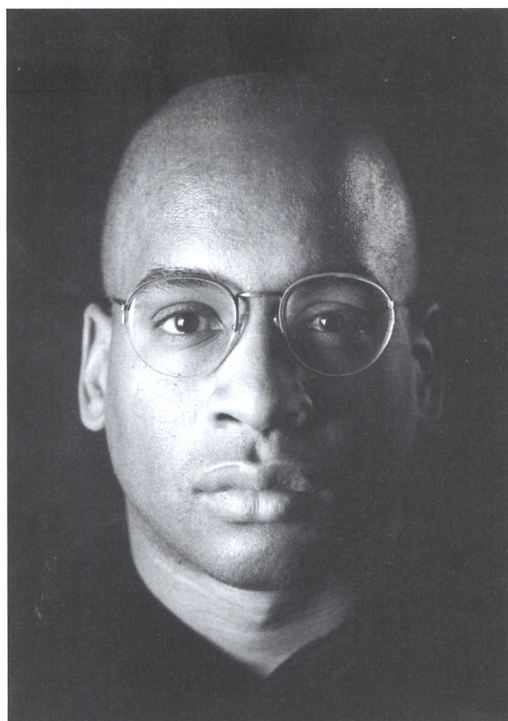


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LEFT A portrait of
Ligon by photographer
David Seidner.

OPPOSITE *Untitled*, 1985
(top left), plays on
language and
abstraction; *Untitled*
(*I Am a Man*), 1988
(bottom left); *Untitled*
(*I Am Not Tragically*
Colored), 1990 (right),
from Ligon's
"Door" series.

USING BORROWED TEXTS BY FIGURES
RANGING FROM GERTRUDE STEIN TO RICHARD
PRYOR, **GLENN LIGON** TRANSFORMS WORDS
INTO ABSTRACTIONS THAT SPEAK VOLUMES

THE WRITING ON THE WALL

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS

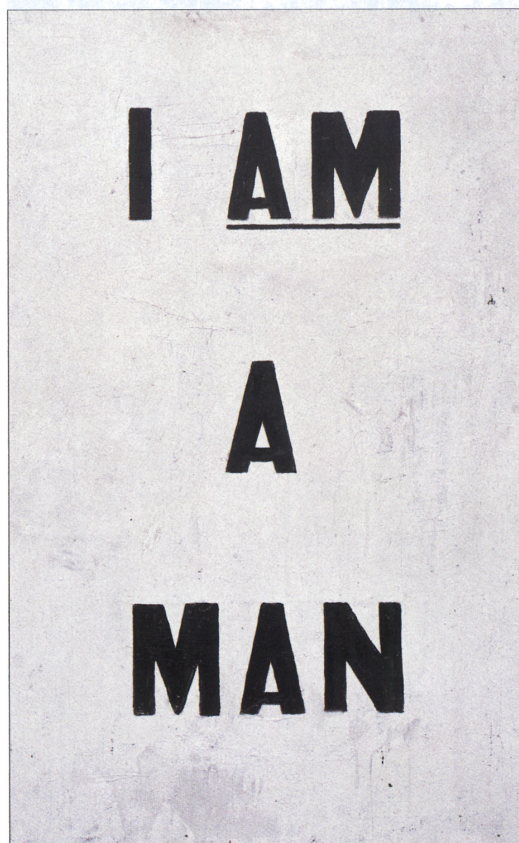
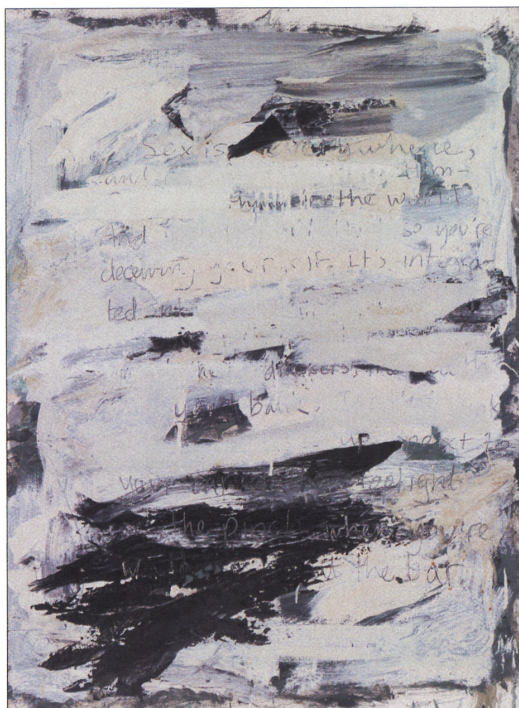
FOR THE PAINTINGS THAT FIRST BROUGHT GLENN LIGON WIDESPREAD attention, at the 1991 Whitney Biennial, the artist chose lines from a 1928 essay by African American writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston, among them, "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background." He stenciled the phrases in black oil stick again and again down tall white doors. The accumulation of paint on the back of the stencil blurred the letters as he worked his way from top to bottom, gradually obscuring the words. At first he tried to stencil the letters perfectly, but then he realized that

