



**Artists Documentation Program  
Video Interview Transcript**

**GLENN LIGON**

**May 2, 2011**

**Interviewed by:**

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## About the Artists Documentation Program

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, artists have experimented with an unprecedented range of new materials and technologies. The conceptual concerns underlying much of contemporary art render its conservation more complex than simply arresting physical change. As such, the artist's voice is essential to future conservation and presentation of his or her work.

In 1990, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded a grant to the Menil Collection for Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, then Chief Conservator, to establish the Artists Documentation Program (ADP). Since that time, the ADP has recorded artists speaking candidly with conservators in front of their works. These engaging and informative interviews capture artists' attitudes toward the aging of their art and those aspects of its preservation that are of paramount importance to them.

The ADP has recorded interviews with such important artists as Frank Stella, Jasper Johns, and Cy Twombly. Originally designed for use by conservators and scholars at the Menil, the ADP has begun to appeal to a broader audience outside the Menil, and the collection has grown to include interviews from two partner institutions: the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art, Harvard Art Museums. In 2009, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded a grant to the Menil Collection to establish the ADP Archive, formalizing the multi-institutional partnership and making ADP interviews more widely available to researchers.

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**[Speakers (in order of appearance): Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Chief Conservator, The Menil Collection; Glenn Ligon, Artist; Matthew Skopek, Assistant Conservator, Whitney Museum of American Art]**

**[BEGIN INTERVIEW]**

**[00:00:50]**

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Today is May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011. And I'm here with Glenn Ligon in his exhibition at the Whitney Museum, called "America" ["Glenn Ligon: America," Whitney Museum of American Art, March 10-June 5, 2011].

**[00:01:00]**

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So we are going to discuss materiality, and your use of it. And this an early place where it started. [*No. 417 (Sweetheart)*, 1988; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; promised gift of Emily Fisher Landau P.2010.184; *No. 167 (Sailors)*, 1989, Private collection; *No. 752 (Colored People)*, 1990, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; promised gift of Emily Fisher Landau P.2010.188]

Glenn Ligon: Right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: But clearly, even in this room, it was very apparent that it had, it was something very much in your mind.

Glenn Ligon: Well, I think it's because I was interested in Abstract Expressionism. So, in a lot of the works in this room, the paint application was derived from looking at [Philip] Gustons and the [Willem De] Koonings, and you know, those. Those were the heroes. And so that's why they have these very, sort of brushy, abstract backgrounds.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Mm-hmm. Very much to do with the brush, the hand.

Glenn Ligon: Right, exactly.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Mm-hmm.

Glenn Ligon: And the stenciling on top was, you know, different content. (laughs)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Different, different what?

Glenn Ligon: Getting a different content than the abstract work I was doing prior to this. So these were done—it's so interesting, that I haven't really thought about them in 25 years.

(laughter)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's true, yeah.

Glenn Ligon: Well, not quite 25 years. I guess it's more like 20 years.

**[00:02:25]**

Glenn Ligon: So, I think that these have an acrylic wash in the background, which is maybe what you're seeing...

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: [inaudible]

Glenn Ligon: ...yes.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Uh-huh.

Glenn Ligon: And then, just a way to protect the paper, and then the oil goes on top. I don't remember the brands, but probably fairly cheap. (laughs)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: The fluidity of the brush was an important part of this?

Glenn Ligon: Yes.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And the oil paint?

Glenn Ligon: Right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: As opposed to acrylic?

Glenn Ligon: Right, right. And the letters were stenciled with oil stick, and the brand, I think, was Shiva. And that has some issues, because it's a cheap brand. But it has a lot of wax in it, so it held the letter form. So that's why I used it.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I see. So you would just use the oil stick on the stencil, and then it would set up right away?

Glenn Ligon: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah.

Glenn Ligon: And, uh, the letter stencils were just plastic letter stencils by, you know, see through stencil.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Mm-hmm.

Glenn Ligon: And because all of the letters of the alphabet were on one sheet, I would just, when I'm making a line of text, I would just, kind of, move the sheet along. And so all this background noise is from the stencil. Because sometimes people ask me, did I, you know, make a stencil for the whole text and then just, kind of, go through. It's like, no, it was actually done one letter at a time.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And that aspect of the chance leaving is something that was very much in keeping with the rest of the activity of...

Glenn Ligon: Right, exactly.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: ...of the work.

Glenn Ligon: Right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So it all kind of fit in. Yeah.

Glenn Ligon: Right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah. Painted on the wall? Upright? Tacked? Flat?

Glenn Ligon: Painted on the wall.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Uh-huh. I see the tack holes.

Glenn Ligon: Yes. (laughs)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I just didn't know if it was flat on, you were tacking it down flat...

Glenn Ligon: Ah, no, yeah, painted on the wall.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Uh-huh.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Were you restricted in size by where you were working?

Glenn Ligon: No, I don't think so. Where were these done?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Hm. This was just a choice?

Glenn Ligon: Yeah. Just sort of seemed big enough.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Uh-huh.

Glenn Ligon: The sheet size. They seemed sort of related to a page. Since these drawings were based on texts in books, I thought the actual sheet should have some relationship to a page, I think. Or some such logic. Maybe newspapers, you know, sort of like the *New York Times*.  
(laughs)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Uh-huh. That makes sense. And the deckle edge of the paper, too, it kind of has...

Glenn Ligon: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: ...something to do with that.

Glenn Ligon: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Uh-huh.

**[00:05:14]**

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Have you, have there been any damages done to these over the years?

Glenn Ligon: They've never been restored, but, you know, things like that you can see. The paper's gotten stiff, I guess, from the oil paint. But as far as I know, they haven't been restored. Though I'm sure some of them have issues.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: But that kind of movement of the paper, and, you know, break out of plane is perfectly in keeping with the nature of them, as far as you're concerned?

Glenn Ligon: Yeah. It's, that's fine.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah. They look wonderful, I think.

Glenn Ligon: Well, I think they got—a lot of them that are here went into Emily Fisher Landau’s collection very soon after they were made, so I think they’ve been well taken care of, you know.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Mm-hmm.

**[00:06:08]**

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And what about the works on this side [*Untitled*, 1985, Collection of the artist]?

