THE ART WORLD

UNHIDDEN IDENTITIES

A Glenn Ligon retrospective.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

Young artists go where the glamour of the moment is; it's how art history moves along, if not how it progresses. Today, that means a frenzied international market and its auxiliary organs, such as art fairs, which, grading all values by prices paid, make each artist a player, ready or not. It's hard now to recall that, less than two decades ago, fashion exalted politically themed work, which, backed by institutions and academic criticism, cast artists as agents of social change. (A down market eased the way to virtue; nothing else was selling very well.) "Glenn Ligon: AMERICA," a striking retrospective at the Whitney Museum, rescues a star of the era of identity politics from a blind spot in the present art world.

The Bronx-born Ligon, now fifty, makes combative points of being black and being gay. He is best known for paintings in black oil stick (and, sometimes, coal dust) of stencilled, racially charged prose, such as a work from 1990 that quotes a line from Zora Neale Hurston: "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background." The words repeat, from the top to the bottom of a tall, white-painted board, becoming increasingly smudged and illegible. But the show also includes fine, less familiar works in photography, sculpture, and neon. Handsomely and sensitively installed by the Whitney curator Scott Rothkopf, the show communicates an appealingly complex sensibility that is subject to self-doubt and aesthetic yearning, even when it is forcefully on message. Ligon emerges as a companionable spirit in an endemic ordeal of American democracy—who we are, beset by what we are taken to be—which most afflicts those, of course, who are most swiftly and carelessly categorized, as by skin color.

Ligon's father was a foreman at the General Motors plant in Tarrytown, New York; his mother was a nurse's aide. Growing up in the South Bronx, he won a scholarship to Manhattan's progressive Walden School. After graduating from Wesleyan University, in 1982, he became a student in the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program, a hotbed of critical theory and conceptualist styles. His love of painting—he has singled out Willem de Kooning, Cy Twombly, and Terry Winters as tutelary heroes, and the importance to his work of Jasper Johns's stencilled lettering is obvious—made him something of a conservative on a scene whose preferred mode was the appropriation of photographic images, in works conceived to expose and mock the malignities of patriarchal, "late capitalist" culture. (Leading lights of the movement included Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Jenny Holzer, Hans Haacke, and Richard Prince.) Early drawings in the Whitney show, from 1985, find Ligon duly juxtaposing images of African-American hair products with images of canonical modern sculptures, by Brancusi and Giacometti, that display influences of African tribal art. But the satirical point is a mite blunted by Ligon's palpable liking for the sculptures.

Ligon's most apposite forebear is the charismatic and elusive black conceptualist David Hammons, whose needling tactics—like setting up as a street peddler of snowballs priced according to size, outside Cooper Union, one winter day in 1983—channel discontents of race and class without recourse to philosophizing, and without insulting past masters of art. In the Whitney show, another precedent both surprises and makes telling sense: Richard Pryor.

I hadn't known Ligon's series of word paintings of chipperly profane racial jokes from Pryor's standup act, in a series from 1993-96, which Ligon resumed in 2004. (An example: "Niggers be holding them dicks too. White people go 'Why you guys hold your things?' Say 'You done took everything else motherfucker.' ") The paintings' hot, flashing colors are as hard on the eyes as their texts are on the nerves. Ligon has said that he backed off his first engage-

ment with Pryor's scorched-earth hilarity because its intensity scared him. That may be understandable on two counts. First is the social chasm between an artist trained in sophisticated manners of fine art and a performer who was brought up in his grandmother's brothel. The second possible root of Ligon's unease is an emotional stance, which might be called aggressive-passive, and which he shares with the comedian: a fury at unjust suffering, the expression of which strips bare a personal, humiliated vulnerability. Pryor's incendiary poetry burns to a core of humanity from which all customary divisions among people appear ridiculous. He let audiences feel at one with him, for spans of redemptive laughter. His genius steeled him to decide that he had nothing to lose by that. But an equivalent attitude in art would have set Ligon at odds with the judgmental righteousness of his social-critical peers. In effect, he rides Pryor into regions of lonely anguish that he can't brave alone.

Ligon's anxiety plays out by fits and starts in the show, on notes that are comic or angry or just bemused. Elegance steadies him. The artist's superb command of painterly and presentational rhetoric impresses because it has crucial work to do: it gives public poise to private conflict. I remember being irritated, at the notorious, politically minded Whitney Biennial of 1993, by what seemed to be a didactic air in Ligon's "Notes on the Margin of the Black Book." He scavenged pages of Robert Mapplethorpe's "The Black Book" (1986) for its ninety-one erotic photographs of mostly nude black men. He framed the images and arrayed them with framed quotations—from critics or theorists or patrons of gay bars whom he interviewed—that assess the work or offer some reflection on race and sex. At the time, it was widely assumed that Ligon shared a politically correct condemnation of a white photographer's "objectifying" presumption. But it's plain now that he was moved in part by the classical form and the libidinous glory of Mapplethorpe's vision. The only thing that remains annoying about the work is the vapid starchiness of so many of the highbrow texts. Being black and being gay, and an aesthete as well, launched Ligon—and us, vicariously, as we contemplate the work—into a crossfire of allurements and compunctions.

Some of Ligon's ironies seem rather pat. "To Disembark" (1993), named for a book by the poet Gwendolyn Brooks, dramatizes the story of a slave who had himself shipped North, to freedom, in a crate. Crates emitting recorded voices, including that of Billie Holiday singing "Strange Fruit," are augmented with descriptions of Ligon, written by friends, in the antique style of "Wanted" posters for escaped slaves. The work comes off as an ingenious goof. Also relatively slight, albeit gorgeous, are neon inscriptions, inflected with black paint, of the word "AMERICA" and a phrase from Gertrude Stein: "negro sunshine." Stein was being fondly indulgent of black folks, in an old vein of white cluelessness. Ligon punctures more recent variants with quotes, in paintings on paper, from reviews of his own work, such as one that defensively praises him for not being defensive "about mainstream American art," unlike "many other minority artists." In fact, that hapless wording points toward a truth of Ligon's significance.

Today, a Ligon painting, "Black Like Me #2" (1992), hangs in the private quarters of the White House. That's not ironic; that's progress. If Barack Obama's election didn't end identity politics in American culture, it certainly complicated the matter. The President's color is only one of the many characteristics that make him both a person and a symbol, standing for a diversity that can't be sorted out on a demographic chart. Certainly, American racism persists, as does the rage that it incites. But this and other issues that galvanized Ligon's generation of artists are, at least, less clear-cut. Ligon deserves honor for foregrounding, in the famously liberal but chronically lily-white art world, voices such as those of Hurston, Brooks, and James Baldwin, as well as Pryor, and for helping to normalize public assertions of gayness. The fact that he could do so without compromising his personality and his artistic standards is a sign of more than hope. ♦

Ligon gives public poise to private conflict. Photograph by Lyle Ashton Harris.

"UNTITLED (FACE #18 GLENN)" (1998)/CRG GALLERY