

He's Barack Obama's favourite artist. But is Britain ready for Glenn Ligon?

He put lipstick on Malcolm X and breathed new life into Mapplethorpe's nudes. As Glenn Ligon brings 'his own personal museum' to the UK, we meet the artist Obama handpicked for the White House

Jason Farago

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The beautiful, powerful paintings of Glenn Ligon hang in museums around the world, but there is one artwork of his you can't see - not since 2009, at least. To catch a glimpse of his 1992 canvas *Black Like Me No 2*, which reproduces a text by a white journalist posing as a black man in the deep south, you would have to be very good friends with a certain art-lover in Washington DC.

"It's in the private quarters of the White House," Ligon says when I visit him in his Brooklyn studio. "So I can't see it. But I met Obama once, backstage at the Apollo in Harlem. I was with my friend and a woman said, 'I wonder if you have a moment to meet the president?' And, you know, we had dinner reservations - but OK. So we go downstairs and there's Obama with the chief of staff, who says, 'Mr President, this is Glenn Ligon. *Black Like Me No 2* is in your personal quarters.' And Obama looks at me and goes, 'Oh, yeah, we have a set of prints too! But they had to move them out, because of the light. I really miss them.'"

Ligon cackles at the memory. "I thought, 'Oh wait, this is real! They live with art, they take their children to look at art, they're not scared of artists. This is not some bullshit. This is not on his talking points. I was super impressed."

The president is hardly the only admirer of Ligon, whose exhibition *Encounters and Collisions* opens at Nottingham Contemporary this week, before touring to Tate Liverpool in July. Rather than mount a traditional retrospective, Ligon has instead curated a bold, peculiar history of postwar art, with works by more than 40 artists who have influenced him, making up what amounts to his own personal museum. He's included older painters like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, icons of black contemporary art like David Hammons, as well as underappreciated figures like Beauford Delaney. There are also artists who tackle LGBT issues, including Félix González-Torres and Zoe Leonard, and seven works of Ligon's own, including a colouring-book picture of Malcolm X, in which the black activist has been left with white skin.

Ligon's art, with its melancholy neon signs and dense, stencilled canvases, probes black representation, the complex terrain of race and homosexuality, and above all the grand promise - and less beautiful reality - of America. You can see reflections of his own career in the artists he's chosen, but the show doesn't treat the art of the past as mere source material. "It's about the broad influences on an artist's work," Ligon says. "Rather than: Richard Serra uses oil stick - you use oil stick! People can walk in and go, 'Oooh, this is a nice group show!' But the bigger issue, the bigger takeaway, is the notion of a community of artists."

Ligon has fleshed out his portrait of himself and his country with photographs that document the upheavals his fellow artists lived through. "Much of my work is engaged with 'America' - the idea of America. So it seemed interesting to think beyond art, to think of documents from various periods that were formative for me and the country as a whole."

Hence the inclusion of Bruce Davidson's shot of two muscular Guardian Angels in tight singlets patrolling the New York subway in the crime-gripped 1980s - and a Stephen Shames photograph of Black Panther founder Huey P Newton, topless and listening to Bob Dylan, which touches on both the struggle for civil rights and the way black men are depicted, feared, or desired. "He was incredibly charismatic," says Ligon of Newton. "And sexy. The Panthers were very aware of his appeal. That's what interests me: this black masculinity."

The centrepiece is the silent video installation *Bear* by Steve McQueen - in which the artist and a friend, both naked, wrestle and grope each other in a choreographed tussle that's both violent and strangely romantic. The men's images are doubled thanks to a shiny floor that reflects the projection and absorbs the viewer into the fight. Ligon first met McQueen at London's ICA in 1995, when the two artists were in a show together. "I thought, 'Why has this guy got them polishing that floor for the 15th time?' Then, when the video came on, I was like, 'Oh. Fucking brilliant.'"

Ligon was born in the Bronx in 1960 and came of age as an artist in the 1980s. As a student, he venerated US painters like Pollock, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg - and yet, at that time in the New York art world, painting had a fraught position. At the august Whitney Independent Study Program, painting took a back seat to theory, and Ligon had to balance his desires as a painter with his political convictions. His text paintings were the result: thick, opaque canvases that reproduce the writings of such African-Americans as James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison or Zora Neale Hurston. They are painstakingly stencilled, over and over, into near illegibility. "The political," Ligon says, "gets turned, through repetition, into a kind of abstraction."

Although he has never stopped painting, Ligon has turned to other mediums for his investigations of masculinity, blackness, and the curdled promise of America. In the early 1990s, he took the pages of *The Black Book*, Robert Mapplethorpe's idealised photographs of nude black men, and framed them beside quotes from philosophers, critics, activists, and even religious evangelists. It was a measured but devastating critique, from one gay artist to another, that showed no photograph of a nude black man can escape questions of power and politics. More recently, he has turned to neon, displaying the magic word AMERICA - but with the letters reversed, or facing the floor, or with the light source switched off.

Ligon's show opens at a hinge moment for civil rights in America. Under Obama, gays and lesbians have made extraordinary strides - and yet the US has witnessed a hideous upsurge in police brutality against African-Americans, notably in Ferguson, Missouri, where the killing of teenager Michael Brown set off weeks of protests. Several recent deaths have emphasised both the persistence of violence and the insufficiency of images and documentation to bring perpetrators to justice. In New York last summer, Eric Garner died after being placed in a banned chokehold by a police officer. Despite the existence of video evidence - in which Garner pleads "I can't breathe" - the officer was not indicted.

You can be visible and invisible at the same time, Ligon concludes. "Even with a million cameras, there's no such thing - for certain groups of citizens - as evidence. It's a hopeful sign that a black presidency has brought these issues to the fore. But at the same time as we go forward, we go back. Things like Ferguson and Eric Garner show us there's an unequal distribution of forward momentum in America. In the show in Nottingham, when people look at the America neon with no light shining from it, they'll see it."

● Glenn Ligon: *Encounters and Collisions* is at Nottingham Contemporary, 3 April-14 June; then at Tate Liverpool, 30 June-18 October

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