Nottingham
Contemporary

Glenn Ligon Encounters and Collisions

3 April — 14 June

Exhibition Notes

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it all adds up

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Glenn Ligon
Encounters and Collisions

3 April – 14 June 2015

"In the exhibition my aim is to create a space that positions my work as a series of dialogues with other artists and histories, encouraging the viewer to consider how these dialogues make us the artists we become."

Glenn Ligon is one of the leading American artists of his generation. He was born in 1960 in the Bronx and lives and works in New York. This exhibition is curated by him. It features 45 artists who have influenced him or are related to his practice. Encounters and Collisions is his ideal museum, or personal art history, realised as a temporary exhibition.

Ligon's own work is often in explicit dialogue with the work of others, particularly American art from around 1945 to 1975 – from Abstract Expressionism to conceptual art – when New York came to dominate international art. The exhibition is particularly strong in artists from this period. It also features many artists of Ligon's own generation who foregrounded issues of language, race, gender and sexuality in their work during the conservative years of the Reagan and Bush Sr administrations and the AIDS crisis.

Glenn Ligon, Untitled, 2006. Courtesy of the artist © Tate Collection.

Literature is of equal importance to Ligon's work, particularly the work of key African-American authors. A large black-on-black Stranger painting by Ligon in the show refers both to postwar American abstraction and James Baldwin's Stranger in the Village – a searing account of Baldwin's contrasting experiences of racism in a remote Swiss village and racism in mid 20th Century America. Ligon's work also engages with US history and popular culture, particularly as they relate to developments in African-American experience. In this exhibition, Condition Report refers to a key moment in the Civil Rights struggle, the Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike of 1968 and to the conservation practices of museums.

Three paintings quote from stand-up routines by the legendary and controversial African-American comedian Richard Pryor whose work addressed racial and sexual dynamics in America in the aftermath of the Black Power era and the counter-culture.

When Ligon borrows the words of others it is often to reveal how those words have acquired different resonances since they were first written or spoken – differences that reflect historical shifts in culture and society. He uses a stenciling technique in his painting, which emphasises the fact that most of the texts he uses are found. In many of Ligon's paintings stenciling is used to smudge the letters so that the words appear more ambiguous or uncertain.

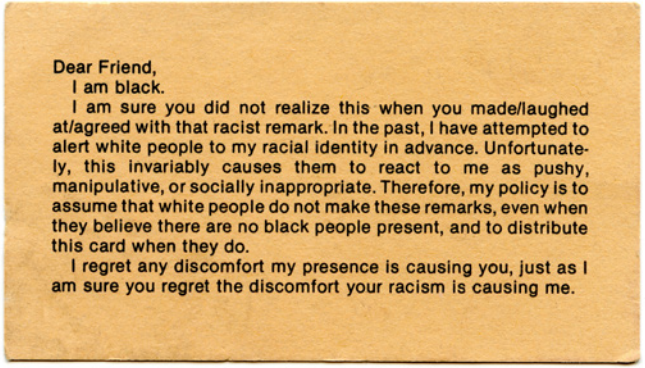
Ligon makes most of his work in the privacy of his studio, but his practice addresses the way an artistic practice – and the self more generally – is the result of encounters with others. His approach to the exhibition was influenced by Adrienne Kennedy's People Who Led to My Plays – an autobiography that takes the form of an exhaustive, chronological cataloguing of everyone and everything that most influenced her life and art.

Glenn Ligon has written letters to six of the artists in the exhibition, and to Adrienne Kennedy. These also appear in the exhibition catalogue, amongst other texts chosen by Glenn Ligon.

From letter to Adrian Piper

Your work is central to the discussions I want to highlight in the exhibition. When I was just starting out in the mid-1980s, struggling with the expectations and presumptions with which viewers approached the work of a black artist, yours was the work that showed me how to resist those limits. Pieces you did in that period like Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features, the Mythic Being drawings, and the photo-text work showed me how identity was socially constructed, contingent, and mutable, not primordial and forever fixed.

