

30

History with a Small “h”

A Conversation with Glenn Ligon

RACHEL MIDDLEMAN

In “History with a Small ‘h’” Rachel Middleman, a PhD candidate in Art History at the University of Southern California, interviews Glenn Ligon, a multimedia artist who interrogates intersections of race and sexuality. Ligon discusses how his artistic project Lest We Forget works against the common practice of memorializing one version of a historically significant event. He memorializes ordinary, ambiguous moments of gay male cruising, demonstrating how to conduct history (with a small “h”) and to use such histories to potentially disrupt public memory. This exchange originally appeared in a 2006 issue of GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies.

The publication of this interview with the artist Glenn Ligon coincides with his current midcareer exhibition, “Glenn Ligon: Some Changes,” which opened in 2005 at the Power Plant in Toronto.¹ Ligon remains best known for his conceptual text paintings, which explore the construction of identities through language and representation. The work documented here, *Lest We Forget* (1998), is a rarely exhibited, somewhat ephemeral addition to his oeuvre. Ligon conceived the series during a two-month residency at Artpace San Antonio in Texas. There he created metal plaques inscribed with personal anecdotes about cruising and desire. He installed the plaques in the public space of the city where they visually resembled the historical markers found in abundance in the downtown

tourist area. He then photographed them and left them behind to be discovered, stolen, or removed by whoever encountered them subsequently. The plaques have since disappeared, but the photographs he took of them in situ and a second set of the plaques remain and were exhibited at Artpace in 1998. I had the opportunity to talk with Ligon in February 2005 about how *Lest We Forget* relates to his larger body of work, his process in making the series, and how it challenges received ideas of history, identity, and communication.

RACHEL MIDDLEMAN: How did this project, *Lest We Forget*, begin for you?

GLENN LIGON: At Artpace there wasn't a mandate to do projects that were specifically geared toward San Antonio, but there was definitely a sense that they wanted some kind of interaction with the city. And I guess I just took that literally. I thought I should use what was available, and I found out that the bronze plaque makers were in Texas, right in San Antonio. I don't know if you've ever been to San Antonio, but basically it's a tourist town. Artpace is on the edge of downtown near the River Walk, and I was very aware of that being a tourist neighborhood and having all these historic markers—they're everywhere. Also, I don't drive, so that was another factor in the project. I walked around a lot. All those things came together to start me thinking about doing a project using bronze plaques. And as for the texts themselves . . . I mean the truth is sort of funny there. Like the one where I'm talking about meeting a guy and I said something like, "shuffling a little bit, a little something-something between us," but I don't know exactly what happened. Maybe nothing happened. The plaques read like you're in somebody's head, but the actual interaction between me and whoever it was is ambiguous.

RM: What did you imagine someone passing by would think when they read the plaques?

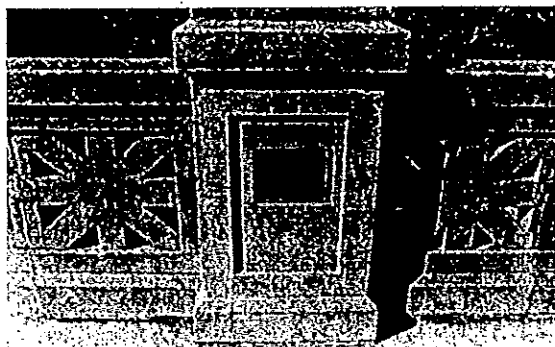


Figure 1. Glenn Ligon, "Hunky Guy," *Lest We Forget* (1998). All photographs courtesy of the artist

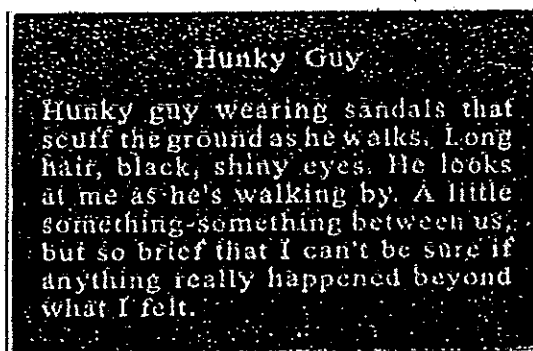


Figure 2. Glenn Ligon, "Hunky Guy" (detail)