Glenn Ligon: These were—This is, I guess, an interesting test case (laughs) for what to do, what not to do. These were done in ’85, so they’d precede the drawings over—the “Dreambook” drawings. These were, they don’t really have a title. The “Porn Drawings,” for lack of a better word. And they are weird, because they’re more expressionistic than those. Like, I—as if I was trying to make a composition, and then the text goes, sort of, into that, as the paint is wet. But the paint is a mix of oil and enamel.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Mm-hmm.

Glenn Ligon: Bad combination. And...

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Why are you thinking of enamel? The sheen? Was it the sheen?

Glenn Ligon: I think it was the sheen, and I think it was, it just seemed, you know, wetter to me than oil paint. And it seemed like that slickness went with the text somehow. And it was fast and cheap. Though, there’s a lot of cracking, you know. And...

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Hm. I think they look in remarkably good condition, actually.

Glenn Ligon: Well, some of them weren’t taken care of, too. I mean, these were in flat files, but something got sprayed on them that wasn’t on them originally. (laughs) You know, and these were literally in the flat files for 25 years, and then the curator of the show—I showed them to him, and he decided, “Oh, we have to show these.” And that became—so they’re, some things, like, that’s just dirt, you know? (laughs) There’s some issues.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, they do show an interest in your progression.

Glenn Ligon: Right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I mean, they do, they do definitely show your getting into the material, and your thinking about that aspect.

Glenn Ligon: Right, right. I mean, I guess they've held up well, considering the paper's not gessoed, and I think this is just oil paint underneath. I don't think there is any acrylic.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, I don't see any oil stains on the paper, which is interesting to me. But it could be that, given, the layer you have underneath, that it is protected.

Glenn Ligon: Right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Or maybe, is that some there?

Glenn Ligon: Right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: See what—yeah. I think, yeah, they've held up extremely well.

Glenn Ligon: Mm-hmm.

**[00:08:38]**

Glenn Ligon: And that's related to this painting [*Untitled (I Am a Man)*, 1988, Collection of the artist], because this painting is also oil and enamel.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: The oil being the white, and the enamel being the black? Or not necessarily that division?

Glenn Ligon: Uh, no.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I got it backwards?

Glenn Ligon: That's oil paint. That's enamel. (pointing at two different areas of white paint) It's all mixed together.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Huh!



Glenn Ligon: And there's a painting underneath there.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Okay, what's underneath there?

Glenn Ligon: I'm not sure.

(laughter)

Glenn Ligon: Well, *there* would be an interesting X-ray to see what's—there is some kind of, I think it's like a figurative painting that I made.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That came out of where, what time? Like...

Glenn Ligon: Prefigures those drawings.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: The ones we were just looking at. Uh-huh.

Glenn Ligon: So, early '80s, mid '80s. And I just decided to paint on top of it. So this is sign painter's enamel. Or maybe it's, it might just be enamel paint, but it might be sign painter's enamel.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Is there a diff—what is the difference? I don't know the difference.

Glenn Ligon: I think it's just, like, sign painter's enamel seems to have—it dries really fast, and it seems to have lots of technical warnings in it. Like it ahs something nasty in it, like (laughs) don't get it on your hands. As opposed to just enamel paint, which was just house paint, you know? Enamel house paint. So I think the cracking is from, is because of the mixing of the two. Because it started cracking within a month or two after it was made.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's interesting, you know, there's so much visual activity in it that the cracking didn't, it was—my eye didn't go to the cracking right away, you know? I mean, obviously, you seem to be really wanting flat with the lettering.

Glenn Ligon: Right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And, and shiny.

Glenn Ligon: Right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And then this is much more physical, the background.

Glenn Ligon: Right. Yeah, I was just sort of trying to merge things that don't really merge (laughs), you know?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: You mean technically?

Glenn Ligon: Conceptually, but also, I guess technically too. There was, and I'm not sure ex—maybe I just wanted, I used enamel because I knew it would dry fast. But I wanted impasto, and it's hard to get that with enamel. So that's when I added the oil paint. Because the oil paint seems to be mostly on top. But it's kind of mixed in, too.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It is.

Glenn Ligon: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I'm fascinated—I'm really drawn to how flat this is in here. This intentional flatness in here, right in here.

Glenn Ligon: Right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Because it really makes that pop in a really wonderful way. And I see some red? That must have been a studio accident? Or is that blood?  
(laughter)

Glenn Ligon: Could be blood. You can see on the edges here, the other painting.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh yeah, oh yeah. For sure. As we go on, I'm going to ask you about the painted edges.

Glenn Ligon: OK.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I'm really, because I'm interested in how you...

Glenn Ligon: Mm. (laughs)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: How you may think of that, or you may not, it just may come...

Glenn Ligon: I don't know.

[00:11:49]

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Okay.

Glenn Ligon: So these [*Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background)*, 1990, Collection of Eileen Harris Norton; *Untitled (I Remember the Very Day That I Became Colored)*, 1990, Collection of George C. Wolfe; *Untitled (I Do Not Always Feel Colored)*, 1990, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of The Bohlen Foundation in honor of Thomas N. Armstrong III 2001.275; *Untitled (I Am Not Tragically Colored)*, 1990, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of The Bohlen Foundation in honor of Thomas N. Armstrong III 2001.276] just, I guess, late '80s. '88, '89 is when I get started. These are the first ones. They were actually done on door panels. You know, Luan doors, painted with gesso.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Gessoed first?

Glenn Ligon: Mm-hmm. And then oil stick. Again, Shiva's the brand. Cheap. (laughs) It dries fast, holds the letter form. They've held up well in terms of color, but they definitely change color.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: In what, in what way?

Glenn Ligon: They're not as black as they started out, probably.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Really?

Glenn Ligon: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Why do you think that is?

Glenn Ligon: Cheap pigment, I guess.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: You think?

Glenn Ligon: I don't know.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's really interesting. Is there, is there one among these that you can, that comes to mind particularly?

