

# Glenn Ligon

American, b. 1960

## -- Exhibitions

*Viewpoints—Malcolm X: Man, Ideal, Icon* (1992; publication, tour), *Duchamp's Leg* (1994; catalogue, tour), *The Cities Collect* (2000), *Coloring: New Work by Glenn Ligon* (2000; catalogue), *American Tableaux* (2001; publication, tour), *The Squared Circle: Boxing in Contemporary Art* (2003; publication)

## -- Residencies

1999–2000

## -- Holdings

2 paintings, 1 sculpture, 1 drawing, 22 edition prints/proofs, 1 book

Glenn Ligon troubles the waters with work that challenges assumptions about race, gender, sex, and citizenship using history as his oar: "If I have a well to dip into, it's filled with almost four hundred years worth of permutations of what blackness has meant and speculations on what it might mean in the future."<sup>1</sup> Drawing on an art-historical lineage that includes Andy Warhol and Adrian Piper, his practice is conceptually driven and embraces painting as well as printmaking, photography, and installation. He often appropriates, reconfigures, and recontextualizes culturally loaded materials, particularly literary excerpts from the likes of Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, and James Baldwin. Making possible a sustained dialogue across past and present, black and white, he stubbornly locates American history in the persistent now.

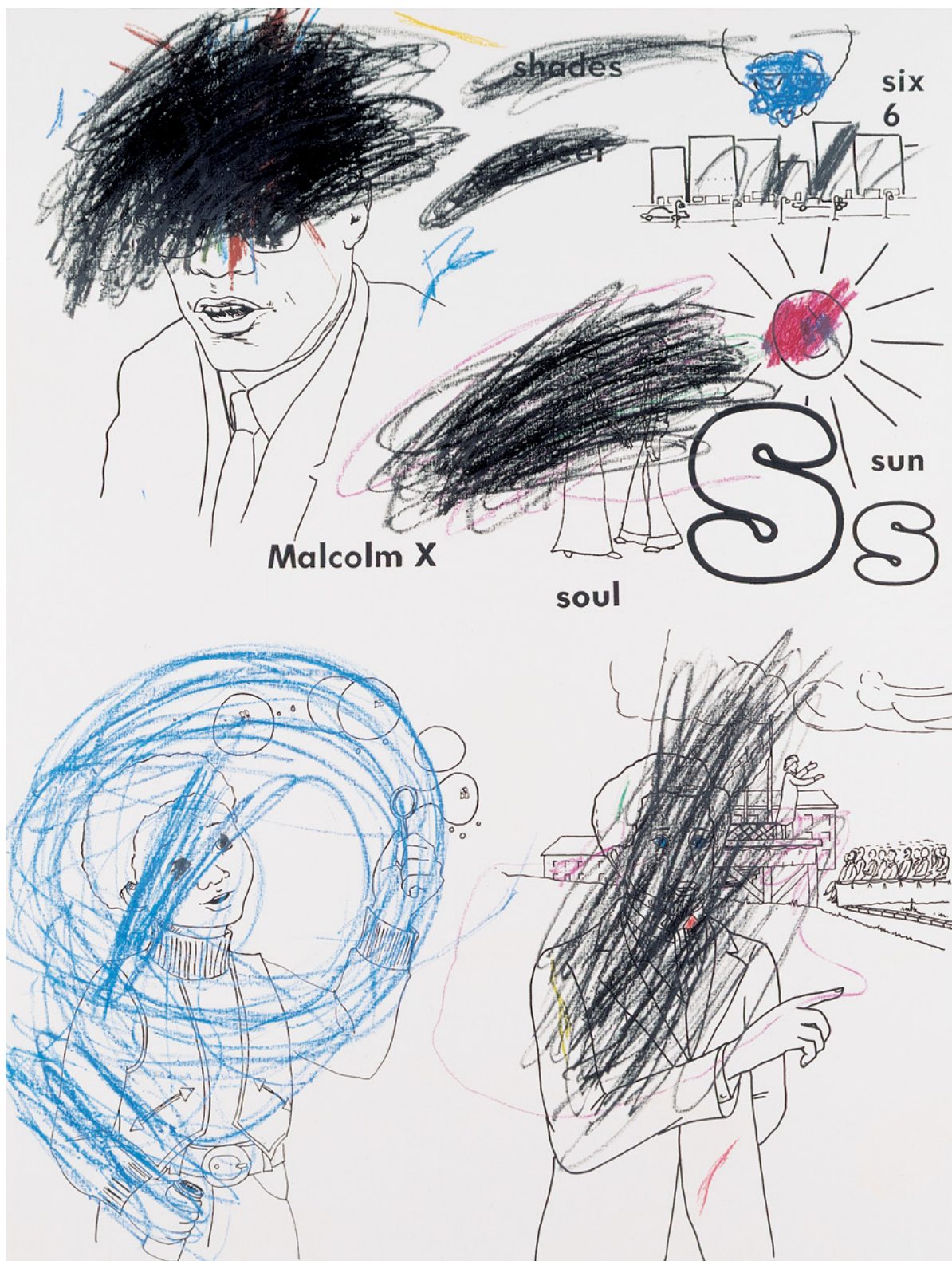
Ligon's series *Runaways* (1993) references the unmistakable stain of American slavery while also calling into question the nature of identity and the power of language to capture it. On black-and-white lithographs, in a style combining the format of runaway slave posters with highly symbolic illustrations of the abolitionist movement, the artist presents ten distinct descriptions of himself supplied by ten friends asked to pretend they were filing a missing persons report. Each starts simply with the phrase "Ran away, . . ." Surprisingly, these twentieth-century verbal accounts mimic the text of actual fugitive slave posters, offering physical descriptions that bring to mind auction blocks. One short piece ends with the racially and historically weighted phrase "Nice teeth." Yet adequate and stable definitions prove to be a moving target as Ligon's skin color is described variously as "black," "pretty dark-skinned," and the nuanced "medium complexion (not 'light skinned,' not 'dark skinned,' slightly orange)." The power of language, oral and written, often gives a visceral quality to his work, at once revelatory, inadequate, confining, and slippery. After all, he seems to remind us, something as complex as a human being cannot be captured in mere words, whether on a slave poster or a modern-day newscast reporting a criminal suspect.