Hilarie M. Sheets is a contributing editor of ARTnews.

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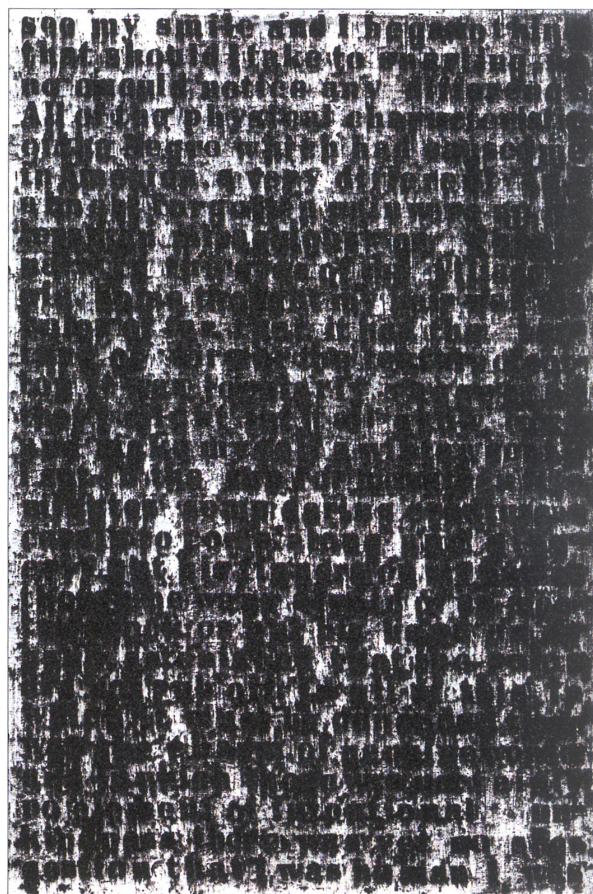
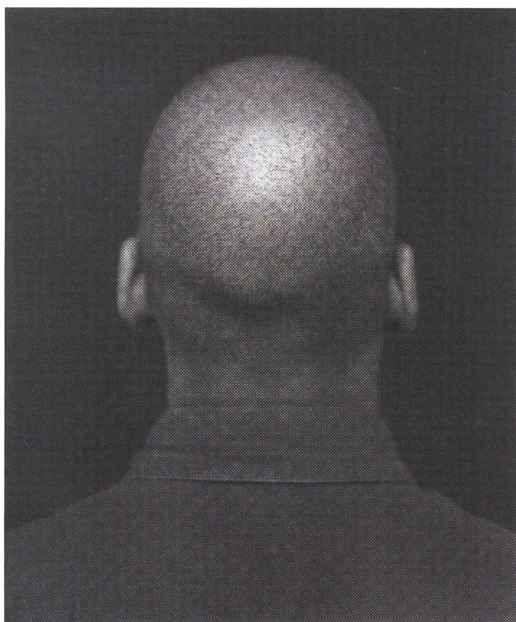
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TOP *Hands*, 1996, from Ligon's
 "Million Man March" series.