- Glenn Ligon: Well, I just think that—I don't know. They feel grayer to me. Now maybe I'm, you know, hallucinating that. (laughs) But...
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: No, could it be the—maybe the mellowing of the white over time?
- Glenn Ligon: Well, it could be that too.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Contributing to it.
- Glenn Ligon: But the gesso had a little bit of tint—all in it, so slightly raw umber or yellow ocher. So it didn't start out as a kind of flat gesso white. But actually, I noticed that gesso goes, is very gray. And these don't look gray.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, I'm—what is this? (points at painting) Tell me we're looking at here that's so gray in here?
- Glenn Ligon: Oh, that is...
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That is a smearing?
- Glenn Ligon: That's a smearing from the stencil.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Uh-huh.
- Glenn Ligon: So basically, because I have—all the letters are on the one stencil, when you—if you don't clean off that stencil, what you've made—if you make the "s" and then you move it over, make the "h," the stencil presses against this "s." And so you're, you're basically just transferring oil stick onto the back of the stencil. And every time you make a letter, that oil stick transfers back onto the surface. So it's sort of like, it's just accum—yeah, I mean, you can sort of see it from top to bottom.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Right.
- Glenn Ligon: It's just accum—the oil stick is accumulating on the back of the stencil. So the more letters you make, the more it's pressing back.

**[00:14:29]**

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: But you know what surprises me is how even it is. I mean, I've read—you know, I've heard you talk about that process.

Glenn Ligon: Right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: But it surprises me at how even it is, and I come to something like this, (points at area of work) where I have the feeling that—did you ever go back with the white?

Glenn Ligon: No.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: No.

Glenn Ligon: No.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Hmm. Oh.

Glenn Ligon: No.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: When I look at and isolated area like that...

Glenn Ligon: Unless I've made a mistake—there might be a painting in here where there's a mistake and there's some white on a, I think maybe one of those at the bottom down there. But it's also, I'm controlling it a bit by how much pressure I'm using with the stencil. So, to get that, you know, the white in the middle of the letter. I'm, it's almost like I'm—the stencil has a little ridge around the letter, and I'm just putting the oil stick, kind of, right at the, at that ridge instead of pressing it in. And so it leaves the middle...

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So you're allowing the gesso to come out.

Glenn Ligon: Right, right, leaves the middle.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: To retain, yeah.

Glenn Ligon: Right. But I haven't really done that at the top here. So it's a way to get white in the middle down there.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I see. That's so sophisticated. I had the feeling that it was more an erasure. I had a feeling it was more going back in with the white as opposed to your leaving it, actually, as you're creating it.

Glenn Ligon: Right. Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Uh-huh.

Glenn Ligon: And all of this is just, you know, I don't know if I thought to do that when I was doing it—it just sort of happened. So, like, here, you can see one of my, I think that's a correction. But I'm not sure how I corrected it. I think I kind of let it dry, and then tried to scrape it off, or—it looks scraped to me.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Uh-huh. When you, when you finish them, finished one, and you looked at it, did you have the temptation of looking at it overall and thinking you needed to adjust?

Glenn Ligon: Oh, I, yeah. I have on some of them. Like, particularly here, you can see how dense it is, or that's because the letters have been gone over twice at the bottom.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Uh-huh. So you did it once, you came back and assessed it, and then you decided to go back into it.

Glenn Ligon: Right. So I sort of start going back in selectively, I think. You know, picking out a few letters. And then I just do the whole thing as it goes down.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's really wonderful.

Glenn Ligon: So it's not—yeah. It's not as random (laughs) as it seems.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, I didn't think it was. (laughs)

Glenn Ligon: No, I think people think it's all—you know. And they talk about it as if it's random. But it's much more controlled. There's also stops and starts. I don't do the whole painting in one day. So, you can sort of see here, I stopped.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Now how do you know you stopped there? What are you looking for?

Glenn Ligon: Because the color is—seems different to me, the way it's pressed in.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah, yeah, yeah, I see that.

- Glenn Ligon: And I wouldn't have just decided, "Okay, this is the line—I'm going to double up all of the letters." It's, I think it's just, like, that was, that's one day (laughs) and that's another day. Because the oil sticks respond to temperature.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Uh-huh. So as it hardens or softens over the evening or morning, your manipulation of it is different.
- Glenn Ligon: Right, right.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And probably your studio, too.
- Glenn Ligon: Cold studio, hot studio, yeah.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And what you did the night before and so on.
- Glenn Ligon: Right. But also, if the stencil gets wiped off or doesn't get wiped off. So here it's getting pretty dense, and I think I wiped it off and started again.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I see. So it's not a question of erasure of going back in and putting something on top, but you might scrape off. No, I'm misunderstanding.
- Glenn Ligon: No, on the stencil itself.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: On the stencil itself.
- Glenn Ligon: Right.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Okay, got it.
- Glenn Ligon: Right.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Okay.
- Glenn Ligon: So if you clean off the stencil, you can—like, here, you can control how much smearing there is outside of the letters.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's so interesting, you're actually using the stencil as a tool.

Glenn Ligon: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Very much so as a tool.

Glenn Ligon: Hi. (laughter)

[Ligon greets Matthew Skopek, Assistant Conservator, Whitney Museum of American Art, who has walked into the room.]

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Hi, come on in and join us. Matt Skopek in Conservation Department. So, it's very much a tool, as you—and did you learn, did you become more proficient with that tool, do you think, as you worked through these?

Glenn Ligon: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Definitely.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: More comfortable with it, certainly.

**[00:19:10]**

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Why are some on wood and some on canvas?

Glenn Ligon: The wood ones were because the first one I did was a door that was just in my studio. And I liked the—they have an anthropomorphic reference. I guess, size, you know, doors and things like that. And they were cheap, much cheaper than canvas. Stretchers. A Luan door was 20 bucks.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, wow. Makes sense. Sure.

Glenn Ligon: (laughs) But then, you know, you get a little bit more money, and you think, “Oh, I have to, you know, be serious.” I mean, I—because I don't know—I didn't know over time how these were going to hold up, whether they were going to warp, or, you know. Because they weren't—I guess you could buy solid core doors but they were more expensive. So—(laughs) 40 bucks as opposed to 20 bucks, and these things mattered back in the day.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, of course, hey. They still do.

Glenn Ligon: So I switched to canvas and stretchers. Panels, actually.



- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Do you remember the first one you did on canvas?
- Glenn Ligon: It might be that [*Untitled (Passing)*, 1991, Collection of Susan and Michael Hort]. I'm not sure, actually.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: When you were doing the doors, just before we...
- Glenn Ligon: No, that's on a door too.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I'm sorry.
- Glenn Ligon: That's on a door.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: My question before—good, because I wanted to ask you another question about the doors.
- Glenn Ligon: All right.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Did you paint the back of the doors?
- Glenn Ligon: Ooh.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I haven't seen the back of one of these. I don't think so?
- Matthew Skopek: Some of them have preparatory sketches, or where you started and then...
- Glenn Ligon: And then decided it was bad?
- Matthew Skopek: One even had text the opposite direction.
- Glenn Ligon: Ooh.
- Matthew Skopek: The long way [sounds like].
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So, it could be something—yeah.
- Glenn Ligon: I think—I don't know. Some of them probably aren't painted, and some are painted. I don't remember, though.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: But you didn't feel the need to paint the back for a purpose of preservation?

- Glenn Ligon: No.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Because the door, and the doors have stood up extremely well.
- Glenn Ligon: Yeah. But I'm sure some of them have the back painted, though. I just don't remember.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Here's one on canvas [*Untitled (Wrong Nigga to Fuck With)*, 1991, Private collection].
- Glenn Ligon: Yes, that's on canvas.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And so you painted the edges of the door. For the reason, probably, you didn't want to see the wood.
- Glenn Ligon: Right.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: But you didn't feel the need to do that with the canvas so much?
- Glenn Ligon: Yeah, I don't know why. Why is that?
- (laughter)
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's my question!
- Glenn Ligon: I don't know. (laughs) I don't know.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, the canvas is white, first of all—we know it was light-colored to begin with. So you didn't....
- Glenn Ligon: Yeah. Is there another canvas one in here? Maybe this one [*Untitled (I'm Turning Into a Specter Before Your Very Eyes and I'm Going to Haunt You)*, 1992, Philadelphia Museum of Art; purchased with the Adele Haas Turner and Beatrice Pastorius Turner Memorial Fund, 1992]? Yeah, this is on canvas. This one has painted sides.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So there was a progression from doors to canvas? Or you went back and forth?
- Glenn Ligon: No, I think—at a certain point, I just stopped doing doors, because it just seemed crazy. Also they could—you know, you're moving them

around, and you thought, “Oh, they can chip, they can, you know.”  
All sorts of things can happen.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I noticed that the dimension of the door is similar to what you chose to be the dimension of the canvas.

Glenn Ligon: Right. Ooh, yeah. (laughs)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It’s a little less. So that wasn’t a conscious thing, it was just, sort of what felt right.

Glenn Ligon: No, I just, yeah. Well, I wanted to them to be a bit flat, you know? So, but I don’t know if I consciously thought about that.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Uh-huh.

**[00:22:52]**

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And the stretchers, you just bought them at...

Glenn Ligon: Well, I think they’re panels, and I think, as I remember, they might be from this maker Simon Liu.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, they’re panels that you’ve stretched it around. Uh-huh.

Glenn Ligon: Yeah. I think. (laughs)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Is that what you remember seeing?

Matthew Skopek: (inaudible)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: They have the look of that, I have to say. And if you were...

Glenn Ligon: Yeah, I think they’re panels.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: ...if you were use—it would seem to me you would need the hard surface to work against.

Glenn Ligon: Right, right, yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So I assume that’s why the doors were...

- Glenn Ligon: Because they were—right. They were painted on, on there. They weren't painted on the wall and then stretched, they were painted on. So they're panels.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: They're panels.
- Glenn Ligon: Yeah.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That makes perfect sense. It also explains why they're in such an even plane, and why you could get—there's obviously pressure, you know?
- Glenn Ligon: Right, right.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Here we are, I was thinking it—yeah, it makes perfect sense. Uh-huh.
- Glenn Ligon: Now, I don't know how I made the jump to Simon Liu, because he's expensive, but (laughs).
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: He's also very good, though.
- Glenn Ligon: He's very good. He actually still makes my panels.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: This one [*Untitled (I Lost My Voice I Found My Voice)*, 1991, Collection of Emily Fisher Landau] is amazing, the way you come to the bottom on that.
- Glenn Ligon: Yeah. Is this a door? This is a door. You can always tell, because, you know, that was the other problem, that's why I switched to panels. Because these doors always have this strange bevel.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Uh-huh.
- Glenn Ligon: And because they have that bevel, they would pick up the—stencil would pick up on the edge there.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: You know, I noticed that on something over there where you have this black edge, which is really quite different from—I noticed that, uh-huh.
- Glenn Ligon: And that's just simply because that—they're badly made doors, and so they have this—I don't know why they have that bevel. But I don't know what it's [word inaudible].

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I never noticed it on a board—on a door. But...

Glenn Ligon: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: But here, and now I can see it here. So would you say that was one of the reasons why you, you decided to...

Glenn Ligon: I think so, yeah. Because I couldn't control that so well, you know? You can't really sand it down so well, and I just thought that's too much work. So I think I switched to canvas because of that.

**[00:25:01]**

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I've also noticed, as you look at the series that are in this gallery, the different topography of the letters, how some of them have gotten very dense and thick and others are not. Was that something that you control, because again, you're talking about the nature of the stick?

Glenn Ligon: That's from going on top of letters, usually.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: You mean going back?

Glenn Ligon: Going back over. And sometimes that is from—let's see, there's one you can see in here where I've gone on—I think some of the letters you can see it. Like maybe...

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Something like that?

Glenn Ligon: Yeah. That "E." It's been—that's once, that's twice, that's probably—that might even be three times.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So you would carefully go back? Because you don't have the sense of them not being aligned, you just have the sense of it being thicker.

Glenn Ligon: Right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Would you go back right away, or is it, would you finish it...

Glenn Ligon: No, it would have to dry.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: You'd dry.

- Glenn Ligon: Yeah, it would always have to dry.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's interesting.
- Glenn Ligon: Because if it doesn't dry, you don't keep the letter form, usually.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So it would dry, and then you'd look at it, and you'd see certain letters that you felt needed to have more topography?
- Glenn Ligon: Then I'd go back in, right, exactly. Also, you can see when I, you know, moving it around. (laughs)
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, your hands.
- Glenn Ligon: It's on the wall, I'd take it off the wall, my hands are dirty. There's a lot of them that have that on the side.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So you're describing a lot of control, Glenn. Going back in and carefully—I mean, you know, it has that feeling of just—which is brilliant, that you've been able to do this of freshness, you know? Just one—but clearly it's a lot of back and forth.
- Glenn Ligon: Well, this is sort of semi—it's sort of—it's mechanical in a way. It's a system set up, but there's so much variation in that system, that I, that's what I liked about it, is that it allowed me to go back in without it seeming, kind of, labored. I mean, it is labored. (laughs)
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: No, but it doesn't feel that way.
- Glenn Ligon: In a way. But it doesn't feel, yeah.
- [00:27:13]**
- Glenn Ligon: So the difference with this painting is it was painted twice. And I don't see where the wall label is. Oh, here, it's sort of ganged up.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah.
- Matthew Skopek: Over there?
- Glenn Ligon: Yeah. I don't remember the dates, but...

- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Okay.
- Matthew Skopek: Ninety and 2003?
- Glenn Ligon: Yeah, Okay.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Okay, so say it again?
- Glenn Ligon: So, this...
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Do you want to come over?
- Glenn Ligon: There's this painting, "I Am Somebody" there [*Untitled (I Am Somebody)*, 1991, Private collection], and then there's this painting, "I Was Somebody" [*Untitled (I Was Somebody)*, 1990 and 2003, Collection of John and Mary Pappajohn]. This was painted in white Shiva oil sticks. And white, it went beige. So the whole painting started out this color white, and went to that.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And what year was that?
- Glenn Ligon: When it was first made. Ninety-one?
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Uh-huh.
- Glenn Ligon: And so it sat in my studio until 2003. And then I repainted it with R&F oil sticks [R&F Pigment Sticks (TM)].
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So you went back into it with the white and then the white oil stick.
- Glenn Ligon: Right. Right, so that's what's on top here. You can see.
- Matthew Skopek: And not every letter.
- Glenn Ligon: Not—well, I've screwed up the grid. So at a certain point, the text goes off of what's underneath it. So, like, "somebody" is there, but then the white oil stick is there. And then "was," and then it sort of keeps going off of what's underneath it.
- Matthew Skopek: That was a, just conscious decision?

- Glenn Ligon: Yeah, it just made it more interesting to me. So that you had a sense of—no, I'd never done that before.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And you never, and you didn't, hadn't ever done it with the black? No, it was just this...
- Glenn Ligon: No, because that black didn't fade enough for me to notice anything like that. But this was so dramatic. I mean, it literally starts out—started out as this color, the entire painting. And then, I don't know, maybe it took a year or so, it was that color.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Uh-huh. Well it kind of gave you another variable to work with on this painting, really, is what it did.
- Glenn Ligon: Mm-hmm. Let the buyer beware. Except that it was in my studio. (laughs) But I guess, let the buyer beware of what cheap materials they're buying.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, but that's part of the nature of it. And in a way, one could argue, you know, it brought out something else in you to go back in it.
- Glenn Ligon: Right.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It really did.
- Glenn Ligon: Right, right.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: You know, I mean, that—You haven't seen this, where the lettering kind of runs off like that, on a line. I don't think, have we?
- Glenn Ligon: No. There's also I—there's color, if you look at those four paintings, they were all done at the same time, but different oil stick colors. So, paint's gray.
- Matthew Skopek: Was that a, do you make a conscious decision which black to use when you start?
- Glenn Ligon: Yeah, I did. Yeah. I mean, there are not so many variations than the rest of them, but there you can really see how blue the...
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah, you really can. It's almost like the difference in the traditional blacks. You know you read Cennino Cennini [15th c. Italian Painter



and Author, *Il Libro dell'Arte*, or *The Craftsman's Handbook*] and you know, the lamp black, and then the, the other—ivory black...

Glenn Ligon: Oh yeah, Mars, bone, ivory—like all those colors.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And they really are different in terms.

Glenn Ligon: But you can't get that range. In the Shiva brand, you can't get that range. You can get that more in R&F brand, or if you melt down and make your own.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Did you ever do that?

Glenn Ligon: I did that occas—not in these. I'm lazy. (laughs)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, why should you? I mean, you were able to get the variation you wanted with what you were able to find.

Glenn Ligon: But, yeah. It's sort of funny to look at them now, how dramatic they look. How dramatically different the blacks are.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Also, when you look at them like this, the rhythm of them is very different. It's interesting, you don't necessarily see that when you're standing in front of them, maybe. But, but when you look at them as a group, you do. Very personal, very. Despite all that's written about you.

(laughter)

Glenn Ligon: Don't believe what you've read, either.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Exactly!

(laughter)

Glenn Ligon: You don't need to talk about these, do we?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I don't think so.

Glenn Ligon: Okay, they're pretty self-explanatory.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Unless you have something specific you'd like to say.

Glenn Ligon:               Nope.

[The group walks through the galleries and into another room.]

**[00:31:48]**

Glenn Ligon:               This is only interesting—it's not your problem. (laughs) This is the Guggenheim's problem. But this [*Notes on the Margin of the Black Book*, 1991-93, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; gift of The Bohlen Foundation] is interesting just because it's the pages that have the photographs. So these [Robert] Mapplethorpe photographs are from a book. And they fade. And so they—Guggenheim spent a long time finding books that had the same color in them so that they could replace the photographs and make a coherent set.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Uh-huh. So the original set faded differentially?

Glenn Ligon:               Right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And so when you went to reinstall it at the Guggenheim, they tried to get it?

Glenn Ligon:               Right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That was important to you then, that they be pretty much similar?

Glenn Ligon:               No, I didn't care. This is...

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: You didn't care.

Glenn Ligon:               ...their problem.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Right.

Glenn Ligon:               (laughs)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: But, I mean, did you think it's important that they be more or less similar, or that didn't—you didn't care?

Glenn Ligon:               I didn't care. But they decided that it would be good to. So they had to go find the first printing, and then look at the different—it's sort of amazing to me that book pages would fade.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah.

Glenn Ligon: Not even opened, you know?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's what surprises me.

Glenn Ligon: Just, like, in—sitting in plastic for 20 years...

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's very surprising.

Glenn Ligon: They would fade.

Matthew Skopek: And that they would do so differentially. You would think that if the ink that was used faded, it, all of them would fade.

Glenn Ligon: Yeah, they'd all be the same color, but...

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: They would all fade the same. Yeah. Especially that they're not opened and exposed to the light a lot.

Glenn Ligon: Right. So, I don't know, this is very funny. Anyway.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: How does it look to you here, in this installation?

