



Untitled, 2002, coal dust, printing ink, oil stick, glue, acrylic paint and gesso on canvas, 74 1/2 by 118 1/2 inches. Dallas Museum of Art.

A nearly illegible painting leaves viewers—like the Swiss villagers in James Baldwin's essay—transfixed by a blackness they can't understand.

authors, and tethers his evolving sense of self to a significant moment in African-American history.

By the early 1990s, Ligon was using plastic letter stencils to create his text-based paintings. For a well-known series of door-sized canvases he executed at this time, Ligon borrowed meaningful passages from the writings of Mary Shelley, Jean Genet and a number of African-American authors. He used black oil stick to repeatedly stencil the quotations against white backgrounds, effectively mimicking the appearance of a printed page. But as Ligon transcribed each sentence over and over again, dragging his pigment-laden stencils from the top of each canvas to its base, the black words became increasingly smudged and blotchy. In the lower regions of these paintings, the text is virtually illegible.

Surprisingly, none of these early paintings was exhibited at the Warhol Museum. But the show did feature *Untitled: Four Etchings* (1992), a suite of related prints created in a similar fashion. In one of the etchings, Ligon quotes a 1928 essay by Zora Neale Hurston and repeatedly stencils the words "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background" in black ink on white paper. As in Ligon's contemporaneous paintings, the printed sentence accrues smears and stains from one line to the next, eventually becoming a black blur that literalizes Hurston's metaphor for racial self-consciousness. In two of the other etchings, Ligon stencils the first

few sentences of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Here the artist prints black text on black paper, confronting the viewer with a different obstacle to legibility. As one scans these near-monochromes, straining to discern sentences like "No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe," Ellison's spectral subject becomes fittingly manifest in the barely visible text.

Black text stenciled on a black ground can also be found in an untitled 6-by-10-foot canvas of 2002 that belongs to a later series Ligon commenced in 1997. All of these works excerpt portions of "Stranger in the Village," a 1953 essay by James Baldwin that recounts the author's visit to a small town in Switzerland

Untitled, from the series "A Feast of Scraps," 1994-98, photographs and text, 11 1/2 by 20 1/2 inches.



Untitled (Contact), 2002, coal dust, printing ink, oil stick, glue, acrylic paint and gesso on canvas, 74 1/2 by 118 1/2 inches. Latner Family Art Collection, Toronto.



Left, Boys with Basketball, Harriet Tubman, Salimu, Letter B #3, 2001, oil crayon and silkscreen on paper, 23 by 16 1/2 inches. Collection Gregory R. Miller, New York.

Right, Malcolm X, Sun, Frederick Douglass, Boy with Bubbles (version 2) #3, 2001, Flashe paint and silkscreen on paper, 23 by 16 1/2 inches. Galerie Hans Mayer, Düsseldorf.

where, reportedly, no black person had ever set foot. Responding to Baldwin's description of his racial exoticism in this context, Ligon mixes coal dust into his black paint, creating a coarse medium flecked with glistening bits of mica. This seductive substance draws the viewer to Ligon's large canvas, where line after line of Baldwin's essay is stenciled across the surface in grainy relief. But reading this painting requires considerable effort, as most of the words dissolve into its dark and sparkling expanse. Ligon thus renders his viewers

analogous to the Swiss villagers in Baldwin's essay—transfixed by a spectacle of blackness, but ultimately uncomprehending of what they see.

While often paying tribute to black writers of the past, Ligon's text-based paintings and prints transcend their specific historical sources to more broadly address the power and shortcomings of the written word. By frequently isolating passages written in the first person, Ligon mobilizes the signifying capacity of the authorial "I," allowing it to channel the voice of the original writer, speak for himself, or offer viewers the opportunity of identification. Yet these same transcriptions eventually blur, fade or otherwise degrade before our eyes, effectively signaling a breakdown of communication. Additionally, then, Ligon concedes that language is an impoverished representational system, incapable of fully expressing black subjectivity and cultural otherness, and hardly a substitute for lived experience.

Ligon has also used stencils to transcribe portions of the stand-up routines that Richard Pryor performed and recorded in the 1970s. After making a small number of these paintings in the mid-1990s, Ligon resumed the series in 2004, and 13 works from both periods were hung in a line across two walls in Pittsburgh. Each canvas is roughly 31 inches square and bears the set-up and punch line of one of Pryor's jokes. Unlike Ligon's other stenciled works in which a black-and-white palette often suggests a literary source, the Pryor canvases are painted with lurid, high-keyed colors that befit their pop-culture roots. The dissonant chromatic contrasts of text and ground are also very hard on the eyes, and underscore the shock value of Pryor's expletive-laced humor. Indeed, as one struggles to read these jokes about "niggers" and well-worn racial stereotypes, the sheer force of their obscenity is absorbed as a retinal assault.

