

DIRECTIONS

GLENN LIGON:
TO DISEMBARK

NOVEMBER 11, 1993–FEBRUARY 20, 1994



Untitled, 1993. Etching and chine collé, 71.1 x 53.3 cm (28 x 21 in.).
Collection of the artist, courtesy Max Protetch Gallery, New York.
Photo by Dennis Cowley.

TO DISEMBARK SUGGESTS ARRIVAL AT THE end of a journey. A physical journey in literature and myth, in turn, frequently suggests a journey into one's self; a quest for self-knowledge.¹ Glenn Ligon's work has often explored ways in which identity is constructed in relation to others or to suit expectations of a specific audience, and thus the impossibility of arriving at a single true self. Ligon is perhaps best-known for paintings based on texts related to these themes by such authors as James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Mary Shelley, and Jean Genet.

In this exhibition, which has four discrete elements, Ligon continues to probe issues of self-definition. Wooden boxes, using international symbols that define fragility, emit barely audible sounds (a heartbeat, Billie Holiday singing "Strange Fruit" and "Traveling Light," disco music by Royal House; fig. 1). The boxes vary slightly in size and construction method, but all take their proportions from the one in which a slave, Henry "Box" Brown, was shipped from Richmond, Virginia, to freedom in Philadelphia in 1849 (fig. 2).² In the same gallery are lithographs imitating 19th-century advertisements for the return of escaped slaves (fig. 3). All name and describe the artist himself (he asked friends to describe him without giving a reason and used their descriptions to create the prints). In another part of the exhibition, three quotes from an essay by Zora Neale Hurston, which Ligon had also used in a series of 1990 paintings (fig. 4), are stenciled directly on the walls.³ Accompanying them are etchings with chine collé (a process by which a thin piece of high-quality paper is glued to a less-expensive backing paper) that mimic frontispieces of the 19th-century narratives published by white abolitionists in which former slaves recounted their lives under slavery and the stories of their escapes (cover). Ligon has replaced the Bible verses and anti-slavery poems that often appeared on the title pages of the 19th-century narratives with quotes from contemporary authors such as Hilton Als, bell hooks, and others. Like the runaway posters that describe him, these narratives tell the story of the artist. As Ligon expressed it:

The show seems to be coalescing around the idea of absence and presence. How is identity constructed? What are the narratives of one's own life, and, for Americans, are those narratives by necessity formed against the background of slavery? Who are the other "masters" from which we flee? Who is the audience I am writing for and does my narrative change if I am not concerned with addressing white

audiences? If the crate is that which brings the "art object" to the museum, what are the implications of that container being the "object" and what does it mean that that container suggests the body but does not contain it?⁴



Fig. 1 Untitled, 1993. Three wood and mixed-media boxes, each approximately 76.2 x 91.4 x 61.0 cm (30 x 36 x 24 in.). Collection of the artist, courtesy Max Protetch Gallery, New York. Photo by Dennis Cowley.

The following text was edited from a series of interviews with the artist in July and August 1993.

Phyllis Rosenzweig, Associate Curator

PR: Can you fill in some biographical information: where you grew up, who encouraged you to think about becoming an artist?

GL: I was born and grew up in the Bronx in an average working class family. My parents separated when I was young. My mother sent my brother and me to private school on scholarship when we were in the first grade. I was always encouraged to do art, if not to be an artist. I thought seriously about becoming an artist when I got to college and realized that I was not cut out to be an architecture major, as I had planned, because I wasn't very interested in math and physics. Studio art courses were required for architecture majors, so I decided to major in art and see what happened. Painting became a kind of refuge for me. The time I spent in the studio was the only time when I could clear my head and concen-

trate. I was interested in Abstract Expressionism, and I am sure I had absorbed part of that mythology: the heroic artist struggling against internal demons. But that was an important time in my development because it taught me to trust my vision and working method.

PR: Why did you start using stencils?

