

Glenn Ligon

An Open Letter

Exhibition dates: 4 February – 2 April 2022

Thomas Dane Gallery
11 Duke Street St James's
London, SW1

“Their reading doesn’t open up through metaphors. They aren’t ‘like’ anything; the paintings’ meaning comes from thinking about language and how it fails to express.”

–Stephen Andrews in conversation with the artist.

An artist versed in language and fluent in the art of quotation, Glenn Ligon’s inspiration and sources over the last three decades have ranged from high literature to stand-up comedy, from a single aphorism to an entire essay. He has abstracted the grandeur of James Baldwin’s essay *Stranger in the Village* in stencilled black and white paintings, rendered the words “negro sunshine” by Gertrude Stein in black-painted neon, and transcribed the off-colour routines of Richard Pryor into text paintings, highlighting the social and political value systems that give these texts meaning and how they are altered or underscored through the work.

However, the works in *An Open Letter* at Thomas Dane Gallery abandon any such reference and concentrate instead on the components of spoken and written language: sounds, symbols, and letterforms. For such an artist to narrow his linguistic focus to a simple field of letters is both radical and unexpected, yet natural for Ligon, who has always laboured to uncover the essence of language.

The works here continue his *Debris Field* series, which premiered at Thomas Dane Gallery in Naples in 2018, and were subsequently exhibited in Paris (2018), Los Angeles (2019), New York (2021), and now here in London. Ligon uses the same ground of silkscreened letters on white or dramatic red backgrounds, and alters each composition through a series of overlapping letter forms and non-linguistic mark making, ultimately creating an open-ended system which allows him to explore, in his own words, “the possibility of meaning, the elements of meaning.”

Formally, the *Debris Field* works resemble a wreckage, a primal explosion—or seconds after the Big Bang—yet they also retain the conceptual inspirations of Henri Michaux, Jean Dubuffet, Islamic calligraphy, and concrete poetry.

A recent iteration in the series, a group of smaller works on paper, feature imperfectly traced lines and grids around and onto the letters—*Fences* as the artist names them—which simultaneously highlight and draw attention to the composition while placing the works in conversation with real world border politics and the language of fences and walls that undergird it.

More than four years into his *Debris Field* opus, Ligon presents *An Open Letter*, his fourth exhibition with Thomas Dane Gallery, and the third in London.

Running concurrently with *Glenn Ligon: An Open Letter* will be an exhibition of work by Susan Rothenberg at Thomas Dane Gallery London, 3 Duke St, St James’s (4 February – 9 April 2022).

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Glenn Ligon (b. 1960) lives and works in New York. Important recent shows include *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America* (2021) at the New Museum, NY, where Ligon acted as a curatorial advisor; *Des Parisiens Noirs* at the Musée d'Orsay, Paris (2019); *Blue Black* (2017), an exhibition Ligon curated at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation in St. Louis, inspired by the site-specific Ellsworth Kelly wall; and *Glenn Ligon: Encounters and Collisions* (2015), a curatorial project organized with Nottingham Contemporary and Tate Liverpool. Ligon has also been the subject of solo museum exhibitions at the Camden Arts Centre in London, the Power Plant in Toronto, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and the Studio Museum in Harlem, among others, and in 2011, the Whitney Museum of American Art held a mid-career retrospective of Ligon's work, *Glenn Ligon: America*, organized by Scott Rothkopf, which traveled nationally. His work has been included in major international exhibitions, including the Venice Biennale (2015 and 1997), Berlin Biennial (2014), Istanbul Biennial (2011), Documenta XI (2002), and Gwangju Biennale (2000).

Ligon's work is held in the permanent collections of museums worldwide including Tate Modern, London; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Art Institute of Chicago; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. His awards and honors include a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship and the Studio Museum's Joyce Alexander Wein Artist Prize. Most recently, Ligon was elected as a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

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Gallery hours: Tuesday to Friday 11am-6pm, Saturday 12pm-6pm or by appointment.

Admission: Free

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Nearest Tube: Green Park or Piccadilly Circus

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