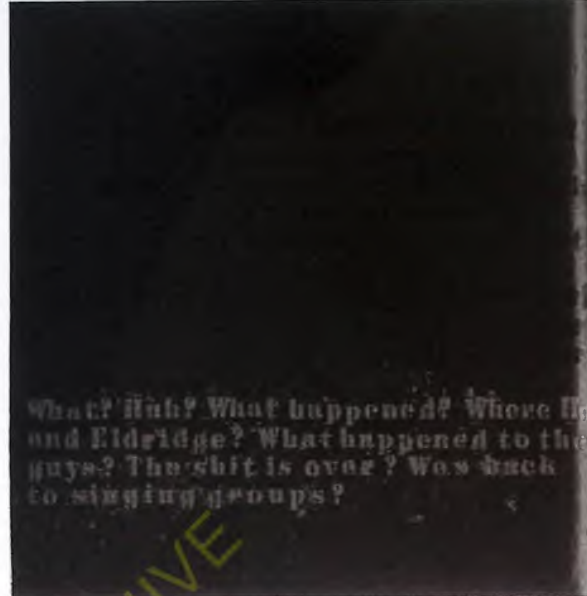
Two different modes of appropriation are combined in "Runaways" (1993), a series of 10 offset lithographs that mimic the appearance of 19th-century

Dissonant chromatic contrasts of text and ground are hard on the eyes, and underscore the shock value of Richard Pryor's expletive-laced humor.

posters seeking the return of fugitive slaves. In each of these prints a small period image of a black person surmounts a framed typeset paragraph describing the artist. Ligon solicited these descriptions from 10 of his friends, asking them each to imagine filing a missing person's report about him. Many of the paragraphs mention the same distinguishing features of their shared subject (short hair, sidelong glance, wears glasses and a wrist-watch). Just as often, however, the descriptions part ways or contradict each other, generating a collective portrait of the artist that is fractured and disjunctive and would hardly guarantee his capture.

One learns more about Ligon's identity as a black gay man from "A Feast of Scraps," a series of photo albums that he assembled between 1994 and 1998. Six open albums were arranged in glass cases in Pittsburgh, displaying mostly black-and-white snapshots of middle-class African-Americans that appear to date to the 1940s and '50s. Among these rather conventional images of family rituals, Ligon inserts several vintage photographs of naked black men and gay sex. Their obvious incongruity is both comic and poignant, as the pictures are occasionally captioned by typewritten phrases like "Mother knew" and "It's not natural." Here Ligon rewrites the unofficial history of this hypothetical family, insinuating gay desire into a photographic record that normally suppresses its representation.

Ligon expanded his investigation of the family photo album in 2003, when the Dia Foundation sponsored the creation of *Annotations*, an interactive Web site presented in the survey and currently accessible on the Internet at www.diacenter.org. Like "A Feast of Scraps," this virtual photo album collects found photographs of African-Americans, some of whom are members of Ligon's own family. A rough chronology seems to govern the album's 20 pages, as the snapshots gradually shift from black and white to color. Nearly



Remember the Revolution #1, 2004, oil stick and acrylic on canvas, 32 inches square. Broad Art Foundation, Santa Monica.