GL: In the mid-1980s I had reached a crisis of sorts in terms of my abstract work and was looking for a way to incorporate ideas from theoretical and literary texts. Using text as the work itself seemed a very economical solution. I started using stencils because they were cheap, durable, and an efficient way of conveying information using paint, which is a very sensuous, tactile, and inefficient material. I was using quotes, and the stencils allowed me to introduce a bit of distance and impersonality to the process. The first works I did with stencils had very painterly backgrounds. Later I just stenciled over a white ground—which is the way we are used to seeing text—but I repeated the quotes. I was interested in what happened if you broke a sentence down in terms of its legibility and the meaning of its individual parts, and in how the line breaks and the accumulation of paint on the stencil teased the traces of other meanings out of the sentences.

PR: The stenciled quotes are very beautiful in a handmade way. Does the meaning of your work change when you use more mechanical printing techniques?

GL: Curiously, the more "hands off" the production method, the more personal investment is evident in the work. The work in this show is among the most autobiographical I have ever done. We read paintings as "personal" because they are so identified with the artist's hand, but even though my work plays with the idea of unmediated access to the artist (the sentences I use often have the word "I" in them), it is in some ways very detached. I use stencils and quotes from other people's texts, after all. I am interested in the border between what is mechanical, repetitive, impersonal and what is autobiographical.

PR: Is that what interested you in the slave narratives? They are autobiographical yet formulaic.

GL: I recently became interested in slave narratives because their modes of address and the conditions under which they were written had certain parallels to my questions about audiences and cultural authority. The purpose of the narratives was twofold: first, to create consensus in the nation that slavery as an institution was immoral and should be opposed; and, second, to

convince white people, by the very act of writing, that the author of the narrative and, by extension, the masses of enslaved black people were indeed human and worthy of freedom. I was interested in contemporary traces of the conditions under which former captives wrote their narratives. For example: what are the conditions under which works by black artists enter the museum? Do we enter only when our "visible difference" is evident? Why do many shows with works by colored people (and rarely whites) have titles that include "race" and "identity"? Who is my work for and what do different audiences demand of it? Toni Morrison says that the



Fig. 2 Henry "Box" Brown. New York Public Library Picture Collection.

writers of slave narratives often stopped short of really describing the horrors of slavery because they feared that white audiences, even sympathetic ones, would be turned off if the accounts were too graphic. What are contemporary examples of that? What do black audiences not want to hear? (I see the positive image/negative image debate now raging in the black community as

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1. The exhibition's title alludes to that of a book by the poet Gwendolyn Brooks, *To Disembark* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1981).

2. See "Henry 'Box' Brown" in *Black Men in Chains: Narratives by Escaped Slaves*, Charles H. Nichols, ed. (New York: Laurel Hill & Co., 1972), 178-99.

3. Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," in *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing . . . And Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive*, Alice Walker, ed., (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1979), 152-55; repr. in *Bearing Witness: Selections from African-American Autobiography in the Twentieth Century*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., (New York: Pantheon, 1991), 32-37.

4. Letter to the author, May 31, 1993.

5. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: Signet, 1968, originally published in 1845), 77. It was illegal for slaves to learn to read and write (among other reasons, it was feared that they would forge passes for themselves and escape). Illiteracy was then cited as proof of inferior status and thus justification for enslavement.

6. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, Jonathan Rutherford, ed. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 225.

Fig. 4. Untitled (I feel most colored when I am thrown against a stark white background), 1990. Oilstick and gesso on wood, 203.2 x 76.2 cm (80 x 30 in.). Collection of the artist, courtesy Max Protetch Gallery, New York. The painting is from Ligon's first series of works using sentences from Zora Neale Hurston's essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me." Photo by Dennis Cowley.



