



glenn ligon: new work

SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Glenn Ligon: New Work is a thought-provoking, three-part rumination on self-portraiture and the individual in relationship to collective histories and notions of group identity. The first gallery of the show features four large, silkscreened paintings based on news photos documenting the 1995 Million Man March. The next gallery contains a number of self-portraits of the artist himself, also silkscreened onto canvas, constituting a complement and counterpart to the images of the march. The final component is a collection of news clippings, test photos, journal notes, and other documents Ligon accumulated while creating the exhibition as a whole. This material will be archived permanently at the Gay and Lesbian Historical Society of Northern California and is on view there in conjunction with the show. Ligon considers these three components of the exhibition to be distinct and separate bodies of work, yet they are also clearly related. Each element is a way of reflecting, both conceptually and visually, on ways that images of the self and the group are constructed and deployed, and to what ends.

The two bodies of imagery on view at SFMOMA stand in sharp contrast to one another: on one side, immense pictures of the Million Man March, showing African-American men joined together in an impressive show of unity and strength; on the other, a clinically spare series of unemotional head-shots of an individual man. The paintings derived from news photographs feature a largely undifferentiated sea of humanity and suggest themes long associated with photographs of demonstrations: political struggle, activism, and protest. Louis Farrakhan, leader of the Nation of Islam, is present only in television effigy, barely recognizable as an indistinct image surrounded by bodyguards on a large-scale video monitor, towering above both the crowd and the capitol building itself.

The series of four large images of the Million Man March are collectively titled "Day of Absence" and function as a conceptual starting point. Organized by Farrakhan, the Million Man March/Day of Absence (as its full title runs), was planned as a day of atonement for African-American men. It was both a triumphant success that brought together enthusiastic participants from across the United States, and a controversial display of Farrakhan's influence, aspirations, and ideology. Although the march drew a wide spectrum of participants, it excluded women and its rhetoric focused on a highly traditional, heterosexual vision of man as father and family provider. "Day of Absence," the second part of the march's title, signaled the fact that black women were encouraged to show solidarity by absenting themselves from work. For some commentators, this nonparticipatory form of "participation" was an illustration of the march's central paradox—the sign of a problematic suppression of African-American diversity and difference that was implicitly embraced by the marchers themselves.¹

As soon as images of the Million Man March began to appear in the news, Ligon knew he wanted to work with them.² Yet as a gay African-American man, Ligon approached the event with considerable ambivalence, and his selection and treatment of these photos suggest his underlying disquiet with the governing spirit of the march. Abstract, somber, and aesthetically charged by the process of enlargement and silkscreening, these images display a multitude of marchers in which the individual is largely subsumed by the mass. Taken from the newspaper and moved to the gallery, these pictures still convey the charisma and dynamism of collective action, but they pose the question of whether individual identities and differences can play a role in such an evidently well-orchestrated political theater. Faces are turned away. An impersonal, curiously distanced atmosphere prevails, despite the close vantage point of some of the figures. In one work, Ligon has taken the words originally dis-

played on a banner, “We’re Black and Strong,” removed them digitally from the photograph, and transformed them into the title. He says that he was struck by the “fragility” of the banner, and troubled by the fact that this testimony to black strength was, in his words, “policed” by the absencing of women and the deliberate marginalization of gays.³ Forcibly removing the text from the photograph, while preserving it in the image’s title, becomes a way of responding in kind to the problematic “strength” on display.

The self-portraits presented in the adjoining gallery of the exhibition serve a dual function. Rather than seeming “personal,” they echo institutional forms of photography, notably the ID photo and the mug-shot. Like the images of the march, they suggest the immersion of the individual in social structures that control and often suppress individual differences in favor of an illusory, but politically expedient, unity. Beyond that, the self-portraits raise a more basic question about the fragmentary nature of photographic images and their adequacy as representations of the self: Who is this person, really? And what can these pictures possibly tell us about him? Shown in conjunction with the images of the Million Man March, Ligon’s self-portraits also become a way for viewers to revisit the march and rethink its construction of black masculinity while considering a gay man’s perspective. Where, they imply, do African-American individuals who reject the values championed by Farrakhan stand in relation to the collective portrayed here? As with the images of the march, the self-portraits deliberately raise more questions than they answer.