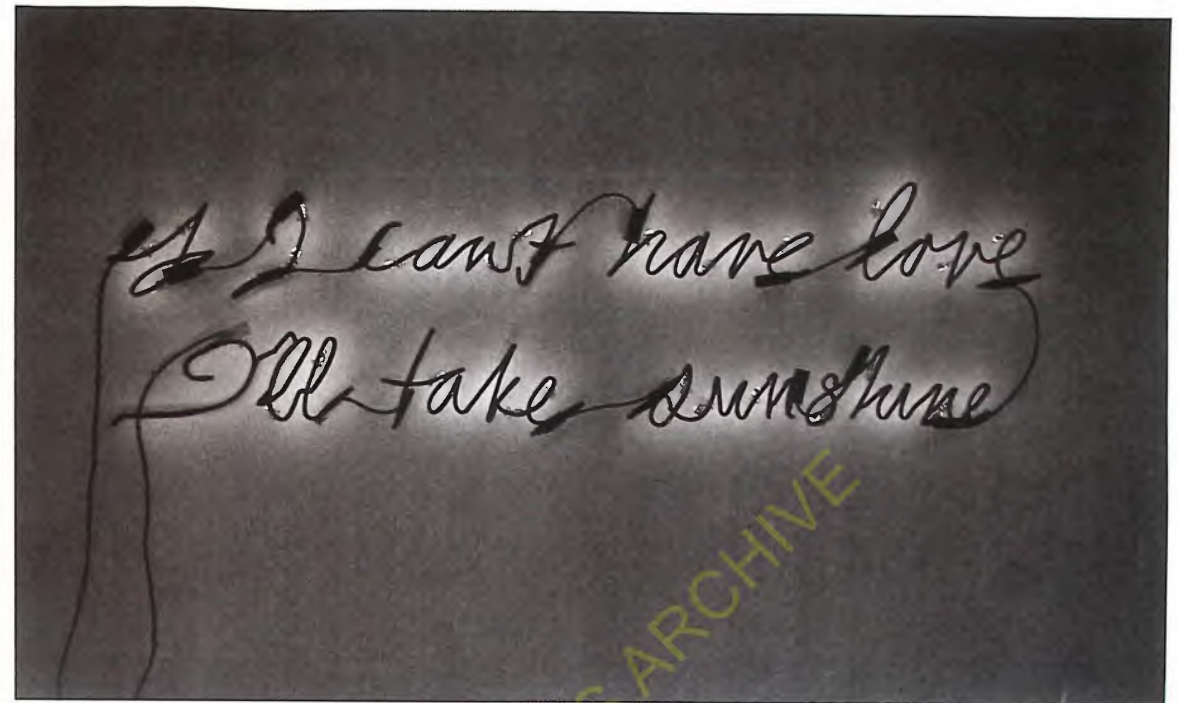
every picture invites a click of a mouse, which reveals additional photographs, handwritten notes or typed captions. Toward the end of the album, links lead to audio tracks of Ligon singing soul and disco songs. Most of this supplemental information is quite vague, and never really explains the contents of the snapshots. But Ligon uses the linking structure of the Internet to mimic the way images can trigger very specific memories. Though we may not know the people pictured throughout *Annotations*, navigation of this photo album feels like climbing inside someone else's head.

We seem to gain intimate access to Ligon's psyche through *The Orange and Blue Feelings* (2003), a 55-minute video that collapses several sessions of the artist talking to his real-life therapist. Shot from the client's perspective, the video is screened on two adjacent monitors. One displays the cropped, seated body of the female therapist (her face is never visible), while the other implies distraction via shifting views of her office and its banal furnishings. The audible exchange eventually unearths some interesting backstories about Ligon's work, including a memory from his third-grade art class at the Walden School, where he made a papier-mâché ocean liner and painted it orange and blue. When his teacher scolded him for using "ugly colors," the young Ligon responded by painting the entire boat black. Ligon's therapist interprets this episode as a "screen memory," and believes this childhood "trauma" may help explain his adult tendency to appropriate words and images in lieu of making "original" marks.

In several related works arranged near the video, Ligon appears to examine the roots of his stymied expressionism. *The Story of the Orange and the Blue Boats* (2003) re-creates the analyzed ocean liner as two papier-mâché sculptures—one brightly colored, the other painted black. The walls are hung with several *End of the Year Reports* (2003), silkscreens of student evaluations written by Ligon's Walden School teachers, one of whom describes him as "an extremely imaginative and creative writer." One also encounters a delicate colored pencil drawing of a jade plant, where the artist's response to nature seems direct and not borrowed. Ironically, this 2003 sketch is an exacting copy of a drawing Ligon made when he was 10 years old.

All these objects are recent replicas of childhood artifacts, and suggest that youthful spontaneity may remain irretrievable to Ligon's adult self. Yet the

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Untitled (If I Can't Have Love I'll Take Sunshine), 2006, neon and paint, 15 by 60 inches. Photos this page courtesy Thomas Dane Gallery.

Warm Broad Glow, 2005, neon and paint, 4 by 48 inches.



Silver Niggers Ain't Scared #1, 2006, oil and acrylic on canvas, 30 inches square. Courtesy Thomas Dane Gallery, London.

