



**Title**

Glenn Ligon: All Over The Place

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Cover image:

# Glenn Ligon: All Over The Place

by Madeleine Harrison • 25.02.2025

Glenn Ligon (b.1960) makes his presence at the Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, known even before visitors enter the building. Affixed to the Neo-classical portico's columns are twelve monumental neons [FIG.1](#), each of which quotes a different English translation of the last stanza of C.P. Cavafy's 1898 poem 'Waiting for the Barbarians'.<sup>1</sup> Through its continuous cycles of translation and reinterpretation – sign and signifier, verbal and visual – this work introduces the themes that play out in rambling form in *All Over The Place*, a hybrid solo exhibition and curatorial project that is anchored by Ligon's conceptual word and image practice.

*All Over The Place* is exactly that: an expansive set of interventions that are strategically placed throughout seven of the Fitzwilliam's labyrinthine galleries. It is neither a solo exhibition, nor an introspective survey of the kind that the museum mounted in 2023–24 with *Black Atlantic: Power, People, Resistance*.<sup>2</sup> Rather, Ligon's artistic and curatorial work is staged in dialogue with the museum's objects and spaces. The artist has rehung and relabelled items and added his own works and wall texts, challenging ideas of knowledge, understanding and misunderstanding, as well as race and representation.<sup>3</sup> These problematisations have endured throughout Ligon's long career, as evidenced by the juxtaposition of such early works as *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background)* [FIG.2](#) with more recent ones, including *Debris Field #15* (2021). Installed in the Octagon Gallery, this pairing demonstrates the trajectory of Ligon's experiments with legibility and illegibility, as the words stamped across early canvases break apart into ballooning, atomised and abstracted forms.

*All Over the Place* unfolds over a number of rooms, not all of which are connected to one another. As a result, it is signposted to assist those visitors who might be seeking something akin to a linear experience. It is more likely, however, that most will happen upon the interventions by chance, which seems to align more closely with the intentions of Ligon and his co-curator, Hadba Rashid. In the exhibition catalogue Rashid describes the project as an exercise in (dis)orientation, generating 'alternative navigation tool[s]' that seek to 'dissolve expectations' (p.14).<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the experience of *All Over The Place* as a series of physically disjointed but conceptually cohesive happenings productively unmoors the visitor from traditional modes of museum engagement. There is

logic at play here, but it is, as Luke Syson, the Director of the Fitzwilliam, tells us, one of 'feeling' more than 'explanations' (p.6).

In the European and Japanese porcelain gallery on the ground floor, Ligon's *Untitled* FIG.3 – nine moon jars made in collaboration with a Korean ceramicist – certainly conjures the disruptive, alternative and unexpected. The objects have been adapted from the traditional design, replacing the pearlescent white surface with a burnished black glaze. Responding to the specificities of the gallery, which houses European ceramics that are influenced by Asia or have Asian motifs, Ligon's hybrid jars problematise easy cultural assignments. Shown on a simple, table-like plinth, the jars are the first ever objects to be put on open display in this context. Exposed, and installed alongside historical objects that are largely displayed behind glass, they gesture towards hapticity while at the same time refusing touch, scratching at the logics of museum exhibition.

In the first-floor print room, a display highlights additional themes that have underpinned Ligon's career: annotation, repetition and language as both visual matter and mode of communication. For example, *Untitled (Cancellation Prints)* FIG.4 – produced from plates that the artist used ten years prior – are hung opposite prints taken from Edgar Degas's own cancelled plates FIG.5. Here Ligon highlights how Degas's cancellation marks – lines and other markings that the artist used to deface plates after producing the desired number of impressions – serve not to disturb, but rather to amplify, compositional harmony. Slender, dark lines arc across the works, resembling rays of light; they skirt around faces and hands in mischievous, contradictory gestures that retain the works' legibility while supposedly rendering them mute. Elsewhere, *Condition Report* FIG.6 turns its own apparently incidental markings – a conservator's annotations indicating cracking, yellowing and other surface flaws – into similar acts of artistic intervention. Nearby, a vitrine contains a number of medieval treasures: a copy of Horace's *Opera* with minuscule letterform annotation; a Hebrew bible with calligraphic additions; and a diminutive diurnal with pages extended by neat, vivid embroidery. Meaning is never settled.



