

# Pre- & Post-visit Materials for Teachers

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*Glenn Ligon: AMERICA*  
March 10-June 5, 2011



# WHITNEY

**Education**  
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## About these Materials

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### How can these materials be used?

These materials provide a framework for preparing you and your students for a visit to the exhibition and offer suggestions for follow up classroom reflection and lessons. The discussions and activities introduce some of the exhibition's key themes and concepts.

p. 3	At the Museum
p. 5	About the Exhibition
p. 6	Pre- & Post-visit Activities
p. 11	About the Artist
p. 12	Related Information
p. 13	Bibliography & Links

Which grade levels are these pre- and post-visit materials intended for?

These lessons and activities have been written for Middle, or High School students. We encourage you to adapt and build upon them in order to meet your teaching objectives and students' needs.

### Learning standards

The projects and activities in these curriculum materials address national and state learning standards for the arts, English language arts, social studies, and technology.

Links to National Learning Standards.

<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>

Comprehensive guide to National Learning Standards by content area.

<http://www.education-world.com/standards/national/index.shtml>

New York State Learning Standards.

<http://www.nysatl.nysed.gov/standards.html>

<http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/standards.html>

New York City Department of Education's Blueprint for Teaching and Learning in the Arts, grades K-12.

<http://schools.nyc.gov/offices/teachlearn/arts/blueprint.html>

### Feedback

Please let us know what you think of these materials. How did you use them? What worked or didn't work? Email us at [schoolprograms@whitney.org](mailto:schoolprograms@whitney.org).

For more information about our programs and resources for schools, educators, teens, and families, please visit [whitney.org/Education](http://whitney.org/Education).

**Cover image:** Glenn Ligon (b. 1960), *Rückenfigur*, 2009. Neon and paint, 24 × 145 in. (61 × 368.3 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from the Paint and Sculpture Committee T.2010.71

## At the Museum

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### Guided visits

We invite you and your students to visit the Whitney to see the exhibition, *Glenn Ligon: AMERICA*. To schedule a visit, please visit [whitney.org/education/k12](http://whitney.org/education/k12). Guided visits are hour-long thematic tours that build upon classroom learning. We introduce students to three to five works of art through careful looking, discussions, and activities that incorporate the artist's voice and process. Museum educators lead inquiry based conversations as well as sketching or writing activities in the galleries.

### Guided Visit Themes

School Programs uses a thematic-based approach to teaching in the galleries. We have updated our themes in order to create more thoughtful connections between K-12 classroom learning and the art on view. When you schedule a guided visit, you will be able to choose one of the following themes.

#### Artist as Observer (K-12)

How do artists represent the world around them? How do they choose to show people and places? This theme can address topics including New York City, community, landscape, and portraiture. This is a great thematic tour for first-time visitors as it incorporates visual literacy skills and introduces students to multiple ways of looking at and talking about art.

#### Artist as Storyteller (K-12)

How do artists tell a story? What is their point of view? This theme addresses ELA concepts such as narrative, tone, character, and setting and is recommended for literacy and writing classes.

#### Artist as Experimenter (K-12)

How do artists push boundaries and explore new concepts? This theme examines how artists experiment with materials, processes, and ideas. Younger students may look at how artists use formal elements such as line, shape, color, texture, and composition, or how they transform everyday objects. Older students may consider more conceptual questions, such as "What makes this art?" and "Why is this in a museum?"

#### Artist as Critic (6-12)

How do artists respond to the social, political, and cultural climate of their time? What does their work tell us about American life and culture? How can art serve as a catalyst for change? Students examine how artists respond to the topics that shape history, politics, and contemporary culture. This thematic tour can address subjects such as current events, war, gender, race, politics, and activism.

## At the Museum (continued)

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### Working with Museum Educators

If you are scheduled for a guided visit, your museum educator will contact you in advance. Let them know what preparatory work you have done, how this connects to the rest of your curricula, and what you would like your visit to focus on. The more you tell them, the better they can prepare for your visit. Please also let them know if your students have any specific needs. If you are visiting during public hours, you and your students (in chaperoned groups) are welcome to stay after your guided tour.

All educators and students who have a guided tour will receive a pass which offers free admission to the Whitney through the end of the school year.

### Self-guided visits

High School students are welcome to visit the museum during public hours in a self-guided capacity. A maximum of 60 students may arrive at the museum together and must then divide into small groups (no more than 4 students) to visit the galleries. One chaperone must accompany 15 students.

Discuss museum rules with students before your visit. We have found that works of art are more accessible if students are provided with some structure or direction, and we recommend giving students a task to complete while in the galleries. You may want to create a worksheet, free-writing or poetry activity, or a sketching assignment. Self-guided visits must be scheduled in advance.

