

GLENN LIGON
Comrades and Lovers
2014

THE NEW SCHOOL
University Center
63 Fifth Avenue, New York



LIGON

more modest than immodest. | No labor-saving machine, Nor discovery have I made, Nor will I be able to leave behind me any wealthy bequest
taken away. | I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul. The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me,
to thank
The first of graft and

STUDLEY
PETER S. LEWIN HALLS OF GARB
AND NANCY WALKER
AND SUSIE ARONSON
CLARISE AND HENRY ARNHOLD
JOE RICE
MICHAEL AND MARY GELLERT
ELLET STERN



THE GLENN LIGON COMMISSION

For Comrades and Lovers, 2015

The New School's University Center at 63 Fifth Avenue officially opened in January 2014. Designed by Roger Duffy of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM), the block-long, 16-story building is the second commissioned building since director Alvin Johnson commissioned Joseph Urban to design a modern building at 66 West 12th in 1930. This building was the first international style building to be built in the New York City and is now a designated city landmark. Johnson invited three artists, Thomas Hart Benton, José Clemente Orozco and Camilo Egas to create site-specific murals for this building.

Part of the vision for the new University Center was to extend the tradition of commissioning site-specific works by contemporary artists. After a collaborative selection process, the Provost, the Office of the Curator, and The New School Art Collection Advisory Group commissioned three artists to create new site-specific works that would resonate with the university's core vision of creativity, innovation and social engagement. By spring 2015, permanent site-specific commissions by Glenn Ligon, Alfredo Jaar and Rita McBride were installed in the University Center.

The Fifth Avenue site for the new University Center already harbored a rich historical legacy for art and design. Thomas Alva Edison, inventor of the phonograph, the motion picture camera and the electric light bulb, opened his business office at this address in the 1880s. Nearly one hundred years later, it was the first location of Marcia Tucker's New Museum. At the invitation of Vera List, The New School's lifetime trustee, Tucker launched the first museum dedicated to contemporary art in New York City since the second World War, which operated for two years in the lobby of The New School for Social Research's Albert A. List Center, popularly known as "the Graduate Faculty Building." These significant cultural antecedents laid the groundwork for encouraging creative invention as well as the display, study and interpretation of contemporary art.

Glenn Ligon created his site-specific work for the new University Center's Event Café, a lobby level space conceived as an open forum where New School community members and visitors could gather. Inaugurated in April 2015, *For Comrades and Lovers* is Ligon's first site-specific commission in New York City and his most ambitious neon work to date. Almost 400 hundred linear feet of violet neon encircles the Event Café's perimeter with excerpted lines from Walt Whitman's canonical *Leaves of Grass*. Ligon re-frames Whitman's meditations and transforms one of the University Center's most striking architectural spaces into an intimate, poetic, as well as politically charged space, asking us to consider the encounter – with ourselves, our longings and endeavors, our temporality and our place in the world – an encouragement to occupy those spaces fully.

Commenting on Whitman's legacy, Ligon notes: "Whitman created a new space in which to consider the American experiment, and over one hundred and fifty years after its publication, the poems in *Leaves of Grass* continue to echo throughout the culture...The quotes in this piece are reflective of a space of encounter and transience, a restless space that in Whitman's poems is characteristic of the space of the city."

Ligon's wide-ranging multimedia practice encompasses painting, neon, photography, sculpture, print, installation and video. In his work, he often explores the intersection of race, sexuality and desire, and offers a nuanced commentary on American history and the practice of democracy. He is widely known for his monochromatic text paintings, which draw their content from popular culture, American history and literary works by writers such as James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Jean Genet, Mary Shelley, Zora Neale Hurston, as well as Walt Whitman.

ripples, buzz'd whispers,

love-root, silk-thread,

crotch and vine,

Today, ahead, though dimly yet, we see, through light, through space, through rooms, through halls in which we gather. A copious, sane, gigantic lasting power becomes us in our gathering. A harmony of eyes and minds and language, gives us a right to things. Here the body and the life are to be considered in diatonic notes—little shreds of fabric to make the whole of a continuum. We spend our lives inside buildings. Walls shape our thoughts. Walls and space influence cognition, inspire thinking, ignite variables of imagination, trigger associations with sky and ocean in expansive horizons and diffuse light. Daydream here. Think in terms of tangential associations. Focus on and become aware of the possibilities simmering interests. Ponder creative solutions and abstract speculations of principle and theory. Develop perfection. Comprehenders, contradict one another and question democracy. Realize your convictions and present them in oneness tempered by wandering. The triumphant future of business, of play, of republic, is afforded us here. Value your occupancy and inhabit your intellect. Look up. Read the words illumed against plaster. They are authored by someone who willed: This is what you shall do to love the earth and the sun and the animals. To despise riches and give alms to every one that asks. To stand up for the stupid and crazy and devote your income and labor to others and to hate tyrants. Argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or in church or in any book. Dismiss whatever insults your own soul. Your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and

