

Sheets, Hilarie M.
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The New York Times.
June 2, 2017

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ART & DESIGN

How Glenn Ligon Is Using Black and Blue to Begin a Dialogue

By HILARIE M. SHEETS JUNE 2, 2017



The artist Glenn Ligon with Ellsworth Kelly's "Blue Black" at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation in St. Louis, where Mr. Ligon has organized an exhibition with the same title. Whitney Curtis for The New York Times

In the beginning was the word: Fragments of prose by James Baldwin, jokes by Richard Pryor and, later, the testimony of a youth wrongly accused of a crime. All have served as the basis for Glenn Ligon's series of text paintings and neons exploring race, identity, language and abstraction. Now an Ellsworth Kelly painting, "Blue Black" (2000), has become the departure point for Mr. Ligon's latest project.

At the Pulitzer Arts Foundation in St. Louis, where the 28-foot-tall Kelly work composed of two monochrome aluminum panels painted blue and black is permanently installed, Mr. Ligon has free-associated on the political, formal and poetic interplay of these two colors in a large-scale exhibition he has organized. Opening on Friday, June 9, "Blue Black" comprises 54 works by 42 artists, including Mr. Ligon, in what he hopes will be a "noisy" conversation about power dynamics, spirituality and the blues as a state of mind.

Sheets, Hilarie M.
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p.2

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At his studio in Brooklyn, this 57-year-old artist — who had an acclaimed midcareer retrospective at the Whitney Museum in 2011 — recounted how the Pulitzer’s director, Cara Starke, invited him last year to a site visit in St. Louis. He went fully intending to propose a project of his own work. “When I was in the building, the Ellsworth Kelly is massive,” he said. “I had this very funny aural hallucination where I kept hearing Louis Armstrong’s voice singing ‘What did I do to be so black and blue?’”



Kerry James Marshall's "Untitled (policeman)" (2015).

Kerry James Marshall and The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY, via Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Sheets, Hilarie M.
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June 2, 2017
p.3

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A list of artists who have used this combination began forming in his head. David Hammons’s “Concerto in Black and Blue” and Chris Ofili’s “Blue Rider” series, the subjects of essays by Mr. Ligon, came to mind immediately.

Then, “there’s Kerry James Marshall’s policeman in uniform, where blackness as a racial identity and blackness as a color are conjoined — very different than Kelly’s intention but somehow connected through the two colors,” Mr. Ligon said. “That’s where the show started.”

Mr. Ligon has gathered diverse works of Western modernism along with African and American folk art, including artists such as Norman Lewis, Philip Guston, Andy Warhol, Joan Miró and Bill Traylor. There is a cross-section of portraiture by Cecily Brown, Jack Whitten and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye; abstraction by Ross Bleckner, Jennie C. Jones and Joan Mitchell.

The show explores the spectrum of ideas between Kelly’s rigorous investigation of color and shape in “Blue Black” and Mr. Ligon’s own luminous meditation on racial violence, in a neon sculpture called “A Small Band,” placed at the center of the Pulitzer’s main gallery.

White neon tubes affixed to aluminum letters spell the words “blues,” “bruise” and “blood.” The piece is based on the recorded testimony of Daniel Hamm, describing how he was beaten as a teenager by the police in 1964 and was permitted to see a doctor only if he was visibly bleeding. Mr. Hamm reached down to his leg, he later said: “I had to, like, open the bruise up, and let some of the bruise blood come out to show them.”

Sheets, Hilarie M.
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The New York Times.
June 2, 2017
p.4

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Glenn Ligon's "A Small Band" (2015), a meditation on racial violence, in Chicago in 2016.
Glenn Ligon, via Thomas Dane Gallery, London; Luhring Augustine, New York; Regen Projects, Los Angeles; Photograph by Nathan Keay, via Rebuild Foundation

But when Mr. Ligon listened to the actual tape, Mr. Hamm “made a slip of the tongue and says he had to open the bruise up to ‘let some of the blues blood come out,’” Mr. Ligon said. “I thought those three words — bruise, blues, blood — went together like they were a small band.”

“The content of Glenn’s work is incredibly meaningful in the context of St. Louis, being the epicenter of the Black Lives Matter movement,” Ms. Starke said.

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June 2, 2017
p.5

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“As an artist, there’s a liberty to curate in a different way,” she said, noting that she would have felt compelled as a curator to be more explicitly historical in her reasoning. “I would not have made that connection to Louis Armstrong’s music in the first place. It opened up a world of combinations for me.”