For more information, please visit [whitney.org/education/k12](http://whitney.org/education/k12).

**We look forward to welcoming you and your students to the Whitney!**

## About the Exhibition, *Glenn Ligon: AMERICA*

Glenn Ligon, *Hands*, 1996. Silkscreen and gesso on unstretched canvas, 82 x 144 in. (208.3 x 365.8 cm). Collection



of Eileen Harris Norton, Santa Monica

This first comprehensive mid-career retrospective of New York–based artist Glenn Ligon surveys twenty-five years of his art from his student days in the Whitney Independent Study Program to the present. The exhibition features roughly one hundred works, including paintings, prints, photographs, drawings, video, and sculptural installations, as well as Ligon’s striking recent neon reliefs, one newly commissioned for the Whitney’s Madison Avenue windows. A leading member of a generation of artists who came to the fore in the late 1980s and early ’90s by exploring issues of racial and sexual identity in their work, Ligon (b. 1960) possesses a singular artistic vision that synthesizes questions of identity with key issues from the history of modern painting and more recent conceptual art.

The information in these pre- and post-visit materials is adapted from:

*Glenn Ligon: America* exhibition wall texts and Antenna Audio tour press script.

Scott Rothkopf, *Glenn Ligon AMERICA*, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, distributed by Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2011.

Glenn Ligon, Scott Rothkopf, Editor, *Yourself in the World*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press in Association with Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2011

## Pre-visit Activities

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Before visiting the Whitney, we recommend that you and your students explore and discuss some of the ideas and concepts in the *Glenn Ligon: AMERICA* exhibition. You may want to introduce students to at least one work of art that they will see at the Museum (see the Artist section of this guide for examples of works that may have particular relevance to the classroom).

### Objectives:

- Introduce students to the work of Glenn Ligon
- Prepare students to thoughtfully analyze and discuss works of art
- Ask students to critically reflect upon American history, politics, and culture

### 1. Artist as Critic

“The exhibition is titled *Glenn Ligon: AMERICA* to draw attention to the fact that the artist addresses the concerns not just of black or gay Americans but of all Americans—with our sometimes troubled histories and shared dreams for the future.”

—Scott Rothkopf, curator of the exhibition

Ask your students to create a list of words that describe America. Then ask them to share their lists with the class. What are the words that come up the most? Is there a pattern you notice? Are the words predominantly positive or negative?

As a class, brainstorm a few of America’s ‘troubled histories’ and ‘shared dreams’. How do these histories and dreams correlate to the words used to describe America?

### 2. Artist as Critic

Print out or project Glenn Ligon’s work, *We’re Black and Strong* (for an image and more information, see the image packet that accompanies this guide).

Ligon said, “...in the image that I’ve presented, it’s quite mysterious; you don’t know what hands are being raised to, what the context is. And I think that was about this ambiguity around the march: What were its aims? What was it trying to do? What do we need to raise our hands in that symbolic space again and again to be present in this country? All those things were expressed in that image.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Glenn Ligon, Interview with David Drogin, 2010, <http://www.museomagazine.com/802505/GLENN-LIGON>

## Pre-visit Activities (continued)

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Ask students to look carefully at the image and share the above quotation with them. Lead students in a discussion about the mystery and ambiguity of the image. Ask students to consider the questions raised by Ligon.

Share the following information with your students about the Million Man March. The image, *We're Black and Strong*, is one of several images that Ligon appropriated from media reports about this march, which took place in Washington, DC on October 16, 1995. Touted as an opportunity for black men to proclaim their solidarity while calling for social justice, the march also proved controversial because women were explicitly discouraged from participating and some observers found Farrakhan's rhetoric both homophobic and anti-Semitic. Discuss whether this information changes students' initial responses to the work. In what ways?

### 3. Artist as Critic

Ligon said, "One of the things that I've always been interested in was the connection or collision of identities—that something written by [Zora Neale] Hurston in the 20s could seem incredibly relevant and autobiographical in some sense, that one could inhabit it..."<sup>2</sup>

Ask students to think about a book they have read, a song they have listened to, or a speech they have heard, that they related to, even if it was from a different time, place, or culture. Ask students to share what the book, song or speech is about. Why do they feel that connection?

### 4. Artist as Experimenter

For his print portfolio *Runaways*, Ligon adopted the format of posters that slave owners used in the mid-nineteenth century to advertise their escaped property. The series of ten prints offer verbal portraits of the artist in place of the runaway slaves. The descriptions were written by ten friends who described him as if they were filing a missing persons report to the police.

Print out or project Glenn Ligon's *Runaways* series in the image packet. Ask students to compare the description of the person in each print. In what ways are they similar? In what ways are they different? What is the relationship between the graphics and the text? How does one inform the other?