in every motion and joint of your body. These words are authored by someone who was before you and who believed himself to be among you eternally in the city that he loved. They are words as art. Art as light. Light as implementation of solution making vision a reality concerned with the aesthetics of thought. Light as words become an interaction with life become thought become wave and particle. Waves of light cursive electro-magnetic. Photon. Index of refraction from material to material. Lines become relationships between angles of incidence and refraction passing through boundaries between two different isotropic media between water between glass between air. Words as light bent backwards curled to refractive index made open as a mirrored lens to the soul equivalent to the ratio of phase velocities to the reciprocal of the ratio of the indices of refraction. It is an integration of gas emitting color and color as atoms of inert gas chemically bonding with atoms as a distribution of transmuted thought. The glare luminance, of surfaces' shadows, reflecting a system of nation vigorous in its literature, transcendental in the expression of its design, inviting your expression. Look up. See yourself here. Ask someone Who are you? Where are you now? What do you think? What shall we change? Where is our congress? Who is curious? What is our proposition and remedy? Where shall we place our attention and how shall we give it decision? How can we redefine the chivalry of the feudal ecclesiastical dynastic world in the conscious and unconscious blood of belief? Embrace the magnitude of a moment in the aggregation of heroes and sufferers of misfortune. This is your place. It is a constant puzzle and an affront to the merely educated cosmical artist mind lit with infinite thirst. Turn to the essential dualism here, of nature's co-existence, of waves at the level of quanta. Welcome a poet. Welcome an architect. Welcome a maker of things. Welcome an artist (and all lovers of art). Speak to someone of what you know. Know words to be light.



THE INCANTATIONS OF LIGON AND WHITMAN Luis Jaramillo

I teach a class at The New School called “Illuminated Manuscripts: Story in Word and Image.” The title captures much of what we do, but not everything. I tell my students that what we’re really trying to learn is how to be brave.

To get to our classroom, we walk past and then below Glenn Ligon’s installation *For Comrades and Lovers*. Whitman’s words hover along the edges of the ceiling, the violet light of the neon tubes glowing against a darkened metal background. Warriors and poets have always taken the time to pause before battle, before writing, to invoke the ancestors and the gods. For me, Whitman hovers somewhere between god and ancestor, a grandfather poet-gay-man, a voice from the other side. When I walk down the stairs I give him a nod, invoking him through movement instead of words.

In his essay *A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads*, included as an epilogue of the collected works in 1889, Whitman uses the word “buoyant” to describe the defining quality of *Leaves of Grass*. Over the many incantatory lines of his poem, Whitman uses strings of gerunds to push the lines forward, upward. In the same essay, Whitman explains that rather than speaking to God, the speaker of his poem addresses his words “towards himself and towards his fellow-humanity.” Whitman adds, “It is certainly time for America, above all, to begin this readjustment in the scope and basic point of view of verse; for everything else has changed.”

The “everything else” Whitman refers to is the Civil War and the industrial revolution. Whitman’s aspirational conviction is that “the crowning growth of the United States is to spiritual and heroic.” Not so fast, Ligon’s work seems to say, things are a bit more complicated than that.

On the east wall below *For Comrades and Lovers* hang four of Ligon’s black and white etchings. One etching repeats the lines, “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background,” and the other, “I do not always feel colored.” The text is taken from Zora Neale Hurston’s essay “How it

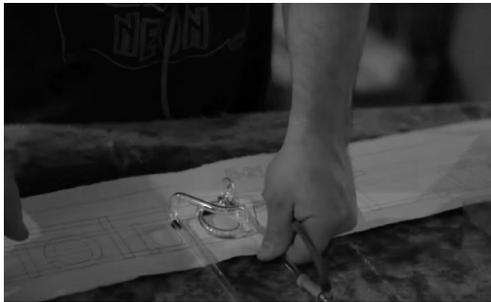
Feels To Be Colored Me.” The word “colored” in the essay and in the etchings of course refers to blackness, but the other meaning is there too. In the two-story space connecting the lobby and the lower level there’s a contrast between light and darkness, weight and weightlessness, pinkness and brownness and blackness, a calling attention to the difference between the above and the below.

“We live in a white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy,” bell hooks recently said to an audience at The New School, repeating a phrase she’s written more than once. With repetition comes the imperative to look, look here, look at what is true right in front of you. In the other two etchings on the lower level, Ligon borrows from the first lines of Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man*. The letters are glossy black on a matte black background, hard to read, and like the Hurston sentences, Ellison’s become congested at the bottom of the frame, a literal representation of the failure of language and art.

This is what we need to be brave for, to stick with our art until the moment of its failure. That’s the only way to the other side. Whitman writes, “The actual living light is always curiously from elsewhere—follows unaccountable sources and is lunar and relative at the best.” In “How it Feels To Be Colored Me,” Zora Neale Hurston writes that sometimes “The cosmic Zora emerges,” belonging “to no race nor time..the eternal feminine with its string of beads.”

In my walking invocation I ask for the grace to be able to write about the real and the transcendent. This isn’t easy work, it shouldn’t be. This is what the bravery is for.