This had a profound impact on me and set me on a path that led to work such as my Runaways series and my Door Paintings, the earliest of which used an essay by Zora Neale Hurston titled How It Feels to Be Colored Me. It was not only your investigation of the social construction of the self that inspired me, but the way you insisted that the social and the political formed the ground from which your work sprang and that social and political change was the aim of your practice.



Adrian Piper, My Calling (Card) #1 (for Dinners and Cocktail Parties), 1986-1990. Performance prop. Davis Museum of Wellesley College. © APRA Foundation Berlin.

From letter to Zoe Leonard

Initially I thought I was going to use pieces of yours that I already own and love, but then I started thinking that in the context of the show it might be more useful for the viewer to think about the photos I first saw when I was discovering your work: the fashion shoot images. I saw them at a moment when I was beginning to think very carefully about the politics of looking and trying to process my ambivalence around one of my own pieces, Notes on the Margin of the Black Book, which is an investigation of Robert Mapplethorpe's images of black men. By making a piece that used Mapplethorpe's photos to critique his project, I worried that I was just putting his images center stage again. When I first saw your work, I realized that not only were you making work that was offering a strong critique of the history of photographic representations, but you were making images that I wanted to keep looking at, that brought new things to the table every time I saw them. Those key early investigations, your subsequent photo and installation work, and the restlessness of your intellectual inquiry have kept you in the forefront of any discussion about photography and its future.

Zoe Leonard, Two Women Looking at One Another, 1990

From letter to Beauford Delaney
I am writing because I am curating a show titled Encounters and Collisions, and it juxtaposes my work with the work of many other artists. I have been in touch with a gallery here in New York that has a sublime portrait of Baldwin you made in the '50s as well as a yellow abstraction that would work perfectly in the exhibition. I am including these pieces in the show not only because of the crucial place Baldwin occupies in our lives – I've seen numerous portraits you painted of him, and his essay Stranger in the Village is the basis of a major cycle of paintings

I have created – but also because your figurative and abstract work finds deep inspiration in jazz and the blues, an inspiration Baldwin and I also share. In your paintings, the line between figuration and abstraction is always porous. That has inspired a similar fluidity in my paintings, which often turn text (a kind of figuration, I suppose) towards abstraction. To tease out that connection is one of the things Encounters and Collisions aims to do.

Beauford Delaney, James Baldwin, c.1955
Collection of halley k harrisburg and Michael Rosenfeld

From letter to Sun Ra

A while ago I read an article in the New York Times where Snoop Dogg said, "I don't rap, I just talk." Hearing Snoop rap reminds me of your voice in Space Is the Place, which is so matter-of-fact, almost affectless in its delivery, but the words you utter are devastating. Like in the movie when you are talking to the kids at the youth center in Oakland and you say, "I'm not real, I'm just like you. You don't exist in this society. If you did, your people wouldn't be seeking equal rights." To escape all that, you propose transporting us to another planet through your music. Maybe under different stars we could get our vibrations back in order. "There was no one to talk to on planet Earth who would understand," you said. Still isn't. Ra, you are not a rapper, but you do drop science.