Fig. 1 Installation view of *Glenn Ligon: All Over The Place* at Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, 2024–25, showing *Waiting for the Barbarians*, by Glenn Ligon. 2021. Neon installation, dimensions variable. (© Glenn Ligon; photograph Lewis Ronald).

It is in the gallery of Dutch floral still lifes that Ligon’s curatorial interventions seem to be honed to their keenest edge. Instead of displaying his own works alongside collection objects, here Ligon has chosen to hang dozens of flower paintings salon-style, so that they crowd all of the available wall space [FIG.7](#). The result is an orgiastic, excessive explosion of colour with vivid blooms seeming to heave outwards from their frames. That this room is now such an embarrassment of riches is precisely the point. Each of the paintings conjures questions of colonial greed, resource exploitation and impending decay. Teeming with flowers, exotic fruits, ornate tableware and other signifiers of wealth and luxury, they speak to the accrual of capital and commodities through extraction from colonised regions and oppressed labourers. Hung together in this way, they induce a kind of Stendhal syndrome, exposing the extent of the rot at the core of imperial glory, while simultaneously inviting viewers to delight in their spectacle, almost at the expense of their comfort. Through his curatorial decision-making and new wall labels, Ligon enacts a profound shift in the affect of these objects. This gallery is perhaps the exhibition’s most strident argument for the dialogues waiting to be staged in Western collections.

The ambivalence of this invitation – a playfulness that coexists with grave seriousness – continues in the Renaissance galleries [FIG.8](#), where Ligon has installed numerous iterations of *Study for Negro Sunshine (Red)* (2018–24). The paintings repeat the titular phrase – taken from Gertrude Stein’s short story ‘Melanctha’ (1909), which describes a character as lacking the ‘warm broad glow of



negro sunshine’ – in cracking, smudged, glistening oil stick and coal dust letters.<sup>5</sup> The intervention implicitly critiques the whiteness of the surrounding rooms, and of the museum more widely: the studies are hung out of alignment with the other works, as though seeking to evade notice except by their own design. One is hung high above Annibale Carracci’s *St Roch and the angel* (1585–89), so that the saint appears to point out of his own time and space towards the blistered red-and-black piece above him. If race so often remains the museum’s ‘dark matter, the often invisible substance that [...] structures the universe of modernity’, as Howard Winant put it, then Ligon’s interventions echo Simone Browne’s riposte: ‘invisible to whom? [...] or rather unseen and unperceived by many?’.<sup>6</sup>



Fig. 2 Installation view of Glenn Ligon: *All Over The Place* at Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, 2024–25, showing, on the left, *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background)*, by Glenn Ligon. 1990. Oil stick on canvas, 76.2 by 50.8 cm. (© Glenn Ligon; photograph Thomas Adank).

The artist’s work is most concentrated in the final room, the Octagon Gallery. A selection of large-scale text paintings spanning his career hang imposingly here, enveloping the viewer in letters that either cohere into words or careen into abstraction. Ligon’s *Silver Nobody Knew Me #1* (2006), a metallic oil and acrylic that quotes Richard Pryor on the paradoxes of diaspora – ‘I went to Africa. I went to the motherland [...] not one of those motherfuckers knew me’ – is hung next to two eighteenth-century Chinese reverse-painted mirrors. Made for export and painted on imported European glass, the objects present an orientalising impression of Chinese culture designed for European eyes. The triptych unfolds as a testament to how diasporic movements of people and objects populate our visual field. In a museum that

adheres to displays organised by periods and geographies, Ligon's interpolations proclaim the richness of other kinds of juxtapositions.



**Fig. 3** Installation view of *Glenn Ligon: All Over The Place* at Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, 2024–25, showing *Untitled*, by Glenn Ligon. 2019. 9 glazed porcelain vessels, dimensions variable. (© Glenn Ligon; photograph Thomas Adank).