ABOVE *Self-Portrait*, 1996,
 composed of silk-screen ink
 and gesso. RIGHT *Mirror*, 2002,
 introduces coal dust to
 Ligon's work.

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the way his semi-mechanical process smeared them was the most interesting aspect of the work. It was full of the incident and accident of abstract painting, and embodied just how slippery language and interpretation can be.

Over the last two decades, as Ligon has cycled through series based in painting, photography, printmaking, video, and neon light, his use of language as both form and content has remained central to his enterprise. He has borrowed text from figures ranging from James Baldwin, Richard Pryor, and Ralph Ellison to Gertrude Stein and Jesse Jackson on the subject of being black, as well as words from his friends, his teachers, and his therapist.

"The movement of language toward abstraction is a consistent theme in my work," says Ligon, sitting in his spacious Brooklyn studio hung with new coal-dust paintings featuring text from Baldwin's 1953 essay "Stranger in the Village." "I'm interested in what happens when a text is difficult to read or frustrates legibility—what that says about our ability to think about each other, know each other, process each other." Ligon, now 50, once invited friends to describe him as if for a police report, and these descriptions formed the basis for a 1993 series of lithographs based on runaway-slave notices. Phrases included "He is black"; "He has almost no hair"; "He talks sort of out of the side of his mouth and looks at you sideways"; "Wears delicate glasses. Moves smoothly"; "Not tall. His voice is very calm"; "He's socially very adept, yet, paradoxically, he's somewhat of a loner." All appear to be accurate portrayals of Ligon, yet they don't capture the warmth and mercurial intelligence he conveys in person, just as the disparate voices that run through his large body of work illustrate how unstable our perceptions of others and of ourselves can be.

Last month, the Whitney Museum in New York opened the first full-scale retrospective of Ligon's work. It's a fitting venue, given the importance of the museum in galvanizing Ligon's career, with his inclusion in the 1991 and 1993 Whitney Biennials and the controversial 1994 show "Black Male." Ligon's relationship with the Whitney began when he was a student in the institution's Independent Study Program in 1985, after his graduation from Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. Today, the Whitney's holdings of Ligon's work are larger than those of any museum in the world. The approximately 30 works in its collection will be augmented by the recent promised gift from collector Emily Fisher Landau of 19 early works.

"Glenn's work has looked increasingly important and relevant as time has gone on—not just to younger African American artists, but to many different artists who are using borrowed text and images to political ends," says Scott Rothkopf, curator of the Whitney show, which runs through June 5. "It's a way of working now that's almost so ubiquitous as to be invisible, but it's one that Glenn and other artists in the late 1980s and early 1990s really pioneered."

Rothkopf is interested in spotlighting Ligon as a painter for whom social content is deeply linked with painterly concerns. To that end, he persuaded the artist to show never-before-exhibited works from the mid-'80s. These are colorful, expressionistic paintings, inscribed with bits of text, which clearly show the influence of Philip Guston, Willem de Kooning, and Cy Twombly. "Glenn was certainly a defining figure in a generation of artists, many of whom

were black and exploring their racial identity or their sexuality or their gender," continues Rothkopf. "I don't want to depoliticize his work, but I do think that critical emphasis in some ways precluded other concerns driving his practice."

