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Glenn Ligon on His “Encounters and Collisions” in Nottingham

BY NICHOLAS FORREST | APRIL 10, 2015


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Glenn Ligon
(Paul Sepuya)

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Glenn Ligon

“Encounters and Collisions” at Nottingham Contemporary is quite an unusual exhibition. Not only does it feature works by distinguished American artist [Glenn Ligon](#), it is also curated by him. Developed as a kind of ideal museum as seen by Ligon, the exhibition features works by almost 50 artists who have influenced him or with whom he feels an affinity – artists such as Willem de Kooning, Andy Warhol, Bruce Nauman and David Hammons to Steve McQueen, Lorna Simpson, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and Chris Ofili.

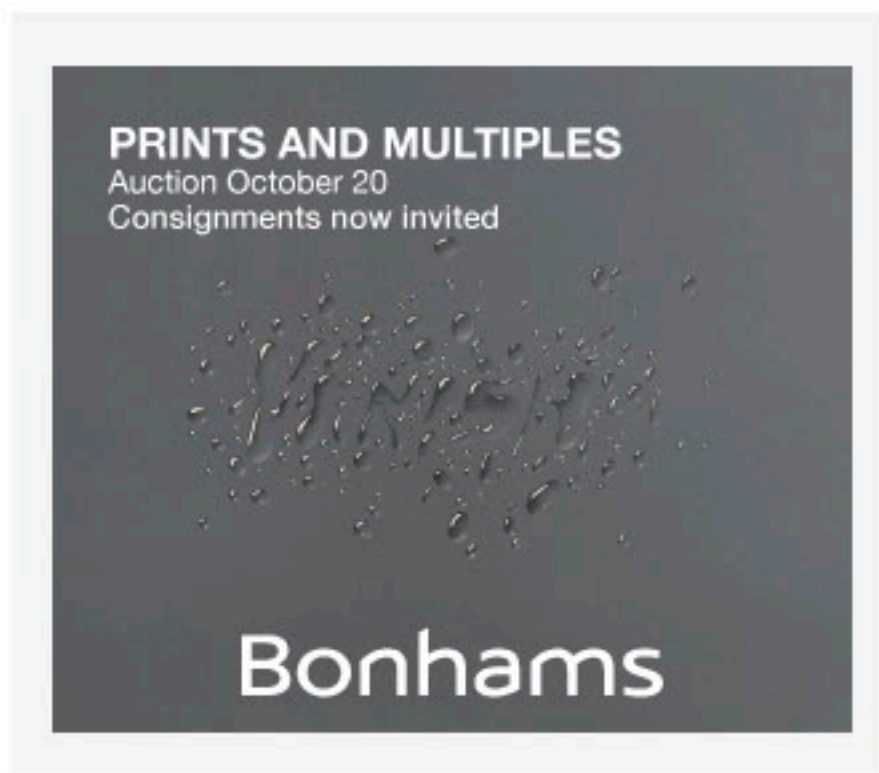
In particular, “Encounters and Collisions” reconnects “Postwar American art history with its wider political and cultural contexts,” according to Nottingham Contemporary. Explaining the basis of inspiration behind the exhibition, Ligon himself said: “The exhibition is an attempt to create a space that positions my work as a series of dialogues with other artists and histories, encouraging the viewer to consider how these dialogues profoundly shaped the artworks I have made over the course of my career.”

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According to Alex Farquharson, Director of Nottingham Contemporary, [Glenn Ligon](#)'s work has long been concerned with encounters and collisions with the work of other artists and writers, and with culture and history more generally. "His is a practice built from hypothetical dialogues with others. Encounters and Collisions will be a unique opportunity to see Ligon's own personal art history brought to life in a single exhibition and will reveal the larger, submerged part of the proverbial iceberg of his celebrated practice," said Farquharson.

To find out more about this intriguing collaboration, BLOUIN ARTINFO got in touch with [Glenn Ligon](#) and asked him a few questions about the exhibition.