ESSAY NO 3



Transcript of neon text from **GLENN LIGON'S FOR COMRADES AND LOVERS**

While there are many points of entry for the reading of the text in this installation, which is meant to be encountered over time, there is a particular sequence one might consider following. Begin on the north wall (over the stage); the two lines here represent one excerpt. From the bottom line on this wall, the eye naturally rises to the east wall, where the text starts with “Walt Whitman...” The text follows the perimeter of the room to the south wall and then to the west wall, where it is suspended. It picks up again on the east wall, on the bottom line under “Walt Whitman...” and then sweeps around the perimeter once more.

Top Line of North Wall

Dead poets, philosophers, priests,
Martyrs, artists, inventors, governments long since, Language-shapers,
on other shores,
Nations once powerful, now reduced, withdrawn, or desolate,
I dare not proceed till I respectfully credit what you have left
wafted hither,
I have perused it, own it is admirable, (moving awhile among it,)
Think nothing can ever be greater, nothing can ever deserve more
than it deserves,
Regarding it all intently a long while, then dismissing it, I stand in my place with
my own day here.

Top Line of East Wall, Then South, Then West Walls

Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,
Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding,
No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or apart from them,
No more modest than immodest.
No labor-saving machine,
Nor discovery have I made,
Nor will I be able to leave behind me any wealthy bequest to found
a hospital or library,
Nor reminiscence of any deed of courage for America,
Nor literary success nor intellect, nor book for the book-shelf,

But a few carols vibrating through the air I leave,
For comrades and lovers.
Among the men and women, the multitude,
I perceive one picking me out by secret and divine signs,
Acknowledging none else, not parent, wife, husband, brother, child,
any nearer than I am,
Some are baffled, but that one is not—that one knows me.
Ah, lover and perfect equal,
I meant that you should discover me so by my faint indirections,
And I, when I meet you, mean to discover you by the like in you.

Bottom Line of East Wall, Then South, Then West Walls

Undrape! you are not guilty to me, nor stale nor discarded,
I see through the broadcloth and gingham whether or no,
And am around, tenacious, acquisitive, tireless, and cannot be shaken away.
I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul.
The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me,
The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into
a new tongue.
There was never any more inception than there is now,
Nor any more youth or age than there is now,
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.
The smoke of my own breath,
Echoes, ripples, buzz'd whispers, love-root, silk-thread,
crotch and vine,
My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing
of blood and air through my lungs,
Through me forbidden voices,
Voice of sexes and lusts, voices veil'd and I remove the veil,
Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur'd.

Immooodeest

the poet word



Jacob Kaplan Building
66 West 12th Street
New York

THOMAS HART BENTON
American, 1889–1975

America Today (Mural Cycle)
1930 – 31

Egg tempera on linen

Commissioned by The New School for Social Research, 1931
Acquired by AXA Equitable, New York, in 1984
Gift to the Metropolitan Museum of Art from AXA, New York, 2012

JOSÉ CLEMENTE OROZCO
Mexican, 1883–1949

Call to Revolution and Table of Universal Brotherhood (The New School Mural Cycle)
1931

Fresco

7th Floor

CAMILO EGAS
Ecuadorian, 1889–1962

Ecuadorian Festival
1932

Oil on canvas

Lobby

Vera List Courtyard + Atrium
66 West 12th Street
New York

GONZALO FONSECA
Uruguayan, 1922–1997

Untitled
1961

Ceramic mosaic

Atrium

MARTIN PURYEAR

American, b. 1941

MICHAEL VAN VALKENBURGH

American, b. 1951

Untitled
1989 – 1997

Maple, granite, stainless steel
courtyard design

Atrium + Courtyard

DAVE MULLER
American, b. 1964

Interpolations and Extrapolations
2002 – 2003

Extensions
2008

Acrylic on paper
Signed

Atrium

Arnhold Hall
55 West 13th Street
New York

SOL LEWITT
American, 1928 – 2007

Wall Drawing #1073 A and B, Bars of Color
2003

Acrylic paint

Lobby (Part A); Second Floor (Part B)

KARA WALKER
American, b. 1969

Event Horizon
2005

Acrylic paint

Lobby, Central Staircase

BRIAN TOLLE
American, b. 1964

Threshold
2006

Fiberglass and acrylic paint

Dorothy Hirshon Suite, 2nd Floor

University Center
55 West 13th Street
New York

RITA MCBRIDE
American, b. 1960

Bells and Whistles
2014

Brass

Ductwork, 530 feet long, spanning six floors

ALFREDO JAAR
Santiago, Chile b. 1956

Searching for Africa in LIFE
1996/2014

Color transparency, LED
lightboxes

Arnhold Forum,
7th Floor Reading Room

GLENN LIGON
American, b. 1960

For Comrades and Lovers
2015

Neon

Event Café

THE
NEW
SCHOOL

om them, No more modest than immodest. | No labor-saving machine
cannot be shaken away. | I am the poet of the Body and I am the