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<sup>2</sup> Glenn Ligon, Interview with David Drogin, 2010, <http://www.museomagazine.com/802505/GLENN-LIGON>

## Pre-visit Activities (continued)

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According to Ligon, “those descriptions varied so widely that they sort of called into question the notion of a unified identity. It was really about each person’s take on what my identity was and using the totality of the descriptions as a way of thinking about what identity mean.”<sup>3</sup>

Share Ligon’s quotation above with your students. Ask them to consider how they may speak and act differently with different people—parents and relatives, classmates and teachers, and among friends. Are there changes in tone of voice and shifts in posture? Why? Is there a difference between how they see themselves and how other people see them?

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid*



# Post-visit Activities

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## Objectives

- Enable students to reflect upon and discuss some of the ideas and themes from the exhibition.
- Ask students to further explore some of Ligon's approaches through art-making and writing activities.

### 1. Museum Visit Reflection

After your museum visit, ask students to take a few minutes to write about their experience. What do they remember most? What did they learn about Glenn Ligon—his ideas, materials, and processes? How do Ligon's experiences and concerns relate to their own? What new ideas did the exhibition give them? What other questions do they have? Ask students to share their thoughts with the class.

### 2. Artist as Critic

Much of Ligon's work reflects upon his own experiences and history. However, his hope is that it addresses the concerns of all Americans, regardless of their backgrounds.

#### Discussion and Action

Drawing from what students have learnt in Social Studies class about American history, politics, and culture, ask them to discuss some shared experiences that all Americans have. You could divide students into smaller groups to work on this project: ask students to identify a current event or issue (local, national or global) that affects our lives now. Challenge them to think creatively about how they can draw attention to these events and issues, and inspire others to make a difference. For example, they might create a poster, write a speech, start a blog, or make a Facebook page.

### 3. Artist as Critic and Experimenter

Throughout his career, Ligon has largely resisted the use of imagery in his paintings and avoided explicitly tackling current events. One notable exception, however, is his body of work related to the Million Man March, where he scoured news images, enlarging some of them with a photocopier until fine details yielded to coarse granularity.

#### Zoom, Crop, Blur, Erase

Ask students to scour newspapers and magazines for an image that interests them. Scan the image into a computer. Alternatively, students can download images from online newspapers and magazines. Using any software that allows students to manipulate the image (Microsoft Photo Editor, Adobe Photoshop, etc), ask students to alter the image in different ways and consider how the manipulations may change the original intention of the image.

## Post-visit Activities

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### 4. Artist as Experimenter

Ligon experimented with different ways of making self-portraits, for example, in his *Runaways* prints. In another series of prints, Ligon pushes the limits of self-portraiture by representing himself through images of celebrities such as Stevie Wonder and Michael Jackson, with whom he identified at different ages.

#### Create a Self-Portrait

Challenge students to create a self-portrait without using an image of themselves. Ask students to consider using found images, appropriating texts, or adopting familiar formats such as magazine covers and newspaper columns. What do these found images, appropriated texts, and/or familiar formats reveal about themselves? What do they intend to disclose and what may be misleading?

### 5. Artist as Experimenter

Ask students to select and research one of the following artists who use text in his or her work and compare it to Ligon's text-based work. Students can visit [whitney.org/Collection](http://whitney.org/Collection) to find images of these artists' works:

Vito Acconci, Mel Bochner, Samuel Durant, Joseph Grigely, Jenny Holzer, Corita Kent, Barbara Kruger, Bruce Nauman, Ed Ruscha, Lorna Simpson, Lawrence Weiner, and David Wojnarowicz.

### 6. Go Digital

If computers and the Internet are available to you and your students, use online resources for student projects and assignments. Make a blog (<http://www.blogger.com/home>) or Flickr set (<http://www.flickr.com>) for student work. Include the assignment instructions and use the text and image features for student work. For student work, you may want to use Blurb, (<http://www.blurb.com>), a site for creating and producing books.

## About the Artist, Glenn Ligon (b. 1960)

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“You have to be a bit outside of something to see it. I think any artist does that. It’s an artist’s job to always have their antennas up.”<sup>4</sup>  
—Glenn Ligon

For more than twenty-five years, Glenn Ligon has incisively explored American history, literature, and society, producing a body of work that builds critically on the legacies of modern painting and more recent conceptual art. Ligon’s subject matter ranges widely from the Million Man March and the aftermath of slavery to 1970s coloring books and the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe—all treated within artworks that are both provocative and beautiful to behold.

