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Glenn Ligon's Poetic Sensibility



Glenn Ligon, "Notes for a Poem on the Third World (Chapter One)," 2018.

(Courtesy of Thomas Dane Gallery. ©Glenn Ligon, photo by Francesco Squeglia-Grafiluce)

For Glenn Ligon, an artist famed for paintings and works on paper that revel in the sheer materiality and density of language that expounds a committed politics, Italy — with its rich literary and cultural history, and its status as one of the birthplaces of Western democracy — seems to be a natural partner. Yet it is only now, for the first time, that the New York-based artist is the subject of a solo exhibition in Naples at the recently opened outpost of London's Thomas Dane Gallery. "Tutto poteva, nella poesia, avere una soluzione / In poetry, a solution to everything," on view until July 28, borrows its title from a poem by the late filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini to consider the politics of statehood, citizenship and belonging through the fluidity and malleability of linguistic signs. Blouin Artinfo spoke to Glenn Ligon as the show opened in Naples.

What was the starting point, in terms of your thinking, reading and research, for the works included in the current exhibition? How important was the Neapolitan context for you when creating them?

Two pieces have come specifically out of thinking about the Neapolitan context. First is the neon "Siete Ospite," 2018, which translates to "You Are Guests," whose genesis comes from looking at banners carried by Italian football fans. Oft times these are nationalistic, homophobic and racist, but they can also be incredibly funny, poignant and enlightening. This particular neon came from an illustration I encountered of Naples fans in Bologna holding up signs saying "You are guests," meaning that they were outnumbering the home team's fans. It reminded me of my first trip to Italy when I was watching a TV debate about immigration and audience members were holding up signs that read "Send them to Naples," the meaning being that immigrants arriving in Italy should be sent to where others already are. This notion of the south of Italy as being inherently different from other parts of the country, and generally questions about north vs. south, east vs. west or us vs. them, are often played out on the football banners at matches.

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

The second piece is "Notes for a Poem on the Third World (Chapter One)," 2018, a large pair of hands in white neon covered in black paint, which is based on a film project that Pier Paolo Pasolini was planning to undertake in the late 1960s. He wrote an essay explaining how he was going to make five interconnected films, shot in India, the Middle East, Africa, South America and in, what he calls, "the black ghettos of the United States." In the essay, Pasolini is musing about how his interest in the struggles of the working class and marginalized peoples in Italy is connected to struggles around the world, and how this project can acknowledge and reach out to those other struggles. Although he never finished the films, I love his idea of "the discovery of the elsewhere," the necessity of going beyond the boundaries of his own, particular political concerns. So the neon is a response to that failed project, but it's also the first figurative neon that I've made, and the first of five pieces that will reference Pasolini's five proposed films.

How important to you is the relationship to place and location? With respect to Naples, it makes me think of Walter Benjamin's term "porous city."

That is the positive spin on the "Send them to Naples" slogan. It's the city that embraces the "Other," which can be viewed negatively, if you are part of anti-immigration groups that have appeared in recent months in Italy, or it can be seen as a positive, an image of the modern world with all its hybridity and porousness.

Does language hold a redemptive potential for you?

What I'm often interested in is language's opacity, where it fails and no longer communicates. James Baldwin has been a touchstone because he tries to grapple with big topics like colonialism, race and identity, but they're notions that remain elusive, indescribable and opaque. My paintings try to investigate that failure and re-stage that difficulty that language presents; it's the struggle that interests me.

The show also includes the "Debris Field," 2018, silkscreen paintings that are about the possibility of text. They're made by using letter stencils, drawing through them with ink markers to make distorted letter forms, then silk-screening and overlapping those images during the process. Because all the letters of the alphabet, numbers and punctuation marks exist on a single stencilled sheet, they present the possibility of language and text. We're living through a post-truth moment in the United States so the works could be read through the lens of uncertainty about language's efficacy, but in terms of my own trajectory, when I'm using an essay by Gertrude Stein, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison or Walt Whitman in an artwork, there's a responsibility I feel to that text which structures the way the paintings or neons are made. This new approach gives the paintings a more freeform sensibility.

You've always been careful in emphasising that your work should not just be reduced to a question of "identity" politics, which was so prevalent an -ism in the US when you were first starting out as an artist. At a moment of total global existential crisis and the renaissance of nationalism and populism, do you think we're back yet again to this level of identity politics or can we push past that?

I wouldn't formulate it as "back to" or "push past." I did a talk recently with Gregg Bordowitz [author of "Glenn Ligon: Untitled (I Am a Man), 1988", 2018, part of the Afterall One Work book series] where he talked about intersectionality and I think that's the moment we're in now. I think you're right in that we're experiencing a surge in nationalist tendencies in the United States and in Europe, but there is also a counter-movement that is just as strong, built up of people who recognize that the world has opened up and that societies are better if they embrace a diversity of voices.

"Glenn Ligon: Tutto poteva, nella poesia, avere una soluzione / In poetry, a solution to everything" is on view at Thomas Dane Gallery in Naples through July 28. More information: www.thomasdanegallery.com

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