Glenn Ligon: It's good. I mean, it needs more space because it's so—this is the only room that I wish, you know, we had another room for. (laughs) So it could sort of be on its own. But it's fine. It's fine.

**[00:33:39]**

Glenn Ligon: These [*White #3*, 1993, The Broad Art Foundation, Santa Monica; *White #14*, 1994, Collection of the artist; *White #5*, 1993, The Broad Art Foundation, Santa Monica] are basically the same process as the earlier paintings. Stencil. The difference here is I'm using Winsor & Newton [Artists'] Oilbars, which are the stump size, so they're bigger. And I'm also probably using paint, too. Oil paint. So the fiction is that you stencil the letters over and over again, and the whole canvas goes black. But that would never happen.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Right.

Glenn Ligon: That's there.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Right, that's, that's as close as you get, doing that.

Glenn Ligon: Right, that's as close as you get. So these were filled in, either with the oil stick itself, just going, you know, *fffft*. But it looks like, because the background's so flat, I think I painted in there. I don't think I started it with a black background. I think I painted in a black background. After I'd stenciled all the text. Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: OK, so you started with a canvas. Cotton canvas? Linen? Linen canvas?

Glenn Ligon: Linen, gesso.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Gesso. And then you started the stenciling?

Glenn Ligon: Start the stenciling.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So the stenciling is going to basically be dark on white.

Glenn Ligon: Right. And then get it to as far as it will go. And then I start probably going in and painting in, or sometimes oil stick. It seems like there are some things that are just oil stick.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It seems like some of them are just kind of...

Glenn Ligon: Yeah, just rubbed in.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And when you went back in with the oil paint—was it oil paint, you're saying?

Glenn Ligon: Mm-hmm.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Did it pick up some of the lettering?

Glenn Ligon: No, because I think this...

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Let it set.

Glenn Ligon: This stuff dries fairly—you could, it dries in two or three days, so I can go back in pretty... It's pretty durable too. But I guess the difference, maybe, is, like these little highlights on top—I think that's the, the

second pass. But maybe—I think because the letters were so thick? I don't know if I used the stencil again. I just probably used the oil stick and just went over the top of the.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Aha. So they were raised enough that you could bring it down and pick up just over the top. That makes sense.

Glenn Ligon: Right. Like using the side of the oil stick, you just kind of—you know, like I went to look at the Richard Serra drawings, and he makes big cakes, and he just kind of goes like this, so they have this very even, kind of—so think I sort of stole that. And that's when I started melting down oil sticks.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: To provide, to make that...

Glenn Ligon: To give me, yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: To make them bigger.

Glenn Ligon: Yeah, to make a bigger thing...

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: You definitely have a different feel with this. You do have a more overall, kind of, evenness feel to it.

Glenn Ligon: Right. But there's some, seems to be some differentiation in the background color, like—like here and there. And there? There's some very different—so maybe there are different blacks in there. Like, mars and ivory, maybe that's when I'm starting to experiment. Because I think, if it's Winsor & Newton, if I'm remembering correctly, it's basically just ivory black. That's all they have. So I differentiate the blacks in the background by different oil paint colors, you know?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So you try, but you've tried all the different blacks.

Glenn Ligon: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah, that makes sense.

Glenn Ligon: I don't know if it's systematic, but, let's (inaudible).

**[00:37:25]**

- Glenn Ligon: So this was done the same way, but you can see where I haven't—these are the little flecks of—that's the gesso. You're seeing right to the gesso back there.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Boy, it takes on such a different reflectance when you look up at it.
- Glenn Ligon: Right.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's (inaudible)...
- Glenn Ligon: And these were done on the wall, too. These are on stretchers. That's...
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Okay, so now we're on stretchers. So did you have a problem with not pressing against a hard surface?
- Glenn Ligon: No, I think I—these were done stapled to the wall, as I remember.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Okay, that makes sense. Because I was trying to figure out how you were getting the raise. I'm also seeing—and so the flecks are really the canvas below, I mean the gesso below?
- Glenn Ligon: I think what I did is stretch a canvas, gesso it, and then take it off. And then re-stretch it.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Um-hum. Makes sense. Re-stretch it after it was done.
- Glenn Ligon: Right.
- Matthew Skopek: Would you tape these edges then? Because they look very clean.
- Glenn Ligon: Well, some of them have—some of these paintings have blue tape in them (laughs).
- Matthew Skopek: Oh yes, actually this one, that's right, this one does.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: No wait...
- Glenn Ligon: Oh, does it?
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: ...explain that to me?

- Glenn Ligon: Because I use a painters tape to keep the straight edge, and it would sort of, I guess maybe it's the solvent would get to it?
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yep.
- Glenn Ligon: And it would stick into the paint. And sometimes I just didn't get it off. So yeah, at the tops and the bottoms, there's probably blue tape. I don't see it, though.
- Matthew Skopek: This, this one. We were talking about this, this little bulge that's right there.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, yeah.
- Glenn Ligon: Oh, that's tape? (laughs) Oh well.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Barnett Newman problem [sounds like]. It's okay.
- Glenn Ligon: Is it really? Oh.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Of course!
- Glenn Ligon: All right, all right.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: No, you explained it exactly right. You know, the solvent in the media is dissolving the adhesive in the tape.
- Glenn Ligon: Right.
- [00:39:13]**
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: But you—we're really getting a difference not only in color, but in density, it seems to me, of the blacks. From the lettering and the background. And eventually, we're going to get into issues of reflectance as we move on in your work, I notice. So this was, these different blacks, and this whole dance of distinction was something that was very much in your mind, apparently. Consciously or not, you know?
- Glenn Ligon: But some of it, I couldn't really control, because there's no—when I'm looking at this, I see how matte the black is on top of—well, there, it's

a pretty matte painting. (laughs) But you get this color differentiation just because, I'm sure it's the same oil stick, it's just—I went over it and they dried, the color is denser somehow. It's, I don't know. I don't know, yeah. But it gives a sort of interesting variation. But I think when I was making that, I wouldn't have seen that. You know, they would be the same color. And then when they dried, I realized, like, "Oh, that black is, you know, it's slightly matter [sic] or shinier, and seems like it's a different color," you know?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Did you work in daylight? At night? When did you, how—what kind of light did you work in?

Glenn Ligon: When were these done? (examines wall label) '93. Where was my studio? Daylight.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Daylight.