These are edited excerpts from a conversation with Mr. Ligon.

Did the works in the show all have to contain the colors black and blue?

You set up rigid parameters and then figure out ways to loosen them. I thought, it can’t just be work that has blue and black in it. Derek Jarman’s film [“Blue,” released in 1993, months before his death] is monochromatic, literally a blue screen, and you hear actors reading from Jarman’s diary. He was going blind and eventually died of AIDS complications. So, metaphorically, blackness is in there. I want the show to be expansive in that way.

Were there key artists or works you just had to include to do this right?

Hammons definitely. Ofili definitely. In his “Blue Bathers,” the blueness is about Trinidad, where his studio was. Ofili’s describing this kind of equatorial light, how in Trinidad even in the darkness there’s a luminosity. [That he was] able to capture that in the painting, I thought, was amazing.

What’s so interesting about the Warhol [portrait of Elizabeth Taylor] is that she was famous for her fake black hair. That blue background is so perfect, but it really is about her whiteness, too, how starkly white the skin tone is.

The Carrie Mae Weems photograph “Blue Black Boy,” I thought, was fantastic. ‘Blue black’ is an African-American usage to describe a certain kind of skin tone that you find on the continent. There are a number of artists dealing with that conjunction between identity and color, and not only black artists. Tim Rollins and K.O.S.’s “Invisible Man (After Ralph Ellison)” is about that, too. They’ve actually painted the I M in blue over pages from Ellison’s “Invisible Man.” In the prologue of the book, the protagonist is in his cellar lair playing Armstrong’s “What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue,” over and over again. Ellison says that the blues is

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June 2, 2017
p.6

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Andy Warhol's "Liz #4" (1963).
2017 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



Carrie Mae Weems's "Blue Black Boy" (1997). Carrie Mae Weems, via Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Sheets, Hilarie M.
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June 2, 2017
p.7

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“personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.” There’s always been this sense of the blues somehow related to trauma as well as a kind of transcendence.

You included a Philip Guston, who you’ve spoken about as an early influence.

I wanted to be Guston when I was a young artist. This Guston, “Dark Room,” may be the closest to a pure black work in the show, with just this whitish blue light bulb illuminating the scene. I love Guston’s abstract paintings but also his transition from abstraction to the Klansman series [his hooded figures caricaturing the Ku Klux Klan in the ’70s]. The change in his work for him was about trying to mirror what was going on in the culture. To be able to work abstractly and figuratively throughout his career is an interesting model for me.



Philip Guston's "Dark Room" (1978). The Estate of Philip Guston, via Hauser & Wirth

Politically oriented shows can be a minefield. During the year you’ve been working on this one, there have been protests over racially charged work by several white artists. They include Kelley Walker’s exhibition at the Contemporary Art Museum, right next door to the

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p.8

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Pulitzer, which displayed sexualized pictures of black women and historical images of police brutality against black people; Dana Schutz showed a painting of Emmett Till’s mutilated body in the current Whitney Biennial. Has the debate over race and appropriation influenced your approach to this show?

No. I feel like these kinds of controversies come up over and over. I was in the 1993 Whitney Biennial and the 1994 “Black Male” show at the Whitney, and I’ve never seen such vicious press. Twenty plus years later, critics who hated that Biennial have come to Jesus and decided it was a really important, seminal show that they misunderstood. In terms of “Black Male,” there were critiques by people who thought there were too many works that depicted homosexuality — what did that have to do with black masculinity? I think the controversies around Kelley Walker and Dana’s painting, these issues need to be aired. It’s painful, though — people calling for paintings to be taken out of the museum and destroyed, having your work discussed in The Guardian and The New York Times. Kara Walker’s had to deal with that. Fred Wilson’s had to deal with that. Maybe what is new is the speed at which these things are disseminated.

How does your show at the Pulitzer differ from the way a curator might approach the same theme?

It’s more of a meander. I’m not bound by chronology or genre. It’s about encounters and collisions. I’m an artist, too. I have my work in juxtaposition with other work in the show. That’s a luxury I can do.

Does the exhibition itself become an artwork?

An artwork is an arrangement of things. The ideal show for me would be if everything touched, literally touched, so that everything would blur together. It’s much easier to talk to one another if you’re in close proximity.

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