How did you end up as both participating artist and curator of "[Glenn Ligon: Encounters and Collisions](#)" at Nottingham Contemporary?

In 2011 "Yourself in the World", a book of my writings and interviews, was published in conjunction with a retrospective of my work at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Alex Farquharson read the essays and interviews in the book and thought an interesting curatorial project could be developed around the artists I write about and other artists that have been important to my practice. He approached me to collaborate with him on that project and I agreed.

What was the motivation and catalyst for the exhibition?

The aim of the exhibition is to make explicit what museum audiences perhaps already know: that artists don't work in isolation and their work is the result of a series of dialogues with and reactions to the work of other artists. In addition, I want the exhibition to make clear that artists are as much a product of a particular social and cultural environment as anyone else and that comes out in the work we make. The way we are enacting in the exhibition that notion of a back and forth between artists is to bring my work into the same space as those artists who have influenced me. I am also including work by artists who I don't know well but that I want to have more of a dialogue with.

What criteria did you use to select the works by the other artists in the exhibition and what do these works reveal about your own work?

Some work was chosen -- de Kooning, Kline and Pollock, for example -- because it was important to me when I first started my career as an artist and has remained touchstones in certain ways for the paintings I produce. My black and white and black on black text paintings, for example, come out of thinking about the Abstract Expressionists, although the use of text in the work was influenced by artists such as Jasper Johns and Adrian Piper, who were not part of that group. Other work was chosen because it is the work of my peers. Artists such as Lorna Simpson, Zoe Leonard, Byron Kim and Stephen Andrews and I are around the same age and I know them personally. The discussions I have had with them over the years have influenced the work that I have made throughout my career.

Could you explain the significance of the title of the exhibition and what it means to you in the context of your own practice?

The title of the exhibition, “Encounters and Collisions,” is taken from a small tapestry by Alighiero Boetti. The text in that work seemed to exemplify what the artistic process is: discovering something, say the work of David Hammons, and then butting heads with it, deconstructing it, trying to make something out of it that is not the same thing but is deeply indebted to it.

Which of your own works did you choose to include in the exhibition and why did you choose those particular works?

I included a coal dust painting from the Stranger in the Village series because the text comes from an important essay by James Baldwin. That painting is in dialogue with Beauford Delaney, who was an African American artist who lived in Paris at the same time Baldwin was there in the mid 1950s and 1960 and did many portraits of him. I also included it because of its relationship to conceptual work, such as Felix Gonzales Torres’, who was always interested in meshing the personal with the social and political. Martin Wong’s obsessively painted canvases depicting cityscapes also have a formal relationship to the Stranger paintings, as well as being related in content.

Another work in the show is Untitled (America), 2006, a black painted neon that is the first in a series of neons using the word “America”. This piece is in conversation with Bruce Nauman’s neon work, of course, as well as work by David Hammons, Cady Noland, Stephen Andrews and Joseph Beuys, artists who all comment on the American experience. The exhibition features a further nine works of mine in various media.

What did you learn about your own practice during the curatorial process?

What I realized is that my interest in literature has more deeply structured my practice than I thought. This is why the catalogue for the exhibition contains many texts by novelists and cultural critics, whose words have helped shape the work I have made.

What was the most difficult aspect of your dual role in the exhibition and why was it the most difficult?

The most difficult part was realizing that any exhibition is a series of hard choices – compromises even – that one has to make as a curator. Given infinite resources, infinite space and infinite time this would have been a very different exhibition as I would have included more work by each artist and more personal material in the form of ephemera from the studio or my home. I worked on this exhibition for two years but I still see Encounters and Collisions as a starting point to understand my practice. It is neither comprehensive nor definitive.

Encounters and Collisions is an exhibition curated by [Glenn Ligon](#). A partnership between Nottingham Contemporary and Tate Liverpool. It continues at Nottingham Contemporary until 14 June, and will be presented at Tate Liverpool from 30 June to 18 October 2