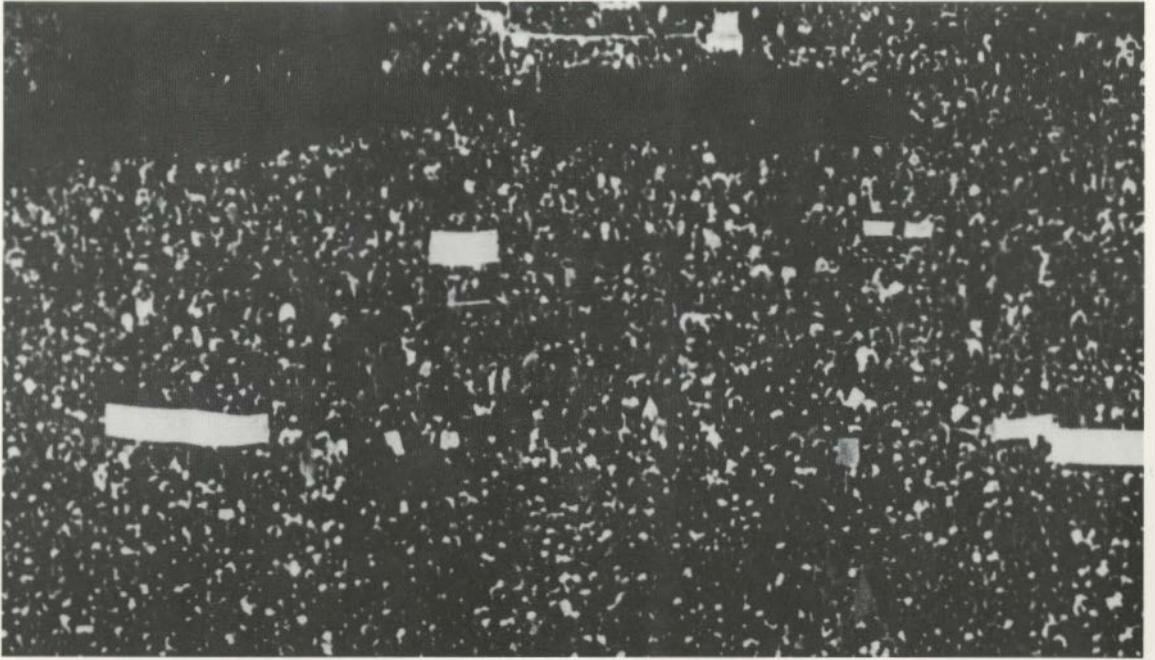
The final component of “Day of Absence” contains what Ligon sees as a crucial link between the images of himself and those of the Million Man March: a personal archive that retraces his steps along the way to the exhibition. This portrait is explicitly fragmentary and messy, yet it is wide-ranging and even intimate in its amassing of autobiographical ephemera. Significantly, the archive is also more true to the psychological density of lived experience than any single image can be. It is a place where, even more than in his “self-portraits,” the artist’s presence is meant to be felt.

For Ligon, placing a trove of materials about the march and his work on it in the care of the Gay and Lesbian Historical Society is an act with many layers of meaning in relation to the questions of presence and absence, visibility and invisibility that run through the rest of the exhibition. It is a way of filling in spaces left hauntingly blank by the images in the gallery, of speaking personally to a more motivated, less impersonal audience than that of a large museum, an audience willing to make the extra effort to visit a space they might otherwise ignore or avoid. Notably, the Historical Society is a place that preserves histories which might otherwise disappear. Its founding can be seen as a product of the frequent invisibility of gay history, an invisibility that has again been perpetuated in the official “guest list” for the Million Man March.

The work in this exhibition extends a vein of critical self-portraiture that has been part of Ligon’s oeuvre from his earliest exhibitions. It makes explicit the deeply personal nature of the artist’s engagement with the question of how African-Americans’ presence has been recorded, represented, and written into history, both by themselves and by others. Offering himself as evidence of the existence of more than one community within “the black community,” Ligon coolly registers the triumph of the Million Man March and reflects on the cost at which it was won.