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9/11. Her body fragments are shown floating through the air in all directions, scrambled with shards of glass. The third panel, a straightforward vertical, depicts a more general maelstrom of destruction. There are more body parts, building fragments, two firefighters, a search-and-rescue worker, a dead woman, flames and countless broken or destroyed objects, with an American flag at the right. This panel by itself is a trenchant evocation of a world in disintegration. Finally, in the last panel, an apparently dead man (though he is depicted standing) is shown in front of the Towers. His burned hand is held by his sorrowing widow. Three policemen attempt to deliver a folded memorial flag to the grief-stricken woman.

Overall, it is clear that 20th-century German painting—Schmidt-Rottluff, Kollwitz, Grosz, Otto Dix—made the most lasting impression on Witkin, particularly as seen in his concern with human vulnerability. But he is also very much part of an American tradition, which Bram Dijkstra in a recent book calls "American Expressionism."² This tradition includes Paul Cadmus, who painted *The Herring Massacre* (1940), a frighteningly graphic record of violent labor struggles. One thinks also of Jacob Lawrence's moving tempera series, "The Migration of the Negro" (1940-41) and, perhaps especially, of Philip Evergood's *American Tragedy* (1937), referring to the antilabor Memorial Day Massacre in South Chicago, a painting in which the blue police uniforms contrast so eloquently with the orange ground and the brilliant reds of the steel mills above—a major statement about police brutality. Witkin picks up on this tradition, with its strong element of social engagement, using the expressive visual chronicle as a format to examine the moral and spiritual values of our cataclysmic time. The work of the above-mentioned painters—and

men like Ben Shahn and Jack Levine—was marginalized when Abstract Expressionism became the dominant mode of American art. Witkin, however, was fortunate to begin his work when Action Painting insisted so strongly on the importance of the gesture. The materiality of paint has remained essential to his work and accounts in no small measure for its power. □

1. Jerome Witkin in Sherry Chayat, *Life Lessons: The Art of Jerome Witkin* (2nd edition), Syracuse University Press, 2006, pp. 24-35.
2. Bram Dijkstra, *American Expressionism*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, 2003.

"Jerome Witkin: Life Lessons" appeared at ACA Galleries, New York [Apr. 22-May 27, 2006] in conjunction with the publication of the second, expanded edition of Sherry Chayat's book *Life Lessons: The Art of Jerome Witkin* (Syracuse University Press). Jack Rutberg Fine Arts, Los Angeles, showed a selection of Witkin's works, mainly from 1993-2004 [June 4-Sept. 30, 2004]. Witkin was also included in the exhibition "New Old Masters," curated by Donald Kuspit and appearing at the National Museum, Gdansk, Poland [Nov. 2, 2006-Feb. 15, 2007].

Author: Peter Selz is a Berkeley-based critic whose most recent book is *Art of Engagement: Visual Politics in California and Beyond* (University of California Press).



Roofies, 2005, oil on canvas, 64 by 48 inches.

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struggle to recover it yielded some fascinating results during the artist's residency at the Walker Art Center in 2001. Asked to collaborate with members of the surrounding community, Ligon distributed Afrocentric coloring books from the 1970s to local children, who proceeded to cover their pages with crayons and acrylic paints. Meanwhile, Ligon silkscreened the original contour drawings onto archival paper and large canvases and eventually copied the children's marks to create his own versions of their work. Regrettably, none of the paintings was included in the survey, but six of the smaller works on paper were hung in a row on one wall. In a couple of these drawings, Ligon translates the efforts of children who stay inside the lines and respect the laws of local color. Most, however, channel the energies of more rebellious scribbles who evince little knowledge of the African-American icons they decorate. In one drawing, Harriet Tubman's head radiates concentric rings of rainbow color. Another child gave the face of Malcolm X a makeover, thus inducing Ligon to also paint his subject's lips pink, rouge his cheeks and apply a heavy coat of blue eyeshadow. Innocent kids' play to be sure, but such creative misrecognition also indexes the passing of time and a loss of historical knowledge. More positively, and not unlike much of his text-based work, Ligon's willful reiterations of these drawings speak to the value of making new sense of enshrined cultural heroes in a contemporary context.

