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Los Angeles Times.  
October 24th, 2011.

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# Los Angeles Times

## Art review: ‘Glenn Ligon: America’ at LACMA

*October 24, 2011 | 5:30 pm*



As tinderboxes go, few are more potentially volatile than the politics of race and sex. Mix the two together, and the possibility for explosion rises exponentially.

In Glenn Ligon’s art, expertly surveyed in a traveling exhibition newly arrived at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the mixture is made. An explosion, however, never comes. What arrives instead is something different — something better, more cogent and worthwhile. Like all good iconoclasts, Ligon chisels open a space for contemplation from a place that is too often inaccessible and locked-down.

The Bronx-born artist, 50, began as a painter. Although the show includes sculptures, prints, drawings, mixed media and even neon signs, painting remains a core activity. Take the beautiful recent neon sculptures in the final room, which play with the word “America,” flipping around its letters to show darker sides. Painting’s usual support of stretched canvas is replaced by gas-filled and electrified glass tubing, parts of which are painted black to achieve various poetic effects. They’re as much paintings as the canvases in the first gallery.

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Those grew out of Ligon’s youthful dissatisfaction with gestural abstraction. (The show is installed in a loose chronology, beginning around 1985.) A standard trope in postwar American abstraction drew an analogy between a painting and the human body — between the support as skeletal structure for a skin of paint. Ligon sent it spinning.

Mixing oil and enamel, “Untitled (I am a man)” derives from the defiant placards worn in 1968 by striking sanitation workers in segregated Memphis, Tenn. To the general indifference of city leaders, two men, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, had been crushed in a malfunctioning garbage truck. Their mangled bodies gave physical heft to protesters’ large signs: “I AM A MAN.” The existential outcry was held aloft on sticks or attached to the marchers’ chests.

Ligon’s painting features identical typeface painted on a white ground. Look closely, though, and the white surface is layered over a black skin of under-paint. The surface is smudged, worn, cracked -- evidence of use, as in those disruptive weeks in Memphis, but also a sign of tattered purity.

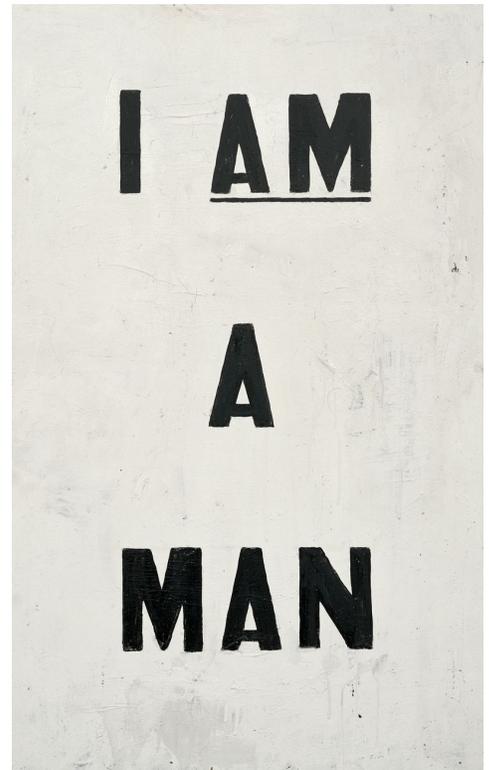
The artist, black and gay, painted it in the final full year of Ronald Reagan’s presidency. Reagan had launched his first term’s campaign with a notorious states’ rights speech delivered in Philadelphia, Miss., site of a famous civil rights era triple-murder. Once in office, he remained silent about AIDS until the epidemic had ravaged the gay community, leaving more than 20,000 dead.

A wry and poignant Ligon drawing (executed with Michael Duffy) from 2000 masquerades as a millennial condition report on that earlier, intentionally “damaged” painting. Identifying every crack, spot and stain on its surface, he reports on a condition much larger than his art’s.

Take the recent Arab Spring, where signs were spotted in Libya declaring “Ana Rajul” — Arabic for “I am a man.” Ligon’s painted 1988 sign, midway between past and the present, retains the capacity to jolt.

Ligon’s fusion of art, language and the body soon expanded. Using black oil stick and stencils, recalling Jasper Johns’ technique, he painted on wood doors covered in white gesso. The format subtly scales the painting to a viewer’s body. In one, the word “passing” is repeated nearly 400 times, legibly across the top but clogging the stencil to become steadily more clotted and indecipherable as it cascades down the surface.

Passing — through doors, between rooms or, metaphorically, from life to death — is smudged with racial and sexual overtones, as in passing as white or straight to survive. A physical roughness in these works eventually gives way to sensuous elegance, especially in the 1990s, when Ligon began to mix coal dust into ink. The tactile surface gains a subtle, light-reflective sparkle, echoing Andy Warhol’s use of diamond dust in paintings. The painting’s body luxuriates in its own skin, gorgeous and scarred.



