

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Rosenfeld, Jason. 'BLUE BLACK: Curated by Glenn Ligon'. *Brooklyn Rail* Online. 7 September 2017



BLUE BLACK: Curated by Glenn Ligon



Installation view of *Blue Black*, with works by Kerry James Marshall, Simone Leigh, and Jack Whitten, in the Entrance Gallery. Pulitzer Arts Foundation, 2017 Photograph © Alise O'Brien Photography.

It is a fraught moment to be discussing race and politics in art. The developing story of the national reassessment of disgraceful Confederate monuments has productively unearthed, for the general public, the symbolic power of art and its propagandistic role in perpetuating systems of power and control. In a recent episode of his absorbing podcast, "Revisionist History," cultural critic Malcolm Gladwell interrogates a statue modeled after a news photograph of a confrontation in 1963 between a police officer with a dog and a young black boy in Birmingham, Alabama.¹ Made by African American sculptor Dr. Ronald McDowell, *The Foot Soldier* (1995) is far more horrific than the photo, Gladwell convincingly argues, because it bears an added imaginative potency: the narrative is told by a traditionally silenced voice, and for Gladwell this "is just what happens when the people on the bottom finally get the power to tell the story their way."

This is the context of the essential and eloquent exhibition *Blue Black* at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation in St. Louis. Curated by artist Glenn Ligon, it is a work of deft design—at times political, at times formal, at times emotional, and always richly aesthetic. Bronx-born Ligon, who is black, has teamed up with the white director of the institution, Cara Starke, who oversaw Kara Walker's *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* (2014) for Creative Time at the Domino Sugar Factory in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, to present this exhibition.

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Ligon writes in the catalog² (which also includes an essay by Fred Moten) that his inspiration for the show occurred while he was standing in front of Ellsworth Kelly's totemic *Blue Black* (2000), one of three works permanently installed in the exquisite complex designed by Tadao Ando. In his head, Ligon heard Louis Armstrong singing Fats Waller's "(What Did I Do To Be So) Black and Blue?" This experience also resonated with Ralph Ellison's protagonist in *Invisible Man* (1952), who imagines listening to the same song in five different recordings on five different record players at the same time, so that he can feel the music more deeply. Kelly's twenty-eight foot vertical wall sculpture dominates the interior space of the building, a long hallway with a staircase at the end, leading down to three lower galleries. It is the impetus for Ligon's gambit to intertwine the two colors, and to see them through a variety of lenses: a "meander through blue and black," as he writes. In this context, Kelly's pure formalism resonates as strongly as the social and racial connotations of the shades—as they operate in the first part of the display—or their links to formations of cultural identity seen in the final room.

Before reaching the Kelly, there is an opening gallery featuring works dealing with the black body and employing the two colors. *Invisible Man (after Ralph Ellison)* (2015) by Tim Rollins and K.O.S., bears a vertical strip and three wedges painted in blue over the opening forty pages of Ellison's novel—marks that reveal the letters "I" and "M." However, unlike Ellison's novel, the theme of this first gallery is not anonymity but the perception of the individual. Ellison's narrator muses, "Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he's made poetry out of being invisible." In this gallery, black people are brilliantly present, as in Kerry James Marshall's riveting depiction of a policeman sitting on the hood of a cruiser from 2015 (on loan from the Museum of Modern Art, New York, where it was on view last year). This figure, posed by Marshall in a canny art historical riff on Girodet's *Portrait of Citizen Jean-Baptiste Belley, Ex-Representative of the Colonies* (1797), calls to mind the shock of Ellison's protagonist when he leaves the South and comes to New York for the first time, where he encounters a black police officer in Harlem calmly directing traffic, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. In the context of the Black Lives Matter movement, it reads as a strident and necessary response to the deadly force being wielded nationwide upon blacks by white cops. But here, a thirty-minute drive from Ferguson, Missouri, it also becomes a statement of localized disruption.