For Ligon, the early 1990s was a complicated time. He and artists like Lorna Simpson, Gary Simmons, and Carrie Mae Weems were making a huge splash, and were being discussed largely in terms of "identity art." "It was a moment that opened up a space for artists of color to enter the market and show in important museum exhibitions in numbers that hadn't happened before," explains Ligon, who is represented by Luhring Augustine in New York, where his work sells for up to \$300,000. "That was great. The problem was that the critical writing around that work became lazy. All one supposedly needed to say was that work is about 'identity,' as if that were the only thing the work could or should be about. It was also as if artists of color had some kind of pipeline to their identities—straightforward, unproblematic."

Ligon, who grew up in the Bronx, negotiated social complexity early on. The principal of his local public school told his mother, who worked as a nurse's aide, that she needed to find a better school for him, because he had demonstrated a precocious vocabulary in kindergarten. So she enrolled him at Walden, a small private school on Manhattan's Upper West Side, which offered him scholarship aid. "I don't know if my mother realized it was the most liberal school in New York City," laughs Ligon, who was thrown into a world of privilege where the African American entertainer Billy Dee Williams, for instance, was coming in for parent-teacher conferences.

Ligon's artistic and literary gifts were cultivated in his 12 years at Walden. In 2003, he produced a silk-screen series duplicating typewritten reports from some of his sixth-grade teachers: "Glenn has an acid, witty sense of humor" and "He tends to be politically apathetic about being black, which is a shame."

"It's shocking that teachers got away with writing such personal and subjective information in official transcript form," says Ligon. "Like the 'Runaways' series, they were accurate and not accurate. They were describing ten different people."

After graduating from Walden in 1978, he went on to study at the Rhode Island School of Design for two years, and then transferred to Wesleyan, where he focused on architecture and painting. He ultimately realized he was more interested in how people live in buildings than in buildings themselves and earned his degree in fine arts. He graduated in 1982, and began supporting himself as a proofreader while making abstract paintings.

Ligon's year in the Whitney's Independent Study Program was pivotal for him. He was introduced to the work of such artists as Barbara Kruger, and became engrossed in the program's reading list. "I found that just making abstract paintings wasn't interesting to me," he recalls, "and decided in a very literal-minded way that if I wanted content in my work, I could just take it from the things I was reading."

Ligon didn't really think seriously of himself as an artist until he was awarded a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1989. His breakthrough came when he was included in the 1991 show "Interrogating Identity" at the Grey Art Gallery in New York, which put him on the radar of Lisa

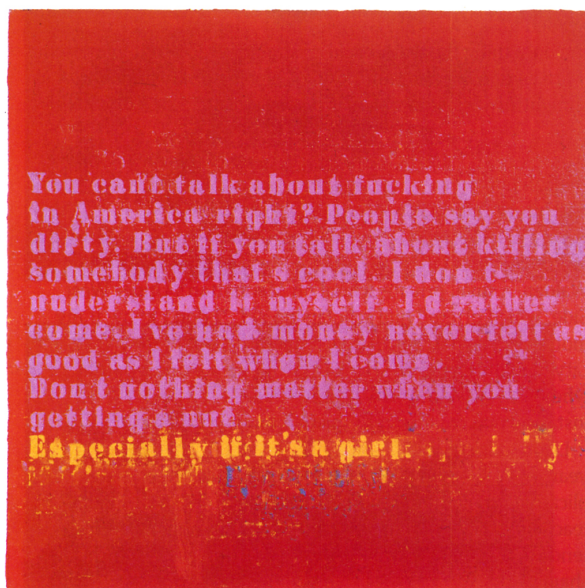
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Phillips, current director of the New Museum, and one of the curators of that year's Whitney Biennial.

By 1993, having been recognized for his "Door" series, which appeared in that show, and for some of his other paintings, Ligon decided to take a different tack for the next Biennial. He presented his series "Notes on the Margin of the Black Book." This work, included in the current retrospective, juxtaposes Robert Mapplethorpe's famous photographs of naked black men with a wide spectrum of commentary on them. "I wanted to place those images within the context of debates about representation, history, homophobia, and censorship," says Ligon, who collected quotes from sources in-



cluding black scholar Cornel West and segregationist senator Jesse Helms, as well as from people who had seen Mapplethorpe exhibitions and men who had posed for the images. In one of the rare instances in which Ligon used his own words, he included a journal entry about interviewing a guy in a bar who asked if Ligon was Mapplethorpe.