BIOGRAPHY

Born in the Bronx, New York, April 20, 1960. Educated at the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, 1980; Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, B.A. 1982; curatorial intern, Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, 1982; Independent Study Program, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1985; Colonist in Residence, Mac Dowell Colony, Peterborough, New Hampshire, 1989; National Studio Program, Clocktower (Gallery), Institute for Contemporary Art, New York, 1989-90. Awards include National Endowment for the Arts, Visual Artists Fellowship, Drawing, 1989, and Visual Artists Fellowship, Painting, 1991; Dewar's Young Artists Recognition Award, 1990. Lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1990 *How It Feels To Be Colored Me: A Project by Glenn Ligon*, BACA Downtown, Brooklyn.
- 1991 Jack Tilton Gallery, New York; *White Room*, White Columns, New York.
- 1992 *Glenn Ligon: Paintings*, Max Protetch Gallery, New York; *Glenn Ligon: Good Mirrors Are Not Cheap*, Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, New York; *Glenn Ligon / Matrix 120*, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1984 *Artist in the Marketplace: The Fourth Annual Exhibition*, Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York.
- 1989 *Selections 46*, Drawing Center, New York; *The National and International Studio Artists 1989-90*, P.S. 1 Museum, Institute of Contemporary Art, Long Island City, New York.
- 1990 *Rutgers National '90: Works on Paper*, Stedman Art Gallery, Rutgers University, Camden; *Art of Resistance, El Arte de Resistencia*, Galeria El Bóris, New York; *Sprint: Currency, Security and Art on Deposit*, New Museum of Contemporary Art at Marine Midland Bank, New York.
- 1991 *Interrogating Identity*, Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University, and tour; *1991 Biennial Exhibition*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; *Positions of Authority, Art in General*, New York; *Color Theory*, Amelie A. Wallace Gallery, State University of New York at Old Westbury.
- 1992 *We Interrupt Your Regularly Scheduled Programming*, White Columns, New York, and tour; *All Words Suck*, Anders Tornberg Gallery, Lund, Sweden; *Allegories of Modernism: Contemporary Drawing*, Museum of Modern Art, New York; *Doubletake: Collective Memory & Current Art*, South Bank Centre, Hayward Gallery, London, and tour; *Knowledge: Aspects of Conceptual Art*, University Art Museum, Santa Barbara, and tour; *Slow Art: Painting in New York Now*, P.S. 1 Museum, Institute for Contemporary Art, Long Island City, New York; *Update 1992*, White Columns, New York; *Mistaken Identities*, University Art Museum, Santa Barbara, and tour; *Malcolm X: Man Ideal Icon*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, and tour.
- 1993 *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; *Byron Kim & Glenn Ligon: Collaborations, A/C Project Room*, New York; *42nd Street Art Project*, New York.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Colpitt, Frances, and Phyllis Pious. *Knowledge: Aspects of Conceptual Art*. Exhibition catalog. Santa Barbara: University of California, 1992.
- Doubletake: Collective Memory & Current Art*. Exhibition catalog. Essays by Greg Hilty, Bice Curiger and Lyne Cooke. London: South Bank Centre, 1992.
- Glenn Ligon / Matrix 120*. Exhibition brochure. Essay by Andrea Miller-Keller. Hartford, Conn.: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1992.
- Golden, Thelma. *Glenn Ligon: Good Mirrors Are Not Cheap*. Exhibition brochure. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, 1992.
- Interrogating Identity*. Exhibition catalog. Essays by Kellie Jones, Thomas Sokolowski, et al. New York: New York University, 1991.
- Kwon, Miwon. *Positions of Authority: Leone & Macdonald, Glenn Ligon, Judith Weiperson*. Exhibition brochure. Interview. New York: Art in General, 1991.
- Ligon, Glenn. "Insert: Glenn Ligon," *Parkett 30* (December 1991): 139-52.
- _____. "Profiles." *Third Text* 14 (Spring 1991): 53-62.

Solomon-Godeau, Abigail, and Constance Lewallen. *Mistaken Identities*. Exhibition catalog. Santa Barbara: University of California, 1993.

CHECKLIST

- All works are lent by the artist, courtesy Max Protetch Gallery, New York.
- Nine untitled wooden boxes with various elements, 1993, each approximately 76.2 x 91.4 x 61.0 cm (30 x 36 x 24 in.).
- Ten untitled offset lithographs, 1993, each 40.6 x 30.5 cm (16 x 12 in.).
- Three untitled wall drawings, 1993 (I remember the very day that I became colored, I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background, I do not always feel colored), each 303.2 x 76.2 cm (80 x 30 in.).
- Nine untitled etchings with chine collé, 1993, each 71.1 x 53.3 cm (28 x 21 in.).



Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden
Smithsonian Institution

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