Glenn Ligon, *A Small Band*, (2015). Neon and paint. 74 3/4 × 797 1/2 inches. Courtesy of the artist; Thomas Dane Gallery, London; Lühring Augustine, New York; Regan Projects, Los Angeles © Glenn Ligon. Installation view

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

of *Blue Black*, Pulitzer Arts Foundation, 2017. Photograph © Alise O'Brien Photography. Ellsworth Kelly's *Blue Black* (2001) hangs in the background.

Hung at left of this work is Carrie Mae Weems's *Blue Black Boy* (1997), and on its right, continuing the conversation is Jack Whitten's celestial *Self Portrait I* from 2014, with the artist's crafted pieces of acrylic arranged in the form of his disembodied head. (Materials make the man.) And on the other side of the Whitten is a beautiful work by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, *Messages from Elsewhere* (2013). Related to her memorable installation presently at the New Museum, it shows an imaginary black dancer in a blue leotard in a bold pose reminiscent of Sargent's *Madame X* (1883–84), and equally boldly painted—few artists have more strongly claimed and reconfigured European painterly traditions than she. Sculptures by Tony Feher and Simone Leigh fill out this first space.

In the main gallery, Kelly's painted aluminum monolith is fronted by Ligon's own *A Small Band* (2015), first seen at the Venice Biennale of that year. It is a huge work, comprised of three words over six feet high, in neon: "blues," "blood," and "bruise." They sit diagonal to one another, such that visitors have to slalom through them to get to the Kelly. It references a Harlem youth, Daniel Hamm, who was beaten by police in 1964, and to prove the assault, had to open up his bruises to elicit blood. In a recording, Hamm misspoke "blues" for "bruise." The curving, cool, white neon bulbs are painted black, and the ambient light becomes bluish behind. It is sequenced in a 1-minute 38-second loop such that the lights come on like a poem: "blues blood bruise / blues bruise blood / blood blues bruise / blood bruise blues / bruise blood blues / bruise blues blood," and then all at once. The effect is hypnotic, the interchangeable wordplay intentional, and the power of the story enhanced. Unexpected and effective juxtapositions abound in a subsequent gallery, where Susan Rothenberg, Philip Guston, Mary Heilmann, and an opulent multi-hued work by Chris Ofili—whose similarly chromatically luxe exhibit at the New Museum in 2014 had an impact on Ligon's thinking—share one of Ando's most rarefied spaces.³

Downstairs, *Blue* (1993), Derek Jarman's heartbreaking elegy to the exquisiteness of his life and excruciation of AIDS, plays in the south gallery. The shattering lines (some spoken by him, others by actors, including Tilda Swinton), share space with an uninterrupted projected "image" of the color blue. Like fin de siècle Symbolist artists, Jarman associates blue with melancholy and death, and after 1 hour and 15 minutes, his final vision of a tropical paradise and a delectable encounter with a lover—"His blue jeans / Around his ankles / Bliss in my ghostly eye"—leads him into an Ozymandias-like, moving meditation on loss and forgotten identity. "I place a delphinium, Blue, upon your grave," he whispers, and, without changing, the azure screen suddenly recalls the heavenly ultramarine of Fra Angelico, then goes black.



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

Installation view of *Blue Black*, West Gallery. Pulitzer Arts Foundation, 2017.

Photograph by Jim Corbett © Alise O'Brien Photography

Jarman's visual and aural poetics prepare viewers for the formal works that fill the next gallery and a shift in Ligon's curatorial intent such that expressions of identity politics are less obviously at the forefront: thirteen large abstract pictures play with one or both of the exhibition's colors and often elicit emotional reactions, beginning with Ross Bleckner's own response to AIDS, *Galaxy Painting* (1993). The earliest work in the show is here—Joan Miró's delicate and lovely *The Lasso* (1927), appropriately a gift of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Pulitzer, Jr. to Harvard University. It shares space with works by Wade Guyton and Stephen Prina, Bleckner, Whitten, a terrific Richard Pousette-Dart, Norman Lewis, Jennie C. Jones, Byron Kim, and others. Not all the artists are black, of course, and racial and cultural identity do not preside—but are instead replaced by—as Ligon writes, curatorial erudition, and the “formal, political, and metaphysical ways the colors have been used.”