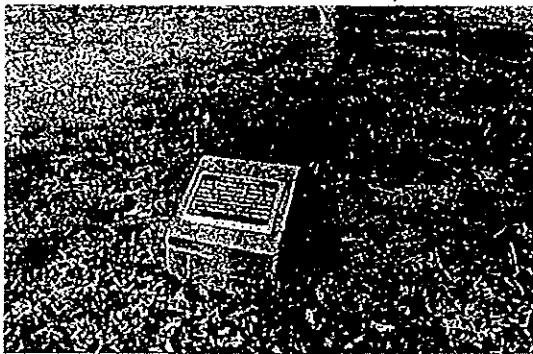


Figure 3. Glenn Ligon, "A Guy in Uniform," Lest We Forget

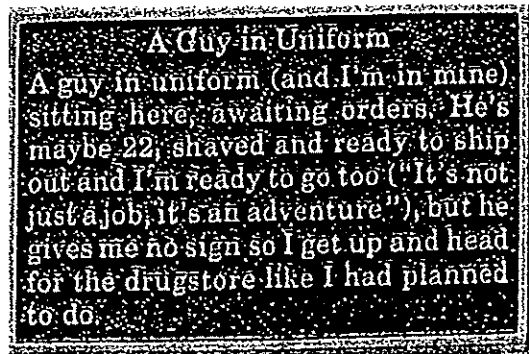


Figure 4. Glenn Ligon, "A Guy in Uniform" (detail)

GL: First of all, I wasn't sure that people would read them at all. Imagine a public park that has this plaque on a concrete pedestal and there are five other things like that in the park. The form of the plaque was just mimicking what was already there. They are so ubiquitous I don't think anyone really reads them anymore. It was funny to imagine how they could just be there forever without being noticed, or, if they were read, it would be because they were at odd sites like the side of the bus station. I wanted people to think about uses of public spaces, particularly queer uses of public spaces, because there was some cruising going on in the downtown area. Not that I ever really saw it in any sustained way, but it was supposedly there. I was thinking that rock plaques are about the official record and asking what it would mean to do things that were in the same language but were about the temporary, the transient, and the illicit. And even beyond that, about things that were so ephemeral maybe they didn't even really happen, things that don't really leave a trace.

RM: I see a humor in that, too, because it's not what you expect to read on a metal plaque. It's not commemorating some historical event, and we don't know if the event even took place. Monuments are intended to remember the past, but that is something that we can never fully grasp. Where was *A Guy in Uniform* placed?

GL: That was Travis Park, which is about five blocks from Artpace. All the other plaques in the park look like that. I think they were soldier monuments, but I'm not really sure. The "D" from one of the plaques is my friend Dario Robleto. He's an artist who lived in San Antonio, and he helped me make this project. I thought we should install it at night, but he suggested going out during the day because I wanted to photograph it. We just walked out there in the middle of the day and put it down. It's amazing what you can do if you act like you know what you're doing.

RM: You took the photographs yourself?

GL: Yes.

