where the distinction of color blurs like Lyle Ashton Harris's print. The final, blue-black with a hyphen, describes racial identity as the police officer rendered in luxuriant black in the work by Kerry James Marshall.

Although I have these three organizing principles in the show, it's much more interesting to show a work that doesn't have black literally expressed in it but blackness implied so the work expands out. "Blue" by Derek Jarman, a single-shot film of a blue screen, does it. Jarman died from AIDS-related complications. He talks about the loss of friends and sight—blackness rendered as an entire range of metaphors for example, life, death, comfort, loss.

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Derek Jarman, *Blue*, 1995. Digitized 35 mm film. Courtesy of Basilisk Communications/Zeitgeist© Basilisk Communications Ltd. Installation view of *Blue Black*, South GalleryPulitzer Arts Foundation, 2017. (Photograph by Jim Corbett © Alise O'Brien Photography)

Has the location of Pulitzer and its proximity to Ferguson, Michael Brown, and the Black Lives Movement informed your approach to curating the exhibition?

I don't think it changed my approach, but the kinds of conversations I had with people from the community better informed my curatorial practice for the show.

It was important for me to talk with people who were stakeholders in the neighborhood, like community activists, poets, and writers. I met with the charter school directly across from Pulitzer. I learned what was going on in the neighborhood. One of the things that came up was the artist Kelley Walker and his controversial use of images of black people in the space of his practice. I was interested in the amount of energy expended to boycotting the show and conversations around the content. [Editors' note: "Kelley Walker: Direct Drive" was a controversial exhibition on view at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis last fall. The show depicted photographs of black women and men smudged with toothpaste and chocolate. It sparked public protests and several members of St. Louis's black community ordered that the work be removed from the museum. The show was not taken down, but the curator resigned.]

Also, the Pulitzers were deliberate about making an investment of giving back to the neighborhood a long time before the area was starting to be revitalized.

Please talk a little bit about the artwork "A Small Band." Three powerful words ("blues," "blood," and "bruise") were taken from one of the wrongfully accused Harlem six teenagers who attested to police violence in 1964. Can you tell us about the work's history?

"A Small Band" is a combination of three large, text-based neon white sculptures that say "BLUES," "BLOOD," and "BRUISE." In 1966, composer Steven Reich arranged the musical piece "Come Out" based on Daniel Hamm, one of the six black Harlem teens wrongly faulted for a murder two years prior. Hamm was repeatedly beaten by police and denied medical treatment. So he opened up one of his bruises "to let the bruise blood come out to show them" the severity of his trauma.

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In 2015, Okwui Enwezor first commissioned “A Small Band” for an outside space at the Venice Biennale. A year later, Theaster Gates wanted to show the work outdoors in Chicago, but it wasn’t logistically feasible, so he installed them on stands at Stony Island Arts Bank. I thought it would be interesting to be in direct dialogue with the Kelly piece in the main space, and there wasn’t space to fit them there.

I was inspired by musician Jason Moran’s composition “STAGED: Three Deuces” and how it speaks to the confines and constrained spaces that jazz artists operated in, especially during segregation. So, I decided to jam “A Small Band” in the confined area in front of Kelly’s “Blue Black,” which adds to the dynamics of the space.



Portrait of Glenn Ligon (Paul Sepuya)

Could you talk about the element of music in the exhibition?

The two colors in Louis Armstrong’s song “(What Did I Do To Be So) Black and Blue?” resonate in particular ways in African American history and culture. There is an invisibility felt that Armstrong expresses in the lyrics. For example, in the exhibition, Jennie C. Jones is interested in materials that explore sound and vibration—there are pieces that directly affect music.

“I constantly think about, ‘What does it mean to be a purposeful neighbor in this community? How do we have conversations of the moment?’”

Cara Starke, how do you imagine Glenn’s exhibition relating to the museum’s mission?

Glenn talks about race, identity, the complexities of American history, and what it means to be a black man. He works across different media and is inspired by opposing perspectives. Glenn recombines divergent aspects of his experiences—it’s not singular—and presents a future that I really appreciate. He doesn’t want to be locked into one particular category, like abstraction.

The Museum is a non-collecting venue. We feature work with value whether it is historic or contemporary to help interrogate our present. We look at what conversations have we won and lost over time that will make us thoughtful citizens. I constantly think about, “What does it mean to be a purposeful neighbor in this community? How do we have conversations of the moment?” It means building meaningful relationships and listening to the community.

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For “Blue Black,” Glenn set up conversation that were quite powerful and poetic with neighbors from social activists to local school teachers. The Pulitzer staff created a “Blue Black” Library and invited artists and educators to compose a selection of books, films, albums, and other media in response to the exhibition’s themes. More visitors have utilized the library than ever.

“Blue Black,” curated by Glenn Ligon, is on view now through October 7, 2017 at Pulitzer Arts Foundation.

<https://www.citylab.com/life/2017/07/glenn-ligon-st-louis-blue-black/534042/>