

# Glenn Ligon

**Beauford Delaney, James Baldwin, c. 1955, and *Untitled*, c. 1958**

In a recent exhibition I curated for Nottingham Contemporary and Tate Liverpool, entitled ‘Encounters and Collisions’, I juxtaposed two paintings by the artist Beauford Delaney. One work from the mid-1950s depicts his great friend and supporter, the writer James Baldwin, of whom Delaney made many tender portraits. The other was *Untitled* (c.1958), a lyrical abstraction in creamy yellow and ochre brush strokes. Born in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1901, moving to Greenwich Village in 1929 and then to Paris in 1953, Delaney spent his artistic career pursuing the truths that lay behind the world of appearances. His portraits of friends and lovers, and his investigations into the spiritual aspects of light and colour, converged in the paintings he produced in France, a country which served as a refuge for many African-American artists and writers seeking to ease the bite of American racism after the end of World War II.

I count Delaney and Baldwin as two of my many queer predecessors. I love Delaney’s indifference to the division between various modes of painting and his unflagging optimism, and I love Baldwin’s fierce critiques of American culture and society and his belief in the world-altering power of the bonds of love. My coaldust paintings, which use passages from Baldwin’s seminal essay ‘Stranger in the Village’ (1953), reference both men and, as Delaney did, attempt to blur the line between the figurative and the abstract.

Baldwin wrote of Delaney: ‘The darkness of Beauford’s beginnings, in Tennessee, many years ago, was a black-blue midnight indeed, opaque and full of sorrow. And I do not know, nor will any of us ever really know, what kind of strength it was that enabled him to make so dogged and splendid a journey.’ I hope, when I am gone, someone will say that my journey was a dogged and splendid one too.

Glenn Ligon lives in New York, USA. This year, he had a solo show at Regen Projects, Los Angeles, USA, and curated ‘Encounters and Collisions’ for Nottingham Contemporary and Tate Liverpool, UK. His work is included in the 56th Venice Biennale, ‘All the World’s Futures’, which runs until 22 November.



**Opposite:** Max Ernst *Corps enseignant pour une école de tueurs* (Teaching Staff for a School for Killers) 1967. Stone and plaster. Courtesy: © 2015 Stiftung Ernst Scheidegger-Archiv, Zurich; photograph: Ernst Scheidegger **This page top:** Beauford Delaney *Untitled* c.1958. Oil on canvas, 76 × 63 cm **This page bottom:** Beauford Delaney *James Baldwin* c.1955. Oil on canvas board, 60 × 45 cm. Both images courtesy: Michael Rosenfeld, New York; Collection of Halley K. Harrisburg