Confronting race and its American twin obsession of masculinity, Ligon collaborated with Byron Kim on *Rumble Young Man Rumble (Version #2)* in 1993. It is a standard-issue punching bag on which is stenciled a poetic speech by champion boxer Muhammad Ali that begins: "Everything that the so-called Negro do in

America seem to be the best, the greatest. So what's wrong with him saying he is the greatest when everything in America that has been made the greatest has been painted and colored white?" It is a call to rhetorical arms that one can read in full only by circling the sculpture, almost like a fighter dancing around the ring. Language becomes image and performative catalyst, the basic requirements of being black and male in America, which are perfectly captured in the persona of Ali. The metaphorical power of text is further explored in Ligon's *Untitled (Stranger in the Village #16)* (2000), a monochromatic painting with a layer of black coal dust obscuring a passage from James Baldwin's "Stranger in the Village." The 1953 essay relates Baldwin's experience of being an American and an African American in a foreign land. The painting's dense and textured surface of luminescent black with just a hint of warm red beneath—evidence of an abandoned work—alludes to the ever-shifting nature of identity and race. As is his trademark, Ligon presents language just on the edge of illegibility, playing hide-and-seek with our ability to break the code and read the script.

With *Malcolm X, Sun, Frederick Douglass, Boy with Bubbles (version 2) #1* (2000), Ligon makes a radical formal shift with a cacophony of colorful strokes different from anything he's done before. This painting is the end result of a multilayered process whereby the artist gave young children coloring-book sheets to fill in, which he then copied on a larger scale in his studio. The images were collaged from various black-themed coloring books from the 1970s, a time of immense promise for black America. According to Ligon, the paintings in this series "are about breaking free of constraints by using children's drawings and inhabiting their casual, indifferent relationship to the images and the whole project of liberation that those images were about in the first place. The paintings are hovering in that space between meaning a great deal and meaning nothing."<sup>2</sup> This piece is a fascinating history lesson spanning a great African American orator of the nineteenth century and a political martyr of the twentieth, then veering into the seemingly trivial concerns of a black child blowing bubbles and a vocabulary lesson on the letter S. Thus, the playing field is leveled as Ligon presents each element as equally relevant to the full story of blacks in America. Perhaps rightly so, since in the 1970s representations of blacks simply living life—blowing bubbles, strolling—were as radical and necessary as those of fiery revolutionaries, and remain so. Again, the artist presents history as a compelling force in contemporary times.

"People are trapped in history," Baldwin wrote, "and history is trapped in them."<sup>3</sup> In Ligon's practice, each work is a Rorschach test that drives us to reengage with what we thought were stable moments and meanings safely ensconced in the past. To encounter his work is to enter an ambiguous yet metaphorically rich space of unresolved questions swirling around the complexity of humanity, which is colored, gendered, and ever evolving. At first, we each see what our own personal biographies and attendant limitations allow us to see; then, he encourages us to look



Glenn Ligon *Malcolm X, Sun, Frederick Douglass, Boy with Bubbles (version 2) #1* 2000 screenprint, oil crayon on primed canvas 96 x 72 in. (243.8 x 182.9 cm) T. B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 2000 2001.18