John S. Weber

SFMOMA Leanne and George Roberts Curator of Education and Public Programs



Gulliver, 1996 (diptych)



Hands, 1996

**An Interview with Glenn Ligon
and Gary Garrels, SFMOMA Elise S. Haas Chief Curator
and Curator of Painting and Sculpture**

March 15, 1996

At the artist's studio,

Brooklyn, New York

GARY GARRELS: The images for your paintings of the Million Man March were taken from small news images?

GLENN LIGON: Right, blown up to monumental proportions. One of the things I was thinking about is the space black people take up in the cultural imagination. Corporeally and statistically we're a small minority, but as a "dilemma" we're seen as enormous. Ralph Ellison gets at some of these issues rather nicely in an essay in his book *Shadow and Act*. He says, "On a moral level I propose that we view the whole of American life as a drama acted out upon the body of a Negro giant, who, lying trussed up like Gulliver, forms the stage and the scene upon which and within which the action unfolds." He suggests that the black experience in America is central to what we mean when we say "American" and simultaneously placed at its limits, recognized only as that which other groups define their "Americanism" against.

I was also intrigued by questions of scale because the size of the march became a crucial issue in its failure or success. The Parks Department was actually going to be sued for undercounting the march. When I started working with certain images, like that of the raised hands, questions of scale took on an added significance.

GG: Did you quickly come to these four images?

GL: No, I looked at lots and lots of images as a way of figuring out through them what I wanted to say about the march. Originally I was attracted to images that had bodies coming forward toward the viewer, that stage a kind of confrontation. Over time I became more drawn to images in which bodies were at a distance, images with fractured bodies or bodies turned away from the viewer.

GG: The different images you've chosen contrast with each other, one with closed fists and another with opened hands and peace signs.

GL: That image is *The Pledge*, a pledge of dedication to the black family. I ended up titling the piece *Hands* because I didn't want it rooted in a specific instance in the march. I wanted to make it more ambiguous. The march itself was a deeply ambiguous, ambivalent moment in our history. People were there for very different reasons. There was a big contingent there because they wanted to support Farrakhan, and there were a lot of people who went just because it was historic. They went with the idea that we are in crisis and someone has provided a space and a framework to address that.

GG: What do you think about Farrakhan's position on gay people?

GL: His organization's position on gays and lesbians is horrendous, but the question was, "Do we go anyway?" There is an amazing discussion between Isaac Julien and Essex Hemphill in an anthology, *Speak My Name*. Isaac's position is, "I don't want to participate in this militaristic show of black masculinity under the banner of Farrakhan who is totally homophobic." And Essex's position is, "A million black men are going to be at this march and if we are not there as some kind of public presence then we just basically give up the game, we say that we are not part of the black community on that level, so it is absolutely crucial for us to physically be there while that march is happening." And Isaac's response is, "No we need to be on CNN because more people will be watching us on CNN than whoever sees us on this march." They have very different senses of what the political priorities are at this moment and the conversation begins to articulate some of the questions that need to be asked about the march. It is all about a desire to participate in the construction of its meaning, what the march meant, what it will mean to people.

GG: Well, it seems to me that the question of the march from a gay perspective is quite integral to your project because the other part of the exhibition which is off-site—out of sight—is the source material which is contextualized at the Gay and Lesbian Historical Society. What kinds of material will be included over at the Historical Society?

GL: I am creating a scrapbook of images, news articles, essays, and so on that were relevant to the creation of the show at the museum. I'm also going to include photo projects that were directly influenced by material I've seen in gay and lesbian archives. For example, I'm doing a series of collages that use pornography and captions cut out of *Jet* magazine. These are inspired by an archive of similar material at Yale by the photographer Carl Van Vechten. There will also be articles and interviews which are important to my whole project, works by people like Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, Stuart Hall, Ellison, Fassbinder, Richter, and others. Literature has always been important in the conception of the work, as important as looking at the work of other artists. Usually I've incorporated text directly into the work; this is the first time I'm working strictly with images.

GG: You have deleted all the text out of the images of the march. So not only have you left off your own text, or not used it as image, but even the texts that originally appeared in the photographs have now been omitted.