For "Black Male," the 1994 Whitney show curated by Thelma Golden that explored how black masculinity has been represented in contemporary American art, Ligon showed paintings based on comedian Richard Pryor's racially and sexually charged jokes. Ligon exacerbated the incendiary language—profanities and use of the word "nigger"—in his choice of brightly colored backgrounds that vibrated against the lettering. "There was this moment when I had to decide whether I was comfortable reproducing that in artworks that were going to be on the walls of museums," says Ligon. Nevertheless, he returned to Pryor a decade later in another group of text paintings. He recounts how a docent leading a tour through "Black Male" felt unable to read a joke aloud. A heated debate broke out among the group about the difference between liking Pryor's comedy in your home versus seeing it presented in a museum. "It's difficult

to get people to think through issues in public like that," Ligon says.

Another text the artist has returned to repeatedly is "Stranger in the Village," in which Baldwin describes his experience in the '50s as the first black man to set foot in a tiny Swiss village. "Baldwin talks about what it means to be a stranger, but also about Europe's relationship to Africa, colonialism, the idea of empire, the civil rights movement," says Ligon, who first used passages from that text in the late 1990s in murky canvases that strained readability. "I return to it over and over again because it takes such a panoramic view of the issues it addresses." For paintings shown last year at Regen Projects in Los Angeles, where the artist exhibits regularly (as well as at Thomas Dane Gallery in London), Ligon silk-screened existing paintings of the text on different colored backgrounds and applied coal dust to the wet ink. He used etching ink rather than silk-screen ink because it would stay wet longer. But the ink proved so stiff that it didn't get pushed through the screen entirely; it created a jagged white streak across the first image pulled. Here, just as when he was unable to make neat letters with his stencil, Ligon realized that the "mistake" was more interesting than what he had intended. He continued making variations on these entirely abstract voids.

His first neon pieces, made during the second Bush administration, spell out the word "America" in neon tubing. Painted black on the front, light only glows from the back and blinks on and off in an aggressive animation. "It's this sense of America as a shining beacon and dark star at the same time," says Ligon, who was thinking of "the best of times" and "the worst of times" described in Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*. More recently he has returned to the word and flipped each neon letter backward in an oblique reference to how figures are viewed from behind in German Romantic painting.

Ligon collaborated with the jazz musician Jason Moran on his 2008 video *The Death of Tom*, a reenactment of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, it is on view there through May 9. An accident in the film processing left him with a grainy blur. He went ahead and used the spectral footage with Moran's moody score, transforming the difficult history of the novel into mesmerizing tonal abstractions. "Jason has been very inspiring to me in terms of his wide-ranging interests and level of experimentation that he's willing to go through in public," says Ligon, who gravitates toward avant-garde jazz by artists such as Anthony Braxton and Thelonious Monk.