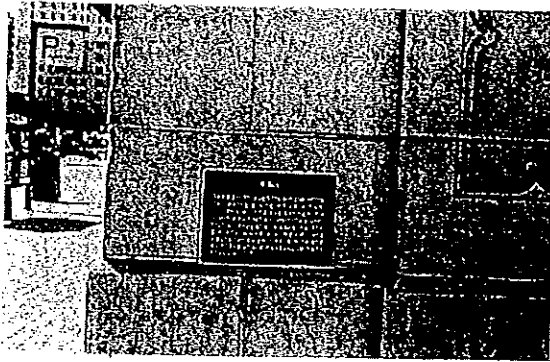


Figure 5. Glenn Ligon, "A Boy," Lest We Forget

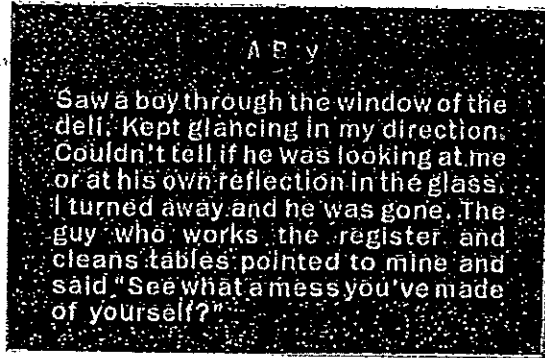


Figure 6. Glenn Ligon, "A Boy" (detail)

RM: And did you see what happened to the plaques?

GL: No. I think some lasted about a week. *A Guy in Uniform* weighed one hundred pounds. So it's not like someone was going to pick it up. It was probably someone from the parks department who eventually figured it out. But I don't know what happened to them.

RM: Did you have an audience? Did you draw any attention?

GL: Nope.

RM: How do you think humor plays into this work?

GL: I don't think I thought about it when I was writing them up. The experience was real, but the writing up was influenced by other things. Honestly with *A Boy*, I was thinking about the Narcissus myth. I was reading myths at the time, and I was particularly interested in doing a project around Narcissus. That whole question about whether he's looking at himself in the glass or looking at another person or not is filtered through the Narcissus myth. I was just reading this text *Vertigo* by the German writer W. G. Sebald, and he talks about this guy who's trying to remember a battle scene and the landscape. He draws this memory map for himself—it's diagrammed in the book—and at a certain point he realizes that the map corresponds directly to an etching he had seen. Basically, it's about how visual images take over one's memories. I was thinking about that because you were talking about the unreliability of memory, and I think it's interesting that images sometimes replace one's memory. Also, my memories are sort of tied up with reading the Narcissus myth, and so what I'm writing about in the plaque is being partially structured by the structure of that myth.

RM: *Lest We Forget* was exhibited with some of the *Stranger in the Village* series. Did you also do those while you were in San Antonio?²

GL: Yes, they were done at the same time.

RM: Did you see a relationship between the two projects?

GL: There is a tangential relationship between the two because the *Stranger* paintings are so much about defeat or frustration. I shouldn't say defeat

... the end of communicating in a way. And the plaques are about starting to communicate and making something visible that may not be visible to people. That's one way to connect them. I notice I've done a lot of projects that are very clear for lack of a better word. I did a series of rubbings [*Schwartzmannstrasse Drawing*] of a street sign when I was in Munich. The street was called Schwartzmannstrasse, "black man's street," and that was the street that I actually lived on when I was in Munich doing a residency. I did some research and found out a Jewish family from the turn of the century had the alley named after them when they gave some money to the government. I liked that there was this weird misapprehension of what that sign meant. Suddenly it was about me because I was living there, but it wasn't about me at all. But people didn't know the history or anything about that family. Some of my projects are much more about trying to communicate, and the paintings are more about the difficulty of language.

RM: I did get a sense of difficulty in communication with *Lest We Forget* because of the events you choose to describe. They're not about actually meeting a person or having some kind of relationship with them. They're only what you [Ligon] think happened.