The final gallery contains a Yoruba sculpture from the Saint Louis Art Museum, flanked by works by Terry Adkins and Malcolm Bailey. A salon-style arrangement on one wall features Warhol's radiant, ice-blue *Liz #4* (1963) sunk to floor level. Above it are a Viviane Sassen photograph, a bust by Yiadom-Boakye, and Lyle Ashton Harris's gorgeously toned and performative self-portrait *Blue Billie* (2002). The wall is peppered with drawings after Jimi Hendrix album covers by Cecily Brown and World War II-era images of people in rural Alabama by the self-taught, former-slave Bill Traylor. His works are dispassionate observations of his world, and deeply engaging. Ligon's own conceptual painting *Untitled (I Am Not Tragically Colored)* (1990) hangs on the wall to the left, and his *Malcolm X, Sun, Frederick Douglass, Boy with Bubbles (version 2) #2* (2001) to the right. The latter, like Tim Rollins's work that leads off the show, is from a series involving the participation of children. They were given crayons and asked to color pages from vintage black history coloring books. Then, Ligon reproduced the pages on a large scale. This work is dominated by blue and black, and this fortuitous occurrence from sixteen years ago must have resonated anew with the curator, forming an appropriately chromatic and conceptual close to the exhibit.

A small oil by Kelly acts as coda by the exit. Bearing two great swathes of black against a blue ground, *Black Blue* (1959) is calculatedly lit so that it is impossible to look closely at it without your own shadow falling on the work. Thus the individual, rendered dark and anonymous, is inserted into the aesthetic dialogue. It's a leveling experience of a work of art, in which one's own sense of self is rendered inconsequential.

The Pulitzer Foundation is free to the public, and consequently the show feels like a gift. It encourages unhurried reflection and its generous, immaculate galleries, hardly ever heaving with visitors, harmonize with Ligon's unimpeachable selection. Upstairs, a roof lounge with seating and sunlit views of the foundation's environs provides access to a selection of books and vinyl records, placed there by Ligon. (He continuously adds to the collection, through visitor requests.) One can place a record on the phonograph and the sound of the blues or ska or jazz will drift pleasantly through the upper spaces of the show. “*Blue Black* aims to be noisy,” Ligon writes in the catalogue. The layout favors “improbable conversations, provisional alliances, and poetic flow,” which he hopes may challenge or otherwise foster dialogue with his curatorial premise. In this sense, the show is not a provocation; it is one extended contemplation—on art, on politics, on life, on America, through Ligon's attempt to tease immediate cultural meanings out of the semiotics of color. It's a new and necessary way to understand history.

Notes

1. Malcolm Gladwell, “The Foot Soldier of Birmingham,” Revisionist History. Podcast audio. www.revisionisthistory.com/episodes/14-the-foot-soldier-of-birmingham Glenn Ligon, *Blue Black* (St. Louis Pulitzer Arts Foundation, 2017).
2. Fred Moten's essay in the catalogue, “Black and blue in white. In and in space. Church and cell in absense,” has long sections on Ofili and David Hammons, the latter of whom exhibits a tarp and canvas painting, *The New Black* (2014), in the show. See pp. 60–67.

CONTRIBUTOR

Jason Rosenfeld

JASON ROSENFELD, Ph.D., is Distinguished Chair and Professor of Art History at Marymount Manhattan College. He was co-curator of the exhibitions *John Everett Millais* (Tate Britain, Van Gogh Museum), *Pre-Raphaelites*:

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Victorian Avant-Garde (Tate Britain and the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.), and *River Crossings* (Olana and Cedar Grove, Hudson and Catskill, New York). He is a Senior Writer and Editor-at-Large for *The Brooklyn Rail*.

<http://brooklynrail.org/2017/09/artseen/Blue-Black-Curated-by-Glenn-Ligon>