



Ligon, Glenn (b. 1960)

by Carla Williams

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One of the most successful artists at work today, African-American mixed-media artist Glenn Ligon explores important questions of race and gender in his multi-layered and deeply resonant work.

Born in 1960 in New York and raised in the Bronx, Glenn Ligon was able to attend a private school in Manhattan thanks to a scholarship. He studied at the Rhode Island School of Design before receiving a B.A. from Wesleyan University in 1982. The recipient of numerous awards and fellowships, he participated in the prestigious Whitney Museum Independent Study Program in 1985.

As much a child of popular culture as of history, Ligon often conflates issues of race and gender and their frequently parallel histories and struggles. He explains: "I am positioning myself against a certain historical experience and trying to find the connection between it and who I am."

Ligon's art is witty, ironic, and compelling in its complex layering of references. In much of his work, he uses carefully selected borrowed texts as a visual as well as a literary and conceptual device.

Everything is fair game: Ligon's work appropriates the iconography of broadsides for escaped slaves (*Runaways*, 1993), African-American folklorist Zora Neale Hurston's 1928 essay "How it Feels to be Colored Me" (Untitled [*I Do Not Always Feel Colored*], 1990), James Baldwin's 1953 essay "Stranger in the Village," and Richard Pryor's stand-up jokes (*Mudbone [Liar]*, 1993), which includes allusions to homosexuality in its race-based humor.

Ligon even uses excerpts from Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan's speech given at the Million Man March, which he refines by recasting it through the perspective of a gay black male. The personal is political; Ligon states: "I consider all the work I've done self-portraits filtered through other people's texts."

Ligon's more sexually explicit work includes his reinterpretation of Robert Mapplethorpe's iconic *Black Book*, which featured exploitative, homoerotic photographs of black men. In his installation for the 1993 Whitney Museum Biennial exhibition, Ligon reframes Mapplethorpe's photographs, juxtaposing the explicit photographs with textual criticism written in a detached, academic language (*Notes on the Margin of the Black Book*, 1991-1993).

In the series *Albums* (alternately titled *A Feast of Scraps*, 1994-1998), Ligon reconfigures the family album to incorporate amateur pornographic snapshots of black men interspersed with his own family photographs. Captioned with such double entendres as "Brother" and "Daddy," as well as vaguely ominous, clipped statements such as "It's not natural" and "Mother knew," the pornographic snapshots claim their rightful, though uneasy, place amid the heterosexual domestic narrative.

Other works that continue the homosexual dialogue and demonstrate Ligon's sharp tongue as well as sharp eye include *Narratives (Plate G)* (1993) and *Snapshots*, which feature cleverly unsettling yet humorous texts, such as "'I'm really into black Americans,' he whispered. 'Especially when they humiliate me.' 'Well,' I

replied, "For starters, I really hate your hair."

Ligon has collaborated with Korean-American artist Byron Kim on numerous works, including *Rumble, Young Man, Rumble* (1993), a boxing bag stenciled with inflammatory words by Muhammad Ali.

As one of the most successful contemporary artists, Ligon has exhibited internationally, and his work is included in the permanent collections of, among others, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.

He lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

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Carla Williams is a writer and photographer from Los Angeles, who lives and works in Santa Fe. Her writings and images can be found on her website at www.carlagirl.net.