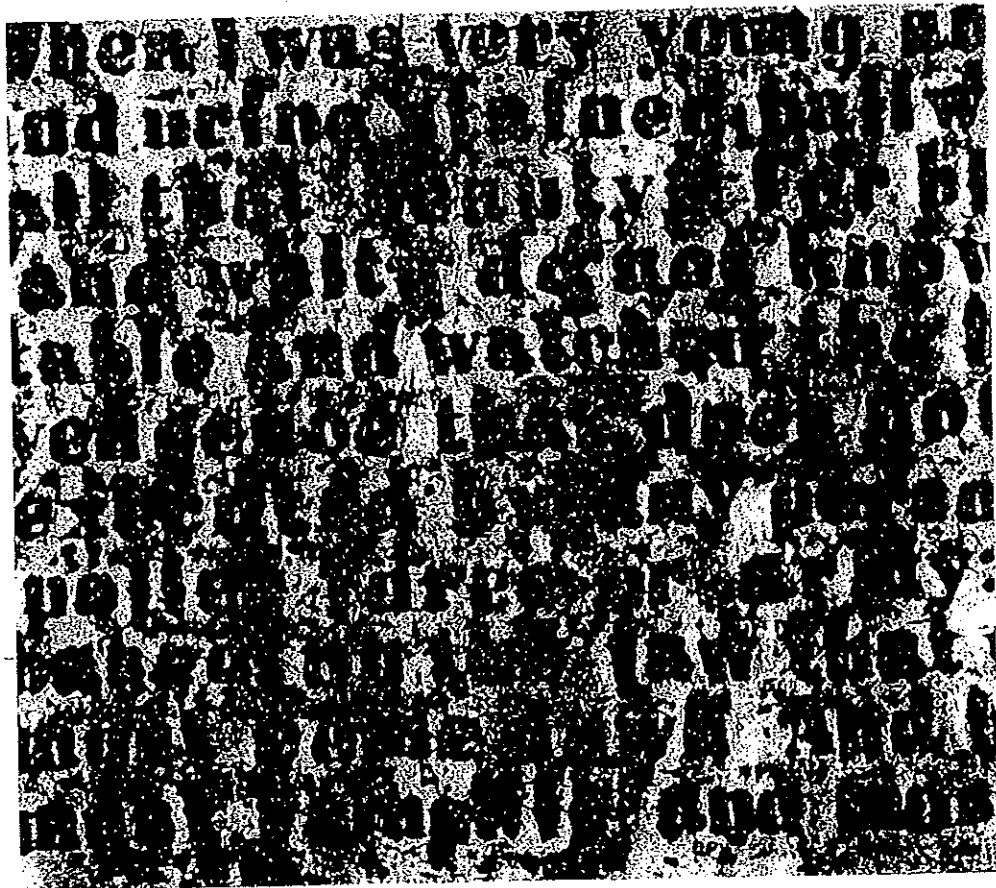


Figure 7. Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (The Fire Next Time/Hands #1)* (2000), ink, glue, and coal dust over screen print. St. Louis Art Museum, Museum Minority Artists Purchase Fund

- GL: Yeah, there's no connection. I guess I'm not very good at cruising! I think the piece is about facts. Plaques are about facts, though those facts are always contested. If you read the plaques at the Alamo, you know there is a whole other story there that is not represented. I wanted to be true to my encounters, which were about, "well, I didn't really connect with this guy," and also put the facts in all those plaques into question.
- RM: The plaques don't necessarily say that nothing came of the encounter, but the assumption is there. Of course, I don't know what really happened; maybe you went and introduced yourself.
- GL: That's an interesting way to think about it because it's about memorializing a moment, but it doesn't memorialize the before and after. I think historical plaques are trying to memorialize the whole event. "This happened on this spot. Here are the players involved. This changed history, and we're marking this spot." But my plaques are more about, "Something happened here. I'm not sure if it was what it was exactly. And did it have an effect on those people after? I'm not sure." They are much more about the ephemeral.
- RM: I was thinking that you could read the work two ways: as being about the more general search for recognition from another person and the missed connections that happen between people all the time, or more specifically it could be about the idea of remapping the city through an experience of cruising. How did you find the cruising spots?
- GL: People who lived there told me. San Antonio has a big gay population, so I knew something had to be going on somewhere. I was told that sometimes the park and the River Walk at night are downtown cruising spots. But another part of it was that I had to walk in order not to be dependent on the staff at Artpace. There was an art supply place and a bookstore I could walk to.
- RM: How did you come up with the title *Lest We Forget*?
- GL: It was on a monument in the town. I don't remember what it was a monument to, though; it might have been a Civil War monument. It was carved on the granite base. It's funny because it sounds kind of romantic and nineteenth century.
- RM: There is something poetic about the word *lest*. It lends a feeling of importance. Why is it that we shouldn't forget what you describe in the plaques?
- GL: I guess there has to be room for history with a small "h." All the other bronze plaques are about the big "H," the official history.
- RM: How many plaques were made?
- GL: I think there were actually five. There was another one that was on a bench right outside Artpace.³