Most recently, Ligon has transformed borrowed bits of text into large, wall-mounted neon sculptures. *Warm Broad Glow* (2005), for example, employs white neon tubing to spell out the phrase "negro sunshine" in a lowercase typeface. These words derive from *Melanctha*, a 1909 novella by Gertrude Stein, in which she contrasts the emotional reserve of a fictional black character who was raised by white parents with the "boundless joy of [typical] negroes" who possess "the wide, abandoned laughter that makes the warm broad glow of negro sunshine." Though this literary source is

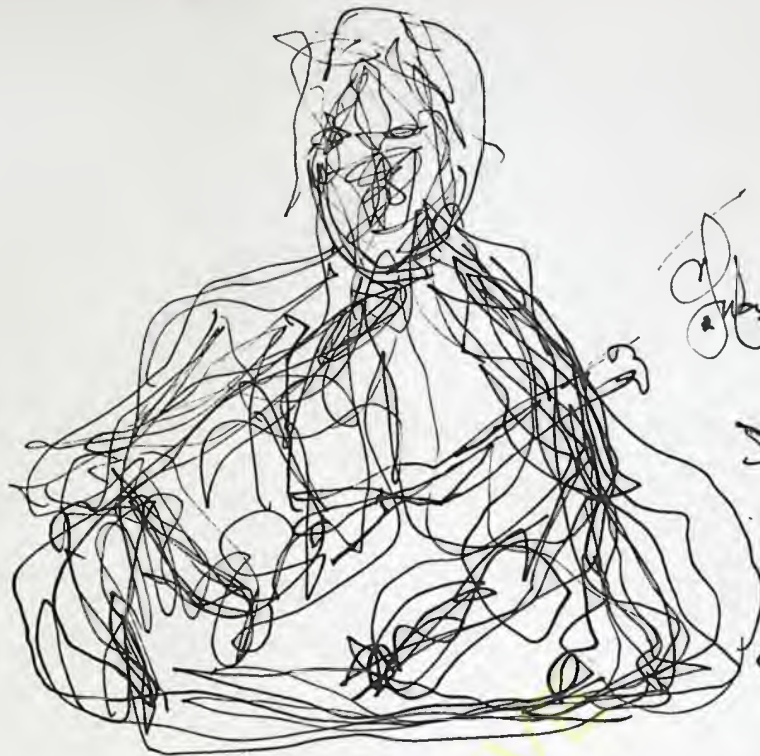
obscure, Ligon conveys the antiquated racism embedded in Stein's phrase through clever manipulation of his radiant medium. By coating the front of the neon tubing with opaque black paint, he generates theatrical backlighting for the darkened letters and invokes an era when white people used superficial layers of blackface to portray "negroes" as ever-cheerful and entertaining simpletons.

In Pittsburgh, *Warm Broad Glow* was hung high on a wall in the museum lobby, where its intimation of minstrelsy resonated with nearby paintings of Pia Zadora, Cheryl Tiegs and numerous other entertainers that Andy Warhol portrayed in the 1970s. Shades of Warhol could also be detected in Ligon's coloring book drawings and coal dust paintings, which recall the older artist's paint-by-number and diamond dust canvases, respectively. Perhaps prompted by these visual echoes, I found myself thinking of Warhol's well-known resistance to biographical revelation. "If you want to know all about Andy Warhol," he told an interviewer in 1966, "just look at the surface of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it." Not unlike this famously cryptic statement, the selections in Ligon's current retrospective thematize issues of authorship and forestall an easy understanding of the man behind the art on view. Instead we witness a shrewd recycler of existing texts and imagery, a nimble ventriloquist of other people's voices. While these tactics can sometimes feel like obfuscation, they ultimately critique the notion of a coherent, unitary self that precedes expression. Ligon's work reminds us that the construction and articulation of one's identity is an ongoing project, and emerges from an active interrogation of family, community, culture and history. □

"Glenn Ligon: Some Changes" was on view at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston [Jan. 14-Apr. 9, 2006], and the Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh [Sept. 30-Dec. 31, 2006]. It can currently be seen at the Wezner Center for the Arts, Columbus [Jan. 26-Apr. 15], and travels to the Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, Luxembourg [Oct. 6-Dec. 17]. "Brilliant Corners," an exhibition of Ligon's recent work, was on view last fall at Thomas Dane Gallery in London [Oct. 11-Nov. 18, 2006].

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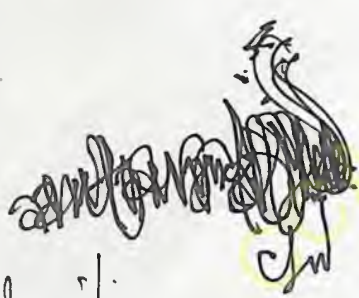
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