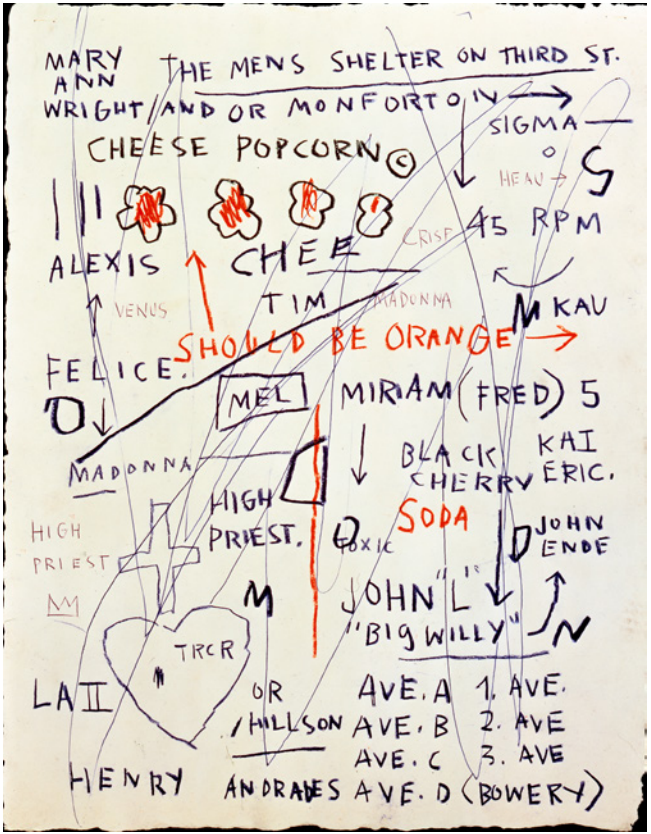
I read some of your broadsides the other day. They are punning and precise; they play with language beautifully. You used to hand them out on the street in Chicago, trying to be "of service," as my church-raised grandfather would have said. Seeing you on the corners must have been like seeing those guys in their crisp suits and bow ties in Harlem selling issues of Final Call and bean pies outside the mosque on 116th Street. "Yakub, the mad scientist" and "tricknology," remember? I was sure I didn't want to live in the future they imagined, but I would live in yours.

Someone took photos of you in Oakland when you were shooting Space Is the Place. You are in your splendor: multicolored robes, ancient Egyptian headpiece, jewelry.

Sun Ra, stills from Space is the Place, 1974
Video, DVD. Lent by Jim Newman for North American Star System

It's like you were here on Earth for just long enough to take us somewhere else. Music is always a vehicle for transport. "I came from a dream that the black man dreamed long ago," you said. "I'm actually a present sent to you by your ancestors." Better to be from outer space than from here. Still is.

From letter to Jean-Michel Basquiat:
I first saw your paintings at Annina Nosei Gallery in 1982. I was just back in the city after college and had decided I wanted to be an artist. Actually, becoming an artist was a long way off (and since I didn't know any black artists, they were a long way off as well). I was familiar with SoHo because I had gone to see Warhol's shadow paintings at Heiner Friedrich Gallery when I was in high school and had eaten brown rice with tahini for the first time at Food, the restaurant Gordon Matta-Clark ran. I knew when I first saw them that Warhol's paintings were important, I just didn't know why. When I saw your work for the first time I knew that it was important too, even though I wouldn't start making text paintings for many years. No one looking at my work would think of yours, but the space you opened up with your use of repeating text and phenomenal color (my Richard Pryor joke paintings owe both you and Warhol a great debt) continues to reverberate in my work.
I am curating a project called Encounters and Collisions that includes some of your drawings. I wanted you in the show because you were part of the community I longed to be part of when I was young; you lived in that exciting, bad neighborhood I was afraid to visit. Life didn't frighten you at all, but it had a toll. I watched all that from the edge of the stage and now, all these years later, I suppose I am recreating that community, that neighborhood, through this exhibition. Perhaps this show is just a way to say hello to you the way I was too shy to do back in the day.



Jean-Michel Basquiat, Untitled (Cheese Popcorn), 1983
Brant Collection. © The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat / ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2015.

From letter to Adrienne Kennedy

I bought a copy of People Who Led to My Plays in 1996 from a bookstand in the lobby of the Public Theater here in New York during the intermission of a performance of Suzan-Lori's astonishing play "Venus." The book has since served as a model for me in considering how one's artistic practice is rooted and thrives in the soil of the past and how an artist uses history (with a small and a large "h") as the raw material for one's practice, molding and transforming and bringing it into the present.