- RM: How did you imagine the relationship between the gallery exhibit and the plaques out in public space?
- GL: As documentation I wanted to create the sense of an important thing that had been out in the world but was already gone. Because the sites were around Artpace, you could figure out the locations. People would imagine that if they went there they would see the plaque, but actually it had already disappeared. I wanted a way to indicate what had been there. It's kind of ridiculous to put up a bronze plaque and let it be stolen. I kind of liked that, so much of the work was about the disappearance of that thing. Again, part of that may have been the people who are in charge of places like the bus station. It lasted there I think about three days, and then someone read it and realized it wasn't supposed to be there. Or maybe they didn't, and it just fell off because they're not attached permanently at all.
- RM: How did you adhere the plaques?
- GL: Double-sided tape. And they're bronze. So that's a lot of tape.
- RM: I was thinking about how you were saying that you didn't know if people would even notice them. This brought to my mind the difference between sanctioned public art and a more interventionist type of public art. This seems to me like it's not entirely either. It wasn't sanctioned because you just put it out there; and, at the same time, it doesn't demand attention or disrupt public space the way some interventionist art can. But I liked the subtlety of that. It's not that every single person who passes by is going to receive a particular message from Glenn Ligon.
- GL: Yeah, I think that is what the activities that are being documented in my plaques are about. That's why you're looking at someone looking into the window of a deli and you have no idea whether he's really looking at you (well, sometimes you do!). You don't really know if he's interested in you. You don't know what his sexuality is. It seemed to me that cruising is about the risk of misreading something. Or it could be one-sided if the person is not who you think he is, or he's not interested. Or he is who you think he is, but he's not interested! Also it happens surreptitiously initially,

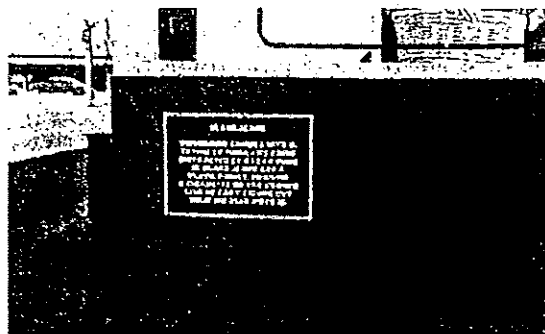


Figure 8. Glenn Ligon, "Black Jeans," Lest We Forget

even if people are going out to cruise each other. It's happening in public spaces but has to remain undercover at the same time. So I think the plaques have to be about this "notice me, don't notice me." They have to remain a bit obscure. They have to mimic, to look like other things, like cruising in public space has to look like you're just going to the bathroom or like you're just reading your book on the bench. As for the questions of the race and gender of the person speaking in the plaques, I didn't think it through that way, that's the way the text came out. But it's interesting to have to think about these things more, afterward.

RM: I think it's interesting to look at it both ways. I don't want to ignore where the work is coming from, but the first time I read this [the plaques] I couldn't assign it immediately to a particular identity. I was trying to look at it both knowing who the artist is and as an anonymous text as if I were a passerby.

GL: The problem of art historians! How to decide what's relevant. Is the biography relevant? Or how do you deal with biography without determining the work? The work is "x" because he's "x."

RM: I really like the idea of putting something so personal into a public form of address, especially if you never really know if it's truth or fiction.

