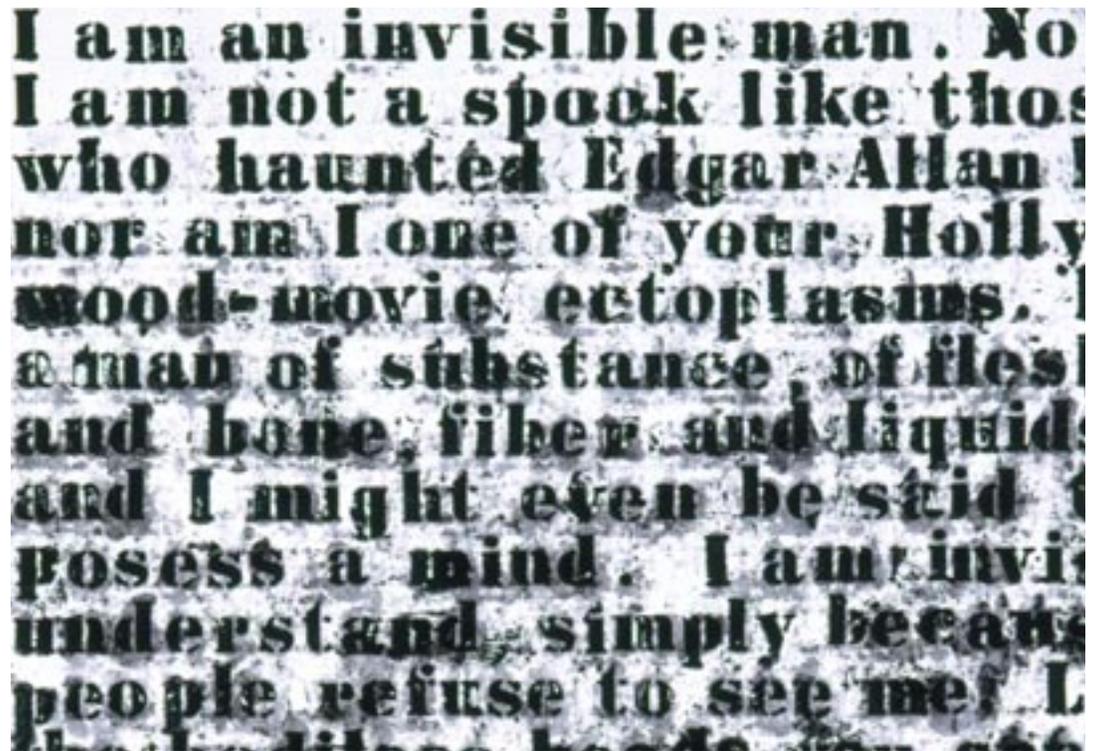


# GLENN LIGON

## CONCEPT

Attitudes of race and ethnicity in America are explored in the contemporary work of New York artist Glenn Ligon. Text becomes art when Ligon appropriates the writings of famous authors such as James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, transforming them into conceptual visual statements.

“[I want to] make language into a physical thing, something that has real weight and force to it.” —Glenn Ligon



Glenn Ligon, *Untitled ( I Am An Invisible Man)*, 1993,  
 Museum Purchase: Bequest of Mr. and Mrs. Walter J. Wichgar, 2000.255

## BACKGROUND

Born in 1960, Glenn Ligon has achieved impressive acclaim for his years. He received a BA from Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, and attended the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program in New York. He now resides and works in Brooklyn, New York.

Ligon's work resides in the collections of the Whitney Museum of Art; The Metropolitan Museum of Art; the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Cincinnati Art Museum.

Though extremely prolific, Ligon's work resists easy classification. His work ranges from conceptual, Pop, and Appropriation Art to Minimalism—

drawing inspiration from Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, Andrian Piper, and Richard Pryor. Whether communicating in paint, print, or sculpture, Ligon uses language to convey his African American perspective. He often makes us question our assumptions about race by incorporating culturally charged quotations from writers, including Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Genet, Leroi Jones, Oscar Wilde, and James Baldwin.

This power of the printed word and its graphic impact can be found in his print series the Runaways and Narratives, which bring the past into the present through Ligon's

## CRITICAL THINKING

The process of appropriating, or adapting traditional art forms into contemporary works, has been especially popular since the postmodern era of the 1980s. Explain how Glenn Ligon uses appropriation in his art.

The artist Charles Demuth is known for his 1928 painting *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold*. Look at a picture of the painting. It is inspired by *The Great Figure*, a poem by American William Carlos Williams. How does inspiration and appropriation differ?

Have you ever wanted to interview an artist? New York students questioned Glenn Ligon about his art when it was featured at the Whitney Museum. Visit [www.harlemlive.org](http://www.harlemlive.org) to learn about their experience. What questions would you ask Glenn Ligon about his art and life?

