

WHITNEY

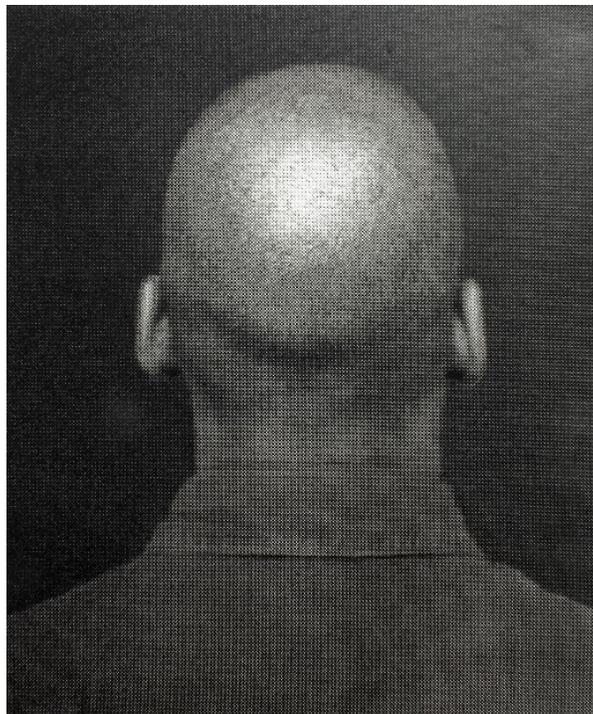
Press Release

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THE WHITNEY TO PRESENT *GLENN LIGON: AMERICA*, A MID-CAREER RETROSPECTIVE OF THE GROUNDBREAKING NEW YORK ARTIST

MARCH 10 – JUNE 5, 2011



Self-Portrait, 1996. Silkscreen ink and gesso on canvas, 48 x 40 in. (121.9 x 101.6 cm). Collection of the artist

NEW YORK, January 26, 2011 – This spring, the Whitney Museum of American Art presents the first comprehensive mid-career retrospective of Glenn Ligon (b. 1960), widely regarded as one of the most important and influential American artists to have emerged in the past two decades. Organized by Whitney curator Scott Rothkopf, in close

collaboration with the artist, the exhibition surveys twenty-five years of Ligon's work, from his student days in the Whitney Independent Study Program until the present. The exhibition will travel to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, where it will be on view from October 2011 to January 2012, and to the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, where it will appear early next year.

Glenn Ligon: AMERICA features roughly one hundred works, including paintings, prints, photography, drawings, and sculptural installations, as well as striking recent neon reliefs, one newly commissioned for the Whitney's Madison Avenue windows. The retrospective also debuts previously unexhibited early works, which shed light on Ligon's artistic origins, and for the first time reconstitutes major series, such as the seminal "Door" paintings, which launched the artist's career. Loans are drawn from important institutional and private collections, as well as from the artist's and the Whitney's substantial holdings.

Adam D. Weinberg, the Museum's Alice Pratt Brown Director, notes: "Few artists in the Whitney's history have had as close a relationship with the Museum as Glenn Ligon has, dating back to his time in the Independent Study Program. Not only does the Whitney hold the largest institutional collection of his work, but Ligon has appeared in numerous exhibitions, including such landmark shows as the 1993 Whitney Biennial and *Black Male* in 1994. This retrospective honors Ligon's remarkable artistic achievement and celebrates our long relationship with him."

Throughout his career, Ligon has pursued an incisive exploration of American history, literature, and society in a body of work that builds critically on the legacies of modern painting and more recent conceptual art. A leading member of a generation of artists who came to the fore in the late 1980s and early 1990s by exploring racial and sexual identity in their work, Ligon is best known for his series of text-based paintings referencing the writings of noted African American authors such as Zora Neale Hurston and Ralph Ellison, as well as Jean Genet, John Howard Griffin, and Mary Shelley, among others. These iconic black-and-white paintings—with their play between abstraction and legibility, light and dark, disembodied text and painterly physicality—signaled the arrival of a singular artistic vision that synthesized questions of identity with key concerns from recent art history, such as the role of appropriation and language in art. Rothkopf

remarks: “Although Ligon emerged in the wake of the American culture wars, with hindsight we are increasingly able to appreciate the formal subtlety and beauty of his work, which in fact add to its force and social relevance. The exhibition is titled *Glenn Ligon: AMERICA* to draw attention to the fact that he addresses the concerns of *all* Americans, regardless of our backgrounds, while exploring our sometimes troubled histories and shared dreams for the future.”

Ligon has dealt with a wide range of source material, which will be highlighted in the Whitney exhibition. One gallery will re-create the bulk of his landmark multimedia installation *To Disembark* (1993), which explores the aftereffects of slavery in America through a series of prints in which Ligon casts himself as a slave on the lam and a group of crates playing music that allude to the story of Henry Box Brown, a slave who famously shipped himself to freedom. Another gallery will feature *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* (1991–93), Ligon’s moving reflection on the cultural debates surrounding the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe; this stunning, fifty-foot-long piece remains a landmark of the art of the 1990s. A 1996 exhibition reflecting on Louis Farrakhan’s controversial Million Man March will be reprised for the first time through a series of large-scale printed canvases and self-portraits of the artist in the manner of mug-shot photography. Also on display will be eleven brightly colored paintings borrowing quotations from Richard Pryor’s stand-up routines, which are both funny and troubling in their frank social critique, and a group of six majestic canvases that treat quotations from James Baldwin’s essay “Stranger in the Village” in oil stick and glittering coal dust.