GL: It's interesting because people imagine that art can't be acted. The part one plays in a movie is not the actor; it's the part. Art can do that, too, sometimes. The plaques point to it more than other works. I think there has always been this strain in my work. It's seemingly autobiographical but always about quotation, someone else's text, or someone else's description of me. It's always mediated by something so that it's autobiographical and resists autobiography at the same time. But I have to tell you that it's interesting to me to talk about those things as not being sexed and gendered, on my part, because I don't think I wrote thinking that I would not reveal myself in them. It just sort of happened that way. I mean it's sort of funny to me to think of them in retrospect. I don't think I really had any sense of doing that as a strategy when I was writing those texts.

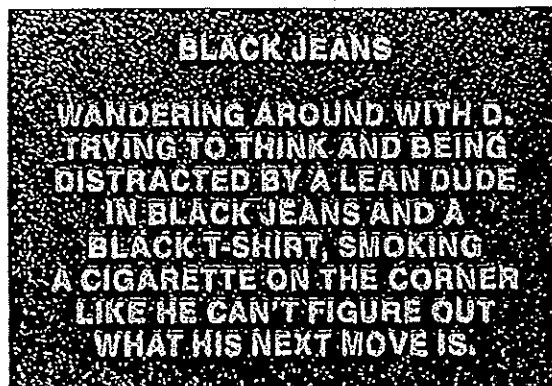


Figure 9. Glenn Ligon, "Black Jeans" (detail)

- RM: I want to go back to something you said before about this work being about making something visible as opposed to the difficulty or frustration of communication in the text paintings. And I wonder if you could say a little more about that.
- GL: This is the first time that I actually wrote something that I used directly for the text. I had always resisted that. Maybe that's why in the text it's hard to locate the person in terms of race and gender. It's the first time I'm actually using my own words, and so I have to sort of hold back from it. Whereas the text paintings hold back because it's already a quotation, it's already someone else's text even though it says "I." It pretends to be the artist's, but it's really a quote. Then there is another level of removal because the text disappears, creating another barrier to the meaning of the text. The plaques were much more direct. The text is quite legible and out in a public place. So in that sense they're about a certain visibility, but in another way they're sort of, as you said, they're so in my head that they're kind of like removed in that sense. Someone daydreaming. It's funny because I hadn't really thought about the work in that way and why it doesn't locate me more specifically. I think partially because so much of my work has been quotation that I felt like I needed to remove the biographical details, even though they seem very autobiographical. It's funny because I think sometimes artists don't know what their work is about. I mean that whole thing about writing the text. . . . it's funny to me . . . but I think that's what keeps you going. I guess I sort of figure things out as I make work, so often those things don't get figured out until after the work is made, and I can say, "That's what that was about."
- RM: I don't think much has been written about this work. Do you know why that is?
- GL: They haven't been exhibited a lot. They were shown at Artpace and at Riverside in a show that Charles Gaines just curated [Remembering, Group Exhibition, Sweeney Art Gallery at the University of California, Riverside, October 1–December 11, 2004].
- RM: Where is *Lest We Forget* now?
- GL: Under my bed. In the studio.

Endnotes

This interview was occasioned by a paper on Glenn Ligon's *Lest We Forget* written for a graduate seminar, "Twentieth-Century Art in Public and Private," taught by Richard Meyer at the University of Southern California in the fall of 2004.

1. "Glenn Ligon: Some Changes" is traveling to the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston (January 14–April 19, 2006); the Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh (September 30–December 31, 2006); the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio (January 27–April 22, 2007); and Mudam—Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, Luxembourg (October 6–December 17, 2007). Co-curators

of the exhibition are Wayne Baerwaldt (formerly of the Power Plant) and Thelma Golden (Studio Museum in Harlem, New York).

2. This series includes text taken from James Baldwin's essay "Stranger in the Village" (1953). Ligon's layering of text and materials, including coal dust, creates a luminescent field of gray and black in which Baldwin's words become almost illegible. Ligon creates a similar effect in *Untitled (The Fire Next Time/Hands #1)* (fig. 7), which also borrows text from Baldwin.
3. An image of the fifth plaque was not available for reproduction.