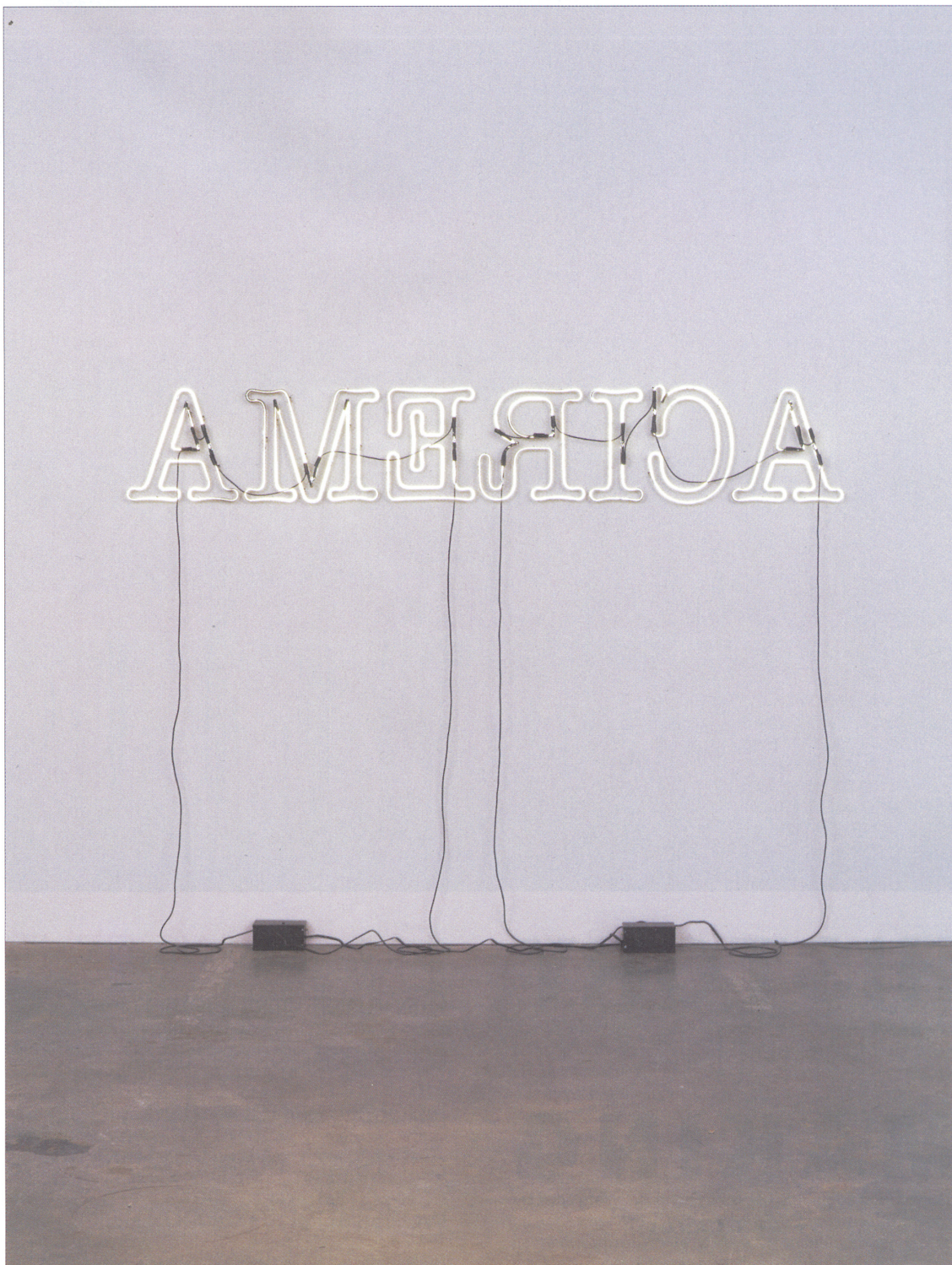
In late 2009, Ligon was honored to learn that the Obamas had selected one of his paintings, on loan from the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., to hang in their private residence in the White House. "The president and first lady are deeply invested in ideas, and it makes sense to me that they would choose tough work," says Ligon. The 1992 canvas repeats the words "All traces of the Griffin I had been were wiped from existence." The phrase was extracted from the 1961 memoir *Black Like Me* by John Howard Griffin, who had his skin darkened to write an exposé on what it was like to be a black person traveling in the South.

"Glenn is so gifted with language," says Rothkopf. "It's amazing how well he zeros in on the most interesting or beautiful or problematic passage." ■

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ABOVE The neon and paint *Rückenfigur*, 2009.

OPPOSITE *Especially If It's a Girl*, #1, 2004, from Ligon's provocative "Richard Pryor" series.