Other bodies of work employ images and texts related to early civil rights demonstrations, political figures such as Jesse Jackson and Malcolm X, and 1970s coloring books and “dream books” targeted at the African American community. The final dramatic gallery will present three twelve-foot-long neon works featuring the word *AMERICA* glowing beneath black paint. Although deeply pointed and courageous, Ligon’s artistic voice is more subtle than strident, more investigative than declarative, the breadth of his subject matter matched by the wide range of mediums he employs.

Publications

Glenn Ligon: AMERICA is accompanied by a full-color, scholarly monograph, published in association with Yale University Press, with more than two hundred illustrations. Rothkopf contributes the first essay to survey the artist's entire career, drawing on his extensive archival research and firsthand study of Ligon's work. The publication also includes a substantial text exploring literary devices in Ligon's art by the distinguished curator and critic Okwui Enwezor, former Dean of the San Francisco Art Institute and Artistic Director of Documenta 11. Four shorter essays examine Ligon's artistic concerns in a broader cultural context. Columbia University professor Saidiya Hartman discusses Ligon's relationship to slave narratives; *New Yorker* staff writer Hilton Als considers the artist's use of Baldwin's writings; LACMA curator Franklin Sirmans explores the Million Man March in Ligon's work; and LA MOCA curator Bennett Simpson addresses the searing comedy of Pryor. A candid conversation between the artist and Thelma Golden, Director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, reflects on their close personal and professional relationship over the past twenty years. The catalogue concludes with the publication of Ligon's first comprehensive exhibition history and bibliography, compiled and verified by Rothkopf and Whitney research assistants.

In addition to the exhibition catalogue, Yale University Press will publish a companion volume of Ligon's collected writings and interviews, with a brief introduction by Rothkopf. This book, entitled *Yourself in the World*, includes a selection of twelve of Ligon's interviews and ten of his trenchant essays. With great erudition, humor, and a lively personal style, Ligon has tackled a broad range of subjects from pop culture and the impact of David Hammons on younger artists to the first post-Katrina Biennial in New Orleans. This volume promises to be an indispensable source reader for artists, students, and all those interested in contemporary art, politics, culture, and American history.

About the Artist

Born and raised in the Bronx, New York, Ligon earned his B.A. from Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, and studied at the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program. He has presented solo museum exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris (1993); the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC (1993); the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (1996); the Walker

Art Center, Minneapolis (2000); the Studio Museum in Harlem (2001); and the Power Plant, Toronto (2005), among other venues. His awards and honors include a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship (2003); the Skowhegan Medal for Painting (2006); the Academy Award in Art from the American Academy of Arts and Letters (2006); the Studio Museum's Joyce Alexander Wein Artist Prize (2009); and a United States Artist Fellowship (2010). His work is found in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the High Museum of Art, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Walker Art Center, and many more.

Credits

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About the Whitney

The Whitney Museum of American Art is the preeminent institution devoted to twentieth-century and contemporary art of the United States, with a special focus on works by living artists. The Whitney's collection, which comprises over 18,000 works by more than 2800 artists, includes major works and materials from the estate of Edward Hopper, the largest public collection of works by Alexander Calder, as well as significant works by Jasper Johns, Donald Judd, Agnes Martin, Bruce Nauman, Georgia O'Keeffe, Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, Kiki Smith, and Andy Warhol, among other artists. With its history of exhibiting the most promising and influential American artists and provoking intense critical and public debate, the Whitney's signature show, the Biennial, has become the most important survey of the state of contemporary art in America today. Founded in 1930, the Whitney was first housed on West 8th Street. The Museum relocated in 1954 to West 54th Street and in 1966 inaugurated its present home at 945 Madison Avenue, designed by Marcel Breuer. The Whitney is currently moving ahead with plans to build a second facility, designed by Renzo Piano, located in downtown Manhattan at the entrance to the High Line in the Meatpacking District.

Current and Upcoming Exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art

Singular Visions	Now on view
Charles LeDray: workworkworkworkwork	Through February 13, 2011
Karthik Pandian: Unearth	Through March 27, 2011
Modern Life: Edward Hopper and His Time	Through April 10, 2011
Legacy: The Emily Fisher Landau Collection	February 10-May 1, 2011
Glenn Ligon: AMERICA	March 10-June 5, 2011
Cory Arcangel: Pro Tools	Opens May 26, 2011
Lyonel Feininger: At the Edge of the World	Opens June 30, 2011

The Whitney Museum is located at 945 Madison Avenue at 75th Street, New York City. Museum hours are: Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., Friday from 1 p.m. to 9 p.m., closed Monday and Tuesday. General admission: \$18. Full-time students and visitors ages 19–25 and 62 & over: \$12. Visitors 18 & under and Whitney members: FREE. Admission to the Kaufman Astoria Studios Film & Video Gallery only: \$6. Admission is pay-what-you-wish on Fridays, 6–9 p.m. For general information, please call (212) 570-3600 or visit whitney.org.

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