I am writing to you about a museum exhibition I am curating titled Encounters and Collisions. It juxtaposes my paintings, drawings, and neons with works from approximately fifty other artists who have had an impact on my practice. A key element of the exhibition is the catalogue, which will include an anthology of writings by authors such as James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Hilton Als, Fred Moten, Jorge Luis Borges and Adrian Piper. My work is often inspired by literature; I have been just as profoundly influenced by writers as by visual artists. I see the anthology as a curatorial project, one that runs parallel to the actual exhibition. An excerpt from People Who Led to My Plays occupies a key place in the anthology, as it is the first text I decided to include in it and is the text that most closely mirrors the curatorial ideas behind the entire exhibition. I feel lucky to have read your book at a formative moment in my career and lucky to be able to bring it to new audiences through this catalogue. I thank you for your extraordinary work in unpacking black life on the stage and showing us how truly rich and strange it is.

Willem de Kooning, Valentine, 1947
Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Gifford Phillips

The title of the exhibition is a translation of the words that appear in a small work in the exhibition by Alighiero Boetti, a leading figure from the Italian Arte Povera movement of the late 1960s. A catalogue of the exhibition, including the full versions of these letters by Glenn Ligon, is on sale in Shop.Contemporary.

Alighiero Boetti, Incontri e Scontri, 1988. Photograph by Ron Amstutz (c) DACS 2015

Front cover image: Dan Flavin. Photo Eric Sutherland for Walker Art Center

Back cover image: Glenn Ligon, Study for Condition Report (Glenn Ligon and Michael Duffy), 1997 Collection of the artist. Photograph by Ron Amstutz

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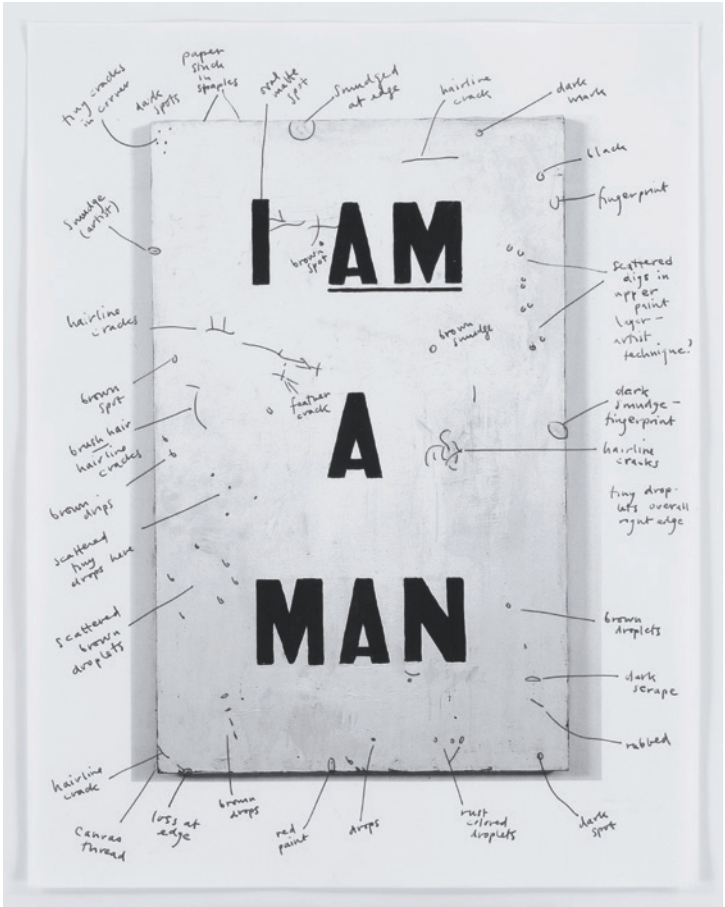
tiny cracks in canvas
dark spots
paper stuck in staples
spot light spot
smudged at edge
hairline cracks
dark marks
cracks
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