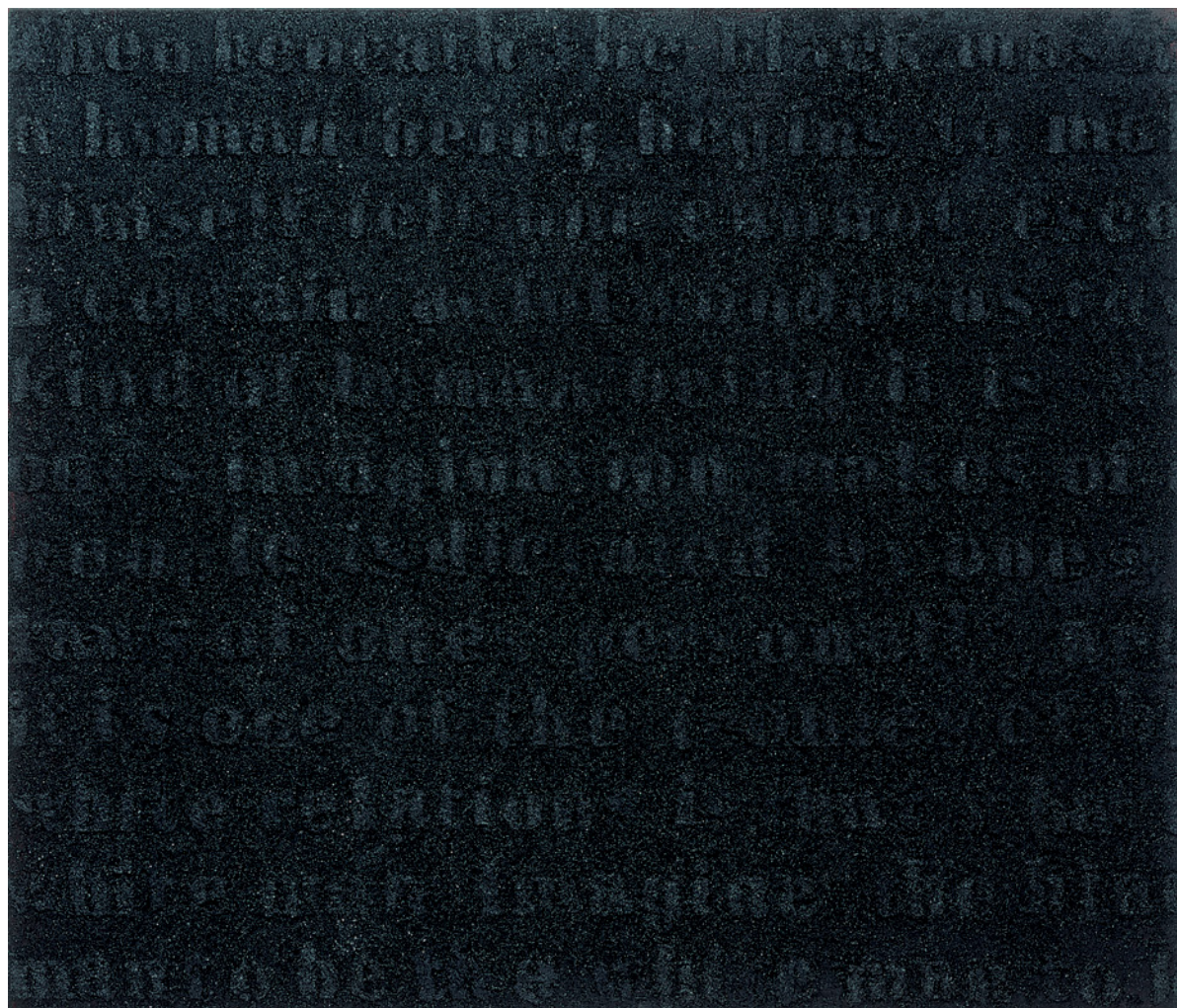


past the familiar for those inevitable marks of transformation that bring history past into history present.

## O.I.

### Notes

1. Quoted in Byron Kim, "An Interview with Glenn Ligon," in Judith Tannenbaum, ed., *Glenn Ligon: Unbecoming*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1998), 55.
2. Quoted in Olukemi Ilesanmi and Joan Rothfuss, "A Conversation with Glenn Ligon," in Olukemi Ilesanmi and Joan Rothfuss, eds., *Coloring: New Work by Glenn Ligon*, exh. cat. (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2000), 32.
3. James Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, Toni Morrison, ed. (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 119.



Glenn Ligon *Untitled (Stranger in the Village #16)* 2000 acrylic, coal dust, oil stick, glue, glitter, gesso on canvas 48 1/16 x 56 1/8 in. (122.1 x 142.6 cm)  
Butler Family Fund, 2000 2000.108



Glenn Ligon and Byron Kim *Rumble Young Man Rumble (Version #2)* 1993  
 paint stick on canvas punching bag, metal 36 x 13 x 13 in. (91.4 x 33 x 33 cm)  
 Butler Family Fund, 1995 1995.148

## Artist-in-Residence, 1999–2000

Glenn Ligon's residency had two distinct elements that nevertheless shared a common theme of "sampling"—the contemporary method of cutting and mixing existing material and ideas to create something dynamic and new. Fascinated by the complicated histories—social, cultural, and political—that can be traced through the covers of books by and about African Americans, Ligon spent many hours exploring the stacks in the Archie Givens Sr. Collection of African American Literature at the University of Minnesota. He later assembled more than sixty of these covers in a small exhibition at the Walker. His display told a fascinating story of the changing representations of black subject matter from the 1950s to the 1970s, a time roughly parallel to the rise of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, and then carried it forward with books from the 1980s to the close of the twentieth century. His selections and groupings, juxtaposed with his own commentary and quotes by writers such as LeRoi Jones, James Baldwin, and Oscar Wilde, were highly personal yet open to interpretation, and ranged from close-ups of black faces to the coding of blackness in typography and graphic layouts.

For the second part of his residency, Ligon asked Walker Art Center Teen Arts Council members to respond to various artworks in the Walker's permanent collection by sampling them to make their own individual pieces. Over a four-month period, the teens worked closely with Ligon to develop their ideas, gaining insight into the creative process. They drew on artists as varied as Lucio Fontana, Andy Warhol, Charles Ray, and Kara Walker. Their resulting works in a variety of media were also included in Ligon's in-residence exhibition.

O.I.



Glenn Ligon (center) with members of the Walker Art Center Teen Arts Council, 2000

# Bits & Pieces Put Together to Present a Semblance of a Whole: Walker Art Center Collections

Joan Rothfuss and Elizabeth Carpenter

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