Glenn Ligon was born and raised in the Bronx. He excelled at art as a child, studied painting in college, and began his career as an abstract painter. Then in 1985, his work underwent a dramatic change. Ligon entered the Whitney Museum’s Independent Study Program, which emphasized more conceptual approaches to art making. Growing increasingly frustrated with what he saw as the limitations of abstract painting, he began to incorporate text in his paintings as a way of introducing new subject matter and a broad range of references into his work. He then developed what would become his signature style through the use of stencils that lent physicality to his text-based painting. Since that time, text has become a vital part of Ligon’s work, and he has used it in an astonishing variety of ways. As he recalls:

When I first started making art, painting was one of the few spaces in my life where I felt free. I was into abstract expressionism—with an emphasis on expressionism. I had a crisis of sorts when I realized that there was too much of a gap between what I wanted to say and the means I had to say it with.<sup>5</sup>  
—Glenn Ligon

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<sup>4</sup> Carol Vogel, “the Inside Story on Outsiderness,” *The New York Times*, February 24, 2011. [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/27/arts/design/27ligon.html?\\_r=3&ref=arts](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/27/arts/design/27ligon.html?_r=3&ref=arts)

<sup>5</sup> Byron Kim, “An Interview with Glenn Ligon,” in *Glenn Ligon: Unbecoming*, Judith Tannenbaum, exh. cat. (Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art, 1998), 51.

## Related Information

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Glenn Ligon  
*Untitled (I Do Not Always Feel Colored)*, 1990  
Oil stick, gesso, and graphite on panel  
80 x 30 in. (203.2 x 76.2 cm)  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;  
Gift of The Bohlen Foundation in honor of  
Thomas N. Armstrong III 2001.275

Ligon's work has incorporated texts from wide-ranging sources, including the writings of James Baldwin, Jean Genet, and Zora Neale Hurston, as well as pornography, theoretical tracts, and the comedy routines of Richard Pryor. Once unmoored from their contexts, these words come to function as a subject of Ligon's art and also as its visual interest. Rendered in smudgy oil stick, crisp type, glowing neon, or sparkling coal dust, they become paintings, photographs, prints, and sculpture. Ligon has also used found images in his work to explore what it means to be an individual, and what it means to be part of a group. He has returned to these questions again and again over the course of his career, often exploring the thorny issues of identity in relation to race, sexuality, and gender. This breadth of material reminds us that Ligon's work is a not only a meditation on American society but also a reflection on the very nature of art, on the differences between reading and looking, legibility and abstraction, knowing and feeling.

## Bibliography & Links

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Glenn Ligon, Scott Rothkopf, Editor, *Yourself in the World*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press in Association with Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2011.

Scott Rothkopf, *Glenn Ligon AMERICA*, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, distributed by Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2011.

[http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/ligon\\_glenn.html](http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/ligon_glenn.html)

Artcyclopedia link for Glenn Ligon.

[http://www.cincinnatiartmuseum.org/absolutenm/articlefiles/365-Glenn%20Ligon%20-%20Untitled%20\(I%20Am%20An%20Invisible%20Man\).pdf](http://www.cincinnatiartmuseum.org/absolutenm/articlefiles/365-Glenn%20Ligon%20-%20Untitled%20(I%20Am%20An%20Invisible%20Man).pdf)

Cincinnati Art Museum's teacher guide for Glenn Ligon.

<http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/Ligon/LigonEssay.html>

Essay about Glenn Ligon's work by Richard Meyer.

[http://www.jjuriaan.com/How\\_It\\_Feels\\_to\\_be\\_Colored\\_Me.pdf](http://www.jjuriaan.com/How_It_Feels_to_be_Colored_Me.pdf)

Zora Neale Hurston's essay, "How It Feels To Be Colored Me."

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/brownbox/brownbox.html>

Narrative of Henry Box Brown.

<https://pantherfile.uwm.edu/gjay/www/Whiteness/stranger.htm>

James Baldwin, *Stranger in the Village*.

<http://www.museomagazine.com/802505/GLENN-LIGON>

Interview with Glenn Ligon by David Drogin.

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/aaworld/timeline.html>

Timeline of African American history, from the 1400s to the present.

<http://www.sfmoma.org/multimedia/videos/63>

Glenn Ligon discusses his exhibition *Glenn Ligon: Day of Absence*.

## Credits

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The exhibition is accompanied by a substantial monograph, published in association with Yale University Press, with an essay by curator Scott Rothkopf considering the artist's entire career, a text exploring the themes of literature and democracy in Ligon's art by the distinguished curator and critic Okwui Enwezor, and contributions by Columbia University professor Saidiya Hartman, *New Yorker* staff writer Hilton Als, LACMA curator Franklin Sirmans, and LA MOCA curator Bennett Simpson. The exhibition travels to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in the fall of 2011.

Curated by Scott Rothkopf.