In 1967, American artist Sol LeWitt said, "In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work...all planning and decisions are made beforehand..." Is Glenn Ligon's art conceptual? Defend your opinion.

manipulation and modernization of nineteenth-century runaway slave posters and narratives. Other works fusing African American history, the present, and manipulated text include *Untitled (I Do Not Always Feel Colored)* (1990), *Malcolm X: Man, Ideal, Icon* (1993), *Duchamp's Leg* (1994), *Skin Tight* (1995), *Million Man March* (1995), and *Stranger in the Village #13* (1998).

At first glance, Glenn Ligon's *Untitled (I Am an Invisible Man)* recalls the textual work of Jim Dine, Joseph Kosuth, or Andy Warhol in the 1960s. The text of Glenn Ligon's *Untitled (I Am an Invisible Man)*, however, may reveal a hidden message for astute viewers.

On the surface, we see Ligon's carefully hand-stenciled letters copied onto a gessoed canvas, using thick, black oil stick. These letters become words then the words become the text from Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*.

*I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus side shows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard distorting glass.*

At this point in the text, Ellison's words become veiled in a sea of indecipherable smudges. Ligon's process of stenciling—top to bottom, letter to letter—changes Ellison's words to mere patterns of light and dark on the canvas. Viewers struggle to see the concluding sentences. Hence, the hidden message is revealed. This breakdown of communication alludes to the profound anguish suffered by African Americans in a mainstream white culture.



# CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

## LANGUAGE ARTS

### Poetry

Artists and authors often ask us to see the world from another point of view. Hans Hofman defined empathy as “the imaginative projection of ones’ own consciousness into another being or thing.” Ask your students to imagine themselves as a different gender, age, nationality, or race. Now have them write a poem from this different perspective.

### Writing

In *African-American Art* by Sharon F. Patton, the author states, “...increasingly black American artists rely on a written narration and associative powers of words.” Ask students to dispute or verify Patton’s statement by researching the work of these contemporary artists: Pat Ward Williams, Lorna Simpson, Faith Ringgold, Adrian Piper, and Howard Pindell.

## SOCIAL STUDIES

As a class project, create a timeline of famous African American artists. Students can analyze how political, social, and economic events have influenced the availability and content of African American art.

## VISUAL ART

While visiting the Cincinnati Art Museum, challenge your students to locate these four pieces. Have them match the correct letter to the numbered question.

- |  |                  |
|--|------------------|
| a) <i>Untitled (I Am an Invisible Man)</i> | b) Glenn Ligon   |
| c) <i>Name Painting #1</i>                 | d) Jim Dine      |
| e) <i>Self-Defined and Self-Described</i>  | f) Joseph Kosuth |
| g) <i>Pete Rose</i>                        | h) Andy Warhol   |

1. Words are the primary element of this piece.
2. Based on text by Ralph Ellison
3. Known for using repeated “popular” images
4. This Toledo native was a leader in the Conceptual Art movement.
5. Created by stenciling letters with oil sticks
6. Cincinnati artist who used “words as objects”
7. Silk-screened acrylic on canvas; assembly-line-like process
8. Memories in charcoal on canvas
9. His work explores attitudes of race in America.
10. Constructed from neon and glass tubing.

## VOCABULARY

- |          |               |                |         |
|----------|---------------|----------------|---------|
| text     | inspiration   | empathy        | stencil |
| identity | appropriation | Postmodern Art |         |

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### Web Sites:

[www.artlex.com/ArtLex/text.html](http://www.artlex.com/ArtLex/text.html)

[www.artic.edu/artaccess/AAAfAm/pages/AfAm\\_12.shtml](http://www.artic.edu/artaccess/AAAfAm/pages/AfAm_12.shtml)

[www.harlemlive.org/arts-culture/museums/GlennLigon/](http://www.harlemlive.org/arts-culture/museums/GlennLigon/)

[www.printshop.org/news/ligon.html](http://www.printshop.org/news/ligon.html)

[www.walkerart.org/programs/vaexhibligon.html](http://www.walkerart.org/programs/vaexhibligon.html)



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I am not a spook like those  
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nor am I one of your Holly-  
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and bone, fiber and liquids -  
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understand, simply because  
people refuse to see me! Like  
the bodiless heads you see  
sometimes in circus side-  
shows, it is as though I have  
been surrounded by mirrors  
of hard, distorting glass.  
When they approach me they  
see only my surroundings,  
themselves or figments of  
their imagination - indeed,  
everything and anything ex-  
cept me. For is my invisibility  
itself, exactly a matter of a bio-  
chemical accident to my out-  
er skin? It is not. It is the  
inner, it is the heart of me,  
a terrible secret that I must  
share with you. You cannot see  
it because it is not yours to see.  
I am invisible, simply because  
people refuse to see me.

Glenn Ligon, *Untitled ( I Am An Invisible Man)*, 1993,  
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