GL: I've always taken text to the point of disappearance in my work. The act of obsessively going over and over the text in the paintings obliterates them. The era-

sure of the text in the silkscreen images is in part because of the generations that the images went through, information just dropped out. But it is also deliberate, as in the banner image where I deleted the text altogether. Suddenly the holes in the banner become really significant.

GG: In general, these are much more abstract images than I thought they would be. The way you are dealing with these images pictorially is consistent with the way you have dealt with language as a pictorial element. It seems quite logical as an extension. It doesn't feel like a rupture.

GL: No, no, it wasn't for me either. The common thread between the works in this exhibition and my earlier text paintings is self-portraiture. At the museum there will be several figurative self-portrait images—shots of my head from the front, back, and sides. These will be screened on canvas in enamel silkscreen ink, screened over and over so that the images have different degrees of legibility. The reworking has precedence in my text-based paintings. They are abstract and specific at the same time—they are portraits but they are also impersonal, clinical. I consider all the work I've done self-portraits, filtered through other people's texts. I've never really dealt with images in such a direct way before. Because of the march I began to think about issues of self-portraiture and group identity.

GG: The large images to a degree become self-portraiture of a racial group.

GL: Right. Langston Hughes said that Claude McKay's novel *Home to Harlem* was "the finest thing 'we've' done yet." There has always been this sense that the triumphs and failures, the fate of the individual, is tied up with the fate of the race and nation. But I love the quotation marks around "we've." Just a hint of skepticism about what constitutes a black subject.

GG: It seems to me that you are talking about two parts of your own identity—as a black man, and also as a gay man. But then there is a "you" in the middle which is not simply about being just black or being just gay. You have two things that are emblematic, and then there is the much more ambiguous portrait in the middle.

GL: I suppose the spaces for the exhibition reflect that since there are three distinct spaces. The room that the archive is in feels equivalent to one of the galleries of the museum.

GG: But it's off-site from the museum and it's much more private material.

GL: Someone has to go to the archive to see it, and someone may have to go to a space which is uncomfortable for them. And what they find once they get there may be uncomfortable for them to deal with. But I like the fact that the viewer is going to have to do some work. Why should it be easy? One could argue that in some ways I have made it easy for people not to go to this third space. But I think even the fact that this material is situated in the archive, available on a permanent basis, can be enough, even if people don't go during the run of the show.

GG: Also, the archive makes public the private histories of gay people, and takes private lives and adds them to the public history and the public record.

GL: And a lot of that material has been rescued from flea markets and junk shops or is stuff that was not even recognized as valuable, like all these leaflets or matchbook

covers, all the ephemera of gay life. And I quite like the idea of putting artwork in that space. I think the context of the archive is really important.

GG: You also are posing questions about degrees of depersonalization. The mug shot is depersonalized, getting away from the identity of the individual and becoming a kind of type. Similarly, there is no sense of individuality in these images of the march, each individual subsumed by this historical moment and subsumed as a black person, not as an individual.

GL: I think the self-portraits are impersonal, but because the surfaces will be engaging, people will get invested in them in a different way than if they were much more straightforward.

GG: They're not clinical.

GL: Right, the poses may be clinical but the images aren't, which I think is what is interesting about Warhol. He makes works in the most straightforward way, and we still are invested in them.

GG: If you really look at Warhol's paintings you can see he is quite deliberate in his manipulations. They're not neutral, not clean, not neat. There is still a lot of sense of the hand or personal intervention with the image.

GL: Well, I know that they're not ever perfectly screened; you see all the mistakes.

GG: Warhol makes them painterly.

GL: He didn't clean the screen or he overlapped images or misregistered them.

GG: And for you, how will you handle the screen? Will there be handwork on these?

GL: No. It is all going to be done through the screen. I have an idea what they will look like, but I know that that will change when I actually do them. But I can't imagine doing much handwork. But maybe what I will do is screen some of them myself because I know that the screener will do too perfect a job. I want their reading to remain open.