Glenn Ligon: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Mm-hmm. Because it really does make a difference, especially with work like this, in how you're perceiving it.

Glenn Ligon: Well, actually, this is funny, because I'm looking at this painting now, and it has much more white in it than I remember. Like, all these little things.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, maybe it's the light. It's—I guess that's what it brought it to mind. They almost flicker, you know? And I think...

Glenn Ligon: Hmm. Curious.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Why black?

Glenn Ligon: Well, initially, black text on white backgrounds, like one reads in books, magazines. And then, I'm not good with color. Or I wasn't. (laughs) I was good with color, and then I talked myself out of it. So (laughs).

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It happens. I understand that.



Glenn Ligon: And then, and because I was using text, it seemed easy, you know? To, kind of, use, to restrict the palette to just black and white or black on black.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: One of the things that interests me, and I don't know if it will interest you—but, in the case of Barnett Newman and [Mark] Rothko, they both had series where they just gave up color. Even though they're basically known as colorists. Barnett Newman did it in *The Stations of the Cross* [1958-1966] and Rothko did it in the Chapel [Rothko Chapel Paintings, 1964-1967]. About the same time, they did that. And being a restorer of the Chapel, as I was for 20 years, I began to realize the other aspects of the work, the material, that was important to the artist. Like the reflectance, like the topography, like the relationship to one another. And so, in your work, because you don't have the color, you're focusing on that all the time.

Glenn Ligon: Right, right. But I think, because there's always this text, and because I have a system, it's much less conscious in a way, because I can't control what's going to happen over time. Well, I can control it, like, decide, you know, like, "Oh, this painting is finished." (laughs) But it's not really finished, because six months later it's going to, you know, settle into whatever kind of matte and shiny it's going to be, and I very rarely went back into paintings. But, yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Did you discard any of your paintings?

Glenn Ligon: Usually a success rate is half and half.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Mm-hmm. So you actually do discard half of them.

Glenn Ligon: Mm-hmm.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Mm-hmm. But you said you don't necessarily go back into them?

Glenn Ligon: No.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: In the case of the white one we saw that, but that was different.

Glenn Ligon: Yeah, that was, right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: But normally, you just...

Glenn Ligon: Right. Like once I've decided I've finished with it, it's finished.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Finished.

Glenn Ligon: Yeah, it's, yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Are there technical reasons why you discard something? Or is it more compositional? Or don't you want to answer that?

Glenn Ligon: It's more compositional, but no one can really tell the difference. But I, you know, like, "Why are you throwing that out?" Like, "Because it's terrible." (laughs) But, you know, you just have to make—just my own eye, you now? Things I feel like. And sometimes it's just the spacing wasn't right, or it just didn't feel—it didn't work from the beginning, and never, never worked. So...

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's interesting how that goes, isn't it? You sort can feel it right away.

Glenn Ligon: Right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah.

Glenn Ligon: Oop. Okay. You can tell me whatever we need to—we can skip.

**[00:44:19]**

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well...

Glenn Ligon: These [*Screen*, 1996, The Broad Art Foundation, Santa Monica; *We're Black and Strong (I)*, 1996, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Accessions Committee Fund: gift of Frances and John Bowes, Emily L. Carroll and Thomas W. Weisel, Collectors Forum, Susan and Robert Green, Danielle and Brooks Walker Jr., and Phyllis Wattis] are pretty straightforward.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: They are. I think, physically, what interested me about this is the kind of flat screening, you know, of the unstretched canvas on the wall. And then when you look over here, again, I'm sensitive to the white edges, so that these are very flat too, even though they have a density.

Glenn Ligon: Worked with Brand X [Editions Limited] printers in Long Island City. These were done in '96. Newspaper images, and that's why they have

those weird moirés. Because this was proto-Photoshop. (laughs) Or at least that—people had Photoshop. Maybe people had Photoshop, but I didn't. So these are literally little things I've cut out of the newspaper, and I sent them to the silk screener, and said, "This is what you're making the film from. So whatever moiré was—happened in that process, I just lived with. I didn't really correct these images beforehand on a computer. And because they, the images were so big, we did them in, you know, three screens, which—and you can see the divisions. Oh, and when you look at this, it has a lot of moiré in it, actually. It's like, kind of funny. Interesting. I liked the, doing silkscreen because it is—I guess I like things that are made by hand. Which, silkscreen is. It's just two guys pulling a squeegee. And you don't know what you're going to get (laughs) until you, you know? So, I like that you could make—take the same image and make it different, because the ink is responding differently, they're not pulling with enough pressure, pulling with too much pressure, or I tell them, like in these [*Self-Portraits* series], you know, "Oh, hit it again." You know? So, one pass, two passes, three passes, maybe even four passes.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, of these first three.

Glenn Ligon: Yeah, yeah. So they're filling in, basically.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So it's really, it's not unlike what you were doing with the letters, you know? It's that same kind of going back in and building.

Glenn Ligon: Yeah, it's just with a set image, you know?

Matthew Skopek: There's a mechanical aspect to it, but then it's still by hand, so there's still control of the process.

Glenn Ligon: Right. And when we get to the neons in the last room [*Rückenfigur*, 2009, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee T.2010.71; *Untitled*, 2008, Rubell Family Collection], it's the same thing. I'm, I'm just giving them a, you know, a text and saying, "This is the font, this is the size." But someone's actually blowing those tubes by hand. (laughs) So it's kind of bizarre to me. So, there are differences in the letters, even, you know, because it's just like, they've got a template. But he blows the bottom of the "a" with a little curve, and he's got a little curve. (laughs) But, you know, that's kind of it.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So it's kind of using the standardized form, but personalizing it, and definitely individualizing it in the way you do it each time. Yeah.

Glenn Ligon: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: They're wonderful, they really are.

**[00:47:46]**

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: What about this one [*Untitled (Speech/Crowd #2)*, 2000, Collection of the artist]?

Glenn Ligon: There are about eight of these drawings, and they come after this body of work. So they were done on paper. Images from the same series, basically, but silkscreen on paper with—they're very, that's weird. They're very gray. I'm trying to remember were they all—I think they always were that gray, but, but it looks like the ink color itself started out pretty gray. It's curious. And then I just used glue or paint and painted in the sort of little white areas in the text, and then as the paint or glue is still wet, I just threw some of this coal dust on top.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Was this one of the first uses of the coal dust?