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An essential pivot comes in the second gallery, where Ligon’s “Notes on the Margin of the Black Book” is installed across two adjoining walls. He separately framed 91 erotic photographs of black males cut from Robert Mapplethorpe’s 1988 “Black Book,” installing them in two horizontal rows. Between them are two more rows of printed snippets of text, 78 comments on sexuality, race, AIDS, art and the politically inflamed controversy over Mapplethorpe’s work launched by then-Texas Congressman Dick Armey.

Some, like twisted quotes from the late ambassador and art collector Walter Annenberg and New York Times art critic Hilton Kramer, make your jaw drop, partly because of the speakers’ social and cultural power. Others, ranging from celebrated author James Baldwin to anonymous bar patrons, turn your head around in more intellectually expansive ways.

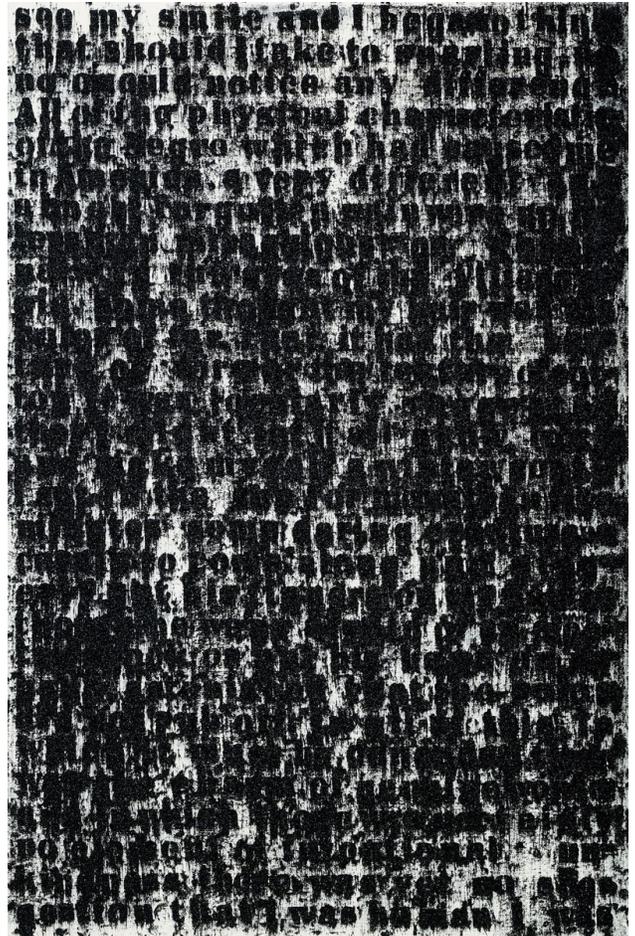
Ligon’s piece, a sensation when shown at the 1993 Whitney Biennial, remains powerful today. Then, it erupted in the immediate aftermath of Patrick Buchanan’s “culture war” battle cry at the Republican National Convention; now, coded racial animus and homophobia still course through presidential contests.

Ligon adroitly ruptures hardened positions. Note that the number of photographs (91) doesn’t match the number of short texts (78). We’re used to reading texts as descriptive photo-captions, but that can’t happen here; the texts and photos don’t match up.

Instead, these words and images slip and slide, the friction between them sending sparks and emitting light. The binary of words and pictures is banished -- along with black/white, gay/straight, naked/nude, liberal/conservative, art/porn, innocent/obscene. Human desires aren’t so easily described. This is political art of the most thoughtful, least didactic kind, rewarding the extended viewing it requires with a shot of deep humanity.

The exhibition, with 79 works, has been trimmed from the 104 in its debut last spring at New York’s Whitney Museum, where it was organized. But it’s beautifully installed, giving a thorough accounting of an important artist at mid-career.

It will make viewers productively uncomfortable -- not least from several paintings based on ribald Richard Pryor comedy routines, the jokes painted in bright, clashing hues that visually embody colorful language. Likewise discomfiting, a large portrait of Malcolm X faithfully reproduces an innocent child’s rendering that Ligon found in a black-pride coloring book: The image sports rouged cheeks, blue eye shadow and pink lips-- part clown, part Warhol-style silkscreen in the manner of Liz Taylor or Marilyn Monroe.



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A lesser artist might have looked away from the vexatious coloring book -- but not Ligon. His *Malcolm-in-drag*, a rare figurative painting in his oeuvre and one he chose to make monumental, inevitably alludes to contested reports that the murdered civil rights hero for many years had a white male lover. It further recalls a famously shocking 1988 David Hammons portrait of Jesse Jackson -- skin whitened, eyes made blue, hair and mustache dyed blond -- that is caustically titled "How Ya Like Me Now." And it resonates against the influence of Marcel Duchamp's graffiti-like 1919 defacement of a Mona Lisa reproduction, sporting a man's goatee and mustache.

Ligon's iconoclasm is never cavalier, always acute and historically grounded. That's what distinguishes a gifted artist from an ordinary vandal, and it makes this trenchant retrospective required viewing.

"Glenn Ligon: America," Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 5905 Wilshire Blvd., (323) 857-6000, through Jan. 22. [www.lacma.org](http://www.lacma.org)