Glenn Ligon collected numerous news clippings, test photos, journal notes, and other documents in the process of developing this exhibition. Scrapbooks created by the artist as an extension of the presentation here at the Museum are currently on view at

The Gay and Lesbian Historical Society of Northern California
973 Market Street, Suite 400
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Hours: Saturday and Sunday, 2:00–5:00 p.m.

glenn ligon

Born in the Bronx, New York, 1960
Lives and works in Brooklyn, New York

Education

Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, 1980
B. A. Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, 1982
Independent Study Program, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1985

Selected Individual Exhibitions

- 1990 *Glenn Ligon*, P.S. 1 Museum, Long Island City, New York
1992 *Glenn Ligon: Paintings*, Max Protetch Gallery, New York
1992 *Glenn Ligon: Good Mirrors Are Not Cheap*, Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, New York
1992 *Glenn Ligon/Matrix 120*, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut
1993 *Glenn Ligon: To Disembark*, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts; Davidson College Art Gallery, Davidson, North Carolina; Spencer Museum of Art, Lawrence, Kansas
1995 *Skin Tight*, MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts
1995 *Glenn Ligon*, Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, Iowa

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1989 *Selections 46*, The Drawing Center, New York
1991 *Interrogating Identity*, Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Madison Art Center, Wisconsin; Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Ohio
1991 *1991 Biennial Exhibition*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
1992 *Doubletake: Collective Memory & Current Art*, The South Bank Centre, Hayward Gallery, London
1992 *Allegories of Modernism: Contemporary Drawing*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York
1992 *Mistaken Identities*, University Art Museum, University of California at Santa Barbara; Museum Folkwang, Essen, Germany; Forum Stadtpark, Graz, Austria; Neues Museum Weserburg Bremen im Forum Lagenstrasse, Bremen, Germany; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark
1993 *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
1993 *Byron Kim & Glenn Ligon: Collaborations*, A/C Project Room, New York
1993 *Prints and Issues*, Kunst-Werke, Berlin
1994 *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center
1995 *Pervert*, Fine Arts Gallery, University of California at Irvine
1995 *Glenn Ligon, Gary Simmons*, Fabric Workshop, Philadelphia, and Beaver College, Glenside, Pennsylvania
1995 *Mirage: Enigmas of Race, Difference and Desire*, Institute of Contemporary Art, London
1995 *25 Americans: Paintings in the 90s*, Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
1996 *Prospect 96*, Frankfurt Kunstverein, Germany
1996 *Biennale of Sydney, International Exhibition of Contemporary Art*, Sydney, Australia

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- Ligon, Glenn. "A Feast of Scraps." In *Masculine Masquerade: Masculinity and Representation* (exh. cat.), edited by Andrew Perchuk and Helaine Posner. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1995: 89-99.
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- Smith, Roberta. "Art in Review." *The New York Times*, November 3, 1995.
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CHECKLIST

Self-Portraits

1996

eleven images: 48 x 40 in. (121.9 x 101.6 cm) each

silkscreen on canvas

Courtesy of the artist and Max Protetch Gallery, New York

"Day of Absence," consisting of the following works:

Gulliver

1996

diptych: 7 x 24 ft. (2.1 x 7.4 m)

silkscreen on unstretched canvas

Courtesy of the artist and Max Protetch Gallery, New York

Hands

1996

7 x 12 ft. (2.1 x 3.7 m)

silkscreen on unstretched canvas

Courtesy of the artist and Max Protetch Gallery, New York

Screen

1996

7 x 12 ft. (2.1 x 3.7 m)

silkscreen on unstretched canvas

Courtesy of the artist and Max Protetch Gallery, New York

We're Black and Strong

1996

10 x 7 ft. (3 x 2.1 m)

silkscreen on unstretched canvas

Courtesy of the artist and Max Protetch Gallery, New York

NOTES

1. See, for example, Patricia Williams, "Different drummer please, marchers!," *The Nation* 26, No. 14 (October 30, 1995): 493, and bell hooks, "Save Your Breath, Sisters," *New York Times*, January 7, 1996: 19.

2. From a conversation with the author, April 1996.

3. Ibid.

Cover image: *We're Black and Strong*, 1996

May 23–August 25, 1996

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Photography by Dennis Cowley

new
work

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