Glenn Ligon: No, there are paintings in the other room that are—precede this.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And what was the attraction of the coal, or how did you come about this?

Glenn Ligon: Stole it from [Andy] Warhol.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Hmm. Again, the sparkle, I guess, had something to do with it? Or is that sparkle not a result...

Glenn Ligon: Well, the first series was using a text ["Stranger in the Village," 1953] by James Baldwin, and I wanted that text to have a kind of density. It's sort of the metaphoric weight of the—metaphoric resonance of coal dust as a material. Warhol used diamond dust, so, you know, I was talking to a printer—actually, when we were working on these things back here, and he said, "Oh, well, this friend of mine is using this stuff called 'magnum.'" And I was like, "Oh," you know, I was like, "Like, diamond dust?" Like, "No, no, no, magnum. It's coal

dust. And I hadn't even seen it. (laughs) And I thought, "Oh, great, it's perfect." Because it just had all this stuff in it, metaphorically. And then when I saw it, I thought, "Well, that's really interesting." It's used for sandblasting, it's like the leftover—it's coal slag. It's like leftover from coal processing. They use it for sandblasting, and road-fill, and things like that. But it comes in grades, so you can get, you know, very coarse, like big gravel, or fine sand versions of it. So, yeah, just started using it.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And so you put the glue on first?

Glenn Ligon: Mm-hmm.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And then you drop it in?

Glenn Ligon: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And then you brush away what...

Glenn Ligon: Then they get sprayed, sometimes, with an acrylic glue.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: After? To set it?

Glenn Ligon: Right. Like a watered-down acrylic, yeah, to set it.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Do you mask where you want it to go? Or the glue does that?

Glenn Ligon: Glue does that, yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah, mm-hmm. Hmm.

Matthew Skopek: When you paint first, do you find it gives it more opacity, because then it's black underneath, on—underneath the coal...

Glenn Ligon: Yeah.

Matthew Skopek: ...as opposed to if you used glue, you'd see little bits of white?

Glenn Ligon: It's better to paint first, yeah, because you've, you, yeah, you get a black underneath. Because the coal dust can sometimes be a bit brown, too. But yeah, if I was just painting with glue, you would

probably see what's underneath it. And so I tended to paint with oil paint or something. If I can—it's hard to see.

Matthew Skopek: This might be just glue.

Glenn Ligon: Yeah.

Matthew Skopek: I see a lot of white.

Glenn Ligon: Right. Exactly.

Matthew Skopek: And here.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: But then where we have splatter...

Glenn Ligon: Well, that is, I think I—these drawings got sprayed with ink, like India ink. Just to bring them—I don't know what I was doing. (laughs) But, bring them down, somehow. Like another layer of something on top.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Mm-hmm.

**[00:52:03]**

Glenn Ligon: Hmm. So, back to color.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Color.

Glenn Ligon: These [*Beautiful Black Men*, 1995, Collection of Peter Norton; *Niggers Ain't Scared*, 1996, Collection of the artist; *Mudbone (Liar)*, 1993, Collection of Raymond J. McGuire] are pretty straightforward. It's the same process as—through stencils. In this case, R&F [Pigment Sticks]. Sort of a better, you know, fancier pigments. And much more about color, because of the backgrounds. So, linen, gesso, an acrylic background, and then stencil on top. And oil stick.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And given the flatness of the acrylic, and then the oil stick on top, we definitely have a sense of the physicality of the letters.

Glenn Ligon: Mm-hmm. You're right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And also the color differential. Yeah.

Glenn Ligon: Right. Right. Right, right. Anything we need to talk about in here?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I don't have anything specific, unless you...

Glenn Ligon: Okay, no, it's all right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Okay.

**[00:53:08]**

Glenn Ligon: So, there's a lot of variations in here. So, essentially it's—it's always kind of—except, well, yeah. Some variations. Oil stick, again. Sometimes a black background. Like, I think—no, this [*Stranger #20*, 2004, Collection of Raymond J. McGuire] didn't start with a black background, I don't think. No. But sometimes I have a black background. But it's essentially the same technique, just using the stencils. But while the paint is wet, I'm throwing coal dust on top of it. But sometimes, like in the case of this painting, there is a text that went down, and I threw coal dust on it, and it sort of filled the whole background. And then I, when that all dried, I went back over it with oil stick. So the oil stick, now, is on top of the coal dust rather than under it. Except...

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: What orientation is the canvas in when you're putting on the coal dust?

Glenn Ligon: In this size, they're on panels. Sometimes they were just—like that was done on the wall. Stapled to the wall.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's a very different feel, isn't it? I mean, you're—when it's flat, you're getting much denser. Is that fair to say, or not necessarily?

Glenn Ligon: It's just a matter of how much work, you know—how worked these things are. Like, this painting [*Mirror*, 2002, Collection of Melody Hobson], I stenciled all the letters. I took a brush and streaked that paint, and then the coal dust went on top of that. So this painting, actually, was very quick in that sense. And you can see, like at the top there, that's the paint from the, like me taking a brush and just going—starting over there. (laughs)

Matthew Skopek: Yeah, so you're (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

Glenn Ligon: So I started that side, right.

- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, I see, and you're picking up the oil stick as you go along.
- Glenn Ligon: Right. And then the whole thing got coal dust put on top of it, so...
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So sort of the same methodology, what you were doing with the stencil, of just constantly...
- Glenn Ligon: Right.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: ...reusing it, but you're using a brush now...
- Glenn Ligon: Right.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: ...to do that.
- Glenn Ligon: Yeah. It's using a stencil to make the letters, but then the brush to smear those letters. But this all had to be done quickly, because the paint needed to be wet. So I probably did this in a day, because it...
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: How much time do you have between the oil stick and putting on the coal dust? How much time do you have?
- Glenn Ligon: Depends on the brand. R&F dries really slowly, so you have a lot of time. Winsor & Newton, couple of days, maybe. Shiva, overnight, sometimes. Doesn't...
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So you really need to work quickly.
- Glenn Ligon: Right. But by this time, I'm not using the Shiva anymore, because they're—they only came in a small size, and so it just wasn't cost-effective. And I think I was making my own oil sticks by this time too.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And when you made your own oil sticks, how did you do that?
- Glenn Ligon: I would just melt, melt them down, and then maybe add a little beeswax or something to make them dry slower. