

VISUAL ART

Glenn Ligon

by Paul Carey-Kent

Glenn Ligon made his name through text works which push language towards abstraction, as if, without abstracting, the weight of meaning becomes too much to bear. Those meanings have dealt with the depersonalizing effects of race relations in America, typically using literary sources such as James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison and Jean Genet, or else channelling the specific case of the comedian Richard Pryor (1950–2005). Ligon has found Pryor a particularly telling conduit through which to consider black experience and the effect on it of white perceptions, as his jokes deal in matters which are far from funny at an underlying level: "I was a nigger for 23 years. I gave that shit up. No room for advancement." Ligon forms his surface out of the text, building up such a density that the phrases close in on abstraction. The world of fine art is seen to be organically contaminated by the political realities which do, in practice, underpin it whether the white men largely in control would see it that way or not.

Ligon's Camden show is impressively focused, with three significant works each given their own room: *Come Out*, 2014 (# 4 and #5 are shown) ups the scale on black on white silk-screened works to monumental 6 x 2 metre textscapes; *Untitled (Bruise/Blues)*, 2014, sets its titular words in neon; while *Live*, 2014, is a silent, seven screen video installation.

Ligon's choice of text for "Call and Response" originates musically. Although both *Come Out* and *Untitled (Bruise/Blues)* derive from the testimony of Daniel Hamm, one of six black youths arrested for murdering a white shopkeeper during the 1964 Harlem race riot,

his words have reached Ligon through Steve Reich's hypnotically dense and driven taped speech composition. That doesn't change the nature of Ligon's work. A loaded phrase forces attention on race relations too easily ignored—Ligon has said—given how for the most part Americans live and socialize in parallel racial worlds.

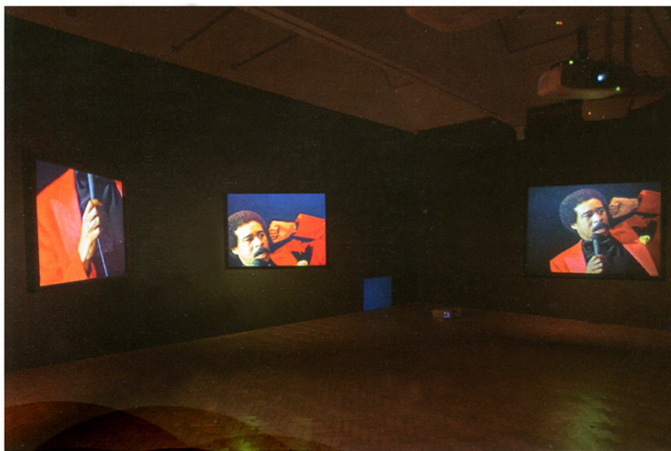
When interviewed after he was beaten by police, Hamm explained how they wouldn't take him to hospital unless he was bleeding, and so "I had to like open the bruise up, and let some of the bruise blood come out to show them." Except, through a slip of the tongue indicative of the pressure he was under, Hamm actually said "let the blues blood out," and that's the basis for *Untitled (Bruise/Blues)*. Ligon's most characteristic neons see him apply black paint to the front of white neon letters to give the charged effect of a back-illuminated blackout. Here, the words are the electric blue of NYC police lights, and face away from each other in a head-high sculptural installation so that the gap between their meanings becomes one into which you can walk. Ligon quotes Ellison's definition

of the blues as "personal catastrophe expressed lyrically," and by returning the bruise to the blues, he takes us back to the sorrowful genesis of the music.

The "Come Out" paintings build on the call for action implicit in that phrase, which nods to Ligon's own position as a gay who has come out, and may also refer to the demand that the wrongly convicted men should come out of jail. The repeated silk-screening of the phrase, while it works similarly to Ligon's earlier text work, also mimics the dense phase-shifting construction of Reich's music.

Thus both the text works, while silent, originate in sound. And the same can be said of *Live*. It's what Pryor said that made him matter, but his words are exactly what you don't get from silent footage of the 1982 film *Richard Pryor: Live on Sunset Strip*. Ligon's installation attempts to find meaning in the absence of the voice which normally carries it. That contrasts neatly with *Come Out*, in which the more you have, the less can be construed. If neither are easy to "read," then that may not be unwelcome to Ligon, who has said that "given the cultural context

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the literature and photos I am using comes out of—the demands on those texts and images—I am interested when they fail to communicate, in the space that is opened up by not communicating."

Seven screens flash intermittently with fragments of Pryor, separating him into torso, face, mouth, hands, crotch and—particularly resonantly—an Afro-heavy shadow. The magnified close-ups flicker on and off for a few seconds, the images switching around the room with only four screens lit up at any one time, so eliminating any narrative of performance. Ligon is interested in what's left over, and has suggested that "in some way you don't need his words to understand." I suspect that relies on prior knowledge: either way, it increases the sense of how difficult it is to grasp the man, both politically and as a personality. We may be reminded of the objectification more often deployed in the representation of women in art and society, and indeed Pryor's movements do have a feminine side. As Megan Ratner puts it in the show's accompanying text, "Live poses questions about how training your gaze on one aspect to the exclusion of others leads to an overall construct of masculinity, race, sexuality—by the gazer; not the subject of the gaze."

1. & 2. Glenn Ligon, installation view, "Call and Response," Camden Arts Centre, London, UK. Photographs: © Valerie Bennett, 2014. Courtesy Camden Arts Centre.

3. Althea Thauberger, still from *Preuzmino Ben i*, 2013–2014, digital film, 57:14 minutes. Photograph: Milica Czerny Urban. Courtesy the artist, Musagetes and Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto.

Yet Pryor is also emasculated by this process; we see only the residue of his identity.

Why does Ligon group these three works as "Call and Response?" The term refers to the speaker—archetypically the leader of a religious service, particularly in black gospel churches—eliciting set replies from a congregation. Will the viewers' responses to Ligon's structured calls be repetitious and routine? Or will the voices of Hamm and Pryor, and the urgency of their messages even today, be taken seriously? I see Ligon as saying, here's the call, now examine your instinctual response, and consider whether it's appropriate.

What's impressive in all this is Ligon's clarity of purpose and staging, and the thematic focus on the unheard music and words which implies that this is part of a larger unheard history. The price which Ligon threatens to pay for this art about art is in the double distancing from the visceral reality of racial hatred, risking ossifying his themes into academicism of a sort. Better, though, to consider the power a well-timed whisper can exert; voices which seemed quieted are shown to have an impact nonetheless. ■

"Call and Response" was exhibited at the Camden Arts Centre, London, UK, from October 10, 2014 to January 11, 2015.

Paul Carey-Kent is a freelance art critic in Southampton, England, whose writings can be found at <paulsartworld.blogspot.ca>.