Across the controlled sprawl of *All Over The Place*, the meaning of the museum – both the Fitzwilliam and the concept of the institution more broadly – is subjected to balanced critique. Just as the text in Ligon's works begins to atomise, the museum's curatorial and interpretive norms emerge as artificially constructed and ideological. However, the artist's approach is not castigating: rather, it delights in the visual and conceptual possibilities that can emerge from encounters between images and ideas that infrequently meet. *All Over The Place* is playful and disarming, and Ligon's humour adds much to the exhibition's deeply critical guide to Western art history as seen through the lens of the Fitzwilliam's collection. Remade according to Ligon's design, the museum becomes more questioning, more conversational and more inviting.



**Fig. 4** From *Untitled (Cancellation Prints)*, by Glenn Ligon. 1992–2003. Etching with aquatint, sugar-lift and spit bite, 2 parts, each 71.8 by 50.8 cm. (© Glenn Ligon; courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, Thomas Dane Gallery, London, and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris; exh. Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge).





**Fig. 5** *Manet assis à gauche (Manet seated to the left)*, by Edgar Degas. c.1864–65. Etching and drypoint, impression from cancelled plate, 32.7 by 24.5 cm. (© Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge).



**Fig. 6** Installation view of *Glenn Ligon: All Over The Place* at Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, 2024–25, showing *Condition Report*, by Glenn Ligon. 2000. Iris print and iris print with serigraph, 2 parts, each 81.3 by 57.8 cm. (© Glenn Ligon; photograph Thomas Adank).



**Fig. 7** Installation view of *Glenn Ligon: All Over The Place* at Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, 2024–25, showing the Flowers Gallery. (© Glenn Ligon; photograph Lewis Ronald).



**Fig. 8** Installation view of *Glenn Ligon: All Over The Place* at Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, 2024–25, showing, from left to right, *Study for Negro Sunshine (Red)* #73, #28, #31 and #29. 2020–24. Oil stick and acrylic on paper, each 30.5 by 22.9 cm. (© Glenn Ligon; photograph Thomas Adank).

### Exhibition details

**Glenn Ligon: All Over The Place**  
 Fitzwilliam Museum, University of  
 Cambridge  
 20th September 2024–2nd March 2025

### About this book

GLENN  
 LIGON  
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**Glenn Ligon: All Over The Place**  
 Edited by Glenn Ligon and Habda Rashid  
 Paul Holberton Publishing, London, 2024  
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## Footnotes

- 1** See B. Eastham: 'Portals', *e-flux* (14th June 2021), available at [www.e-flux.com/criticisms/403235/portals](http://www.e-flux.com/criticisms/403235/portals), accessed 9th December 2024.
- 2** V. Avery and J. Subryan, eds: exh. cat. *Black Atlantic: Power, People, Resistance*, Cambridge (Fitzwilliam Museum) 2023–24, reviewed by Saffron East in THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE, 166 (2024), pp.523–25.
- 3** Hew Locke's recent exhibition *what have we here?* similarly put the extant collection of the British Museum, London, into conversation with Locke's own work. *The Watchers* (2024), a series of eerie, carnivalesque figures, glare from atop vitrines as visitors peruse new arrangements of collection objects, the colonial histories and meanings of which are productively dissected by Locke's labels. See H. Locke, I. Seligman and I. Khanna: exh. cat. *what have we here?*, London (British Museum), 2024–25.
- 4** Catalogue: *Glenn Ligon: All Over The Place*. Edited by Glenn Ligon and Habda Rashid. 144 pp. incl. numerous col. ills. (Paul Holberton, London, 2024), £25. ISBN 978-1-913645-70-0.
- 5** G. Stein: 'Melanctha', in *idem: Three Lives*, New York 1909, pp.47–142, at p.47.
- 6** H. Winant: 'The dark matter: race and racism in the 21st century', *Critical Sociology* 41 (2014), pp.313–24, at p.322, [doi.org/10.1177/0896920513501353](https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920513501353); S. Browne: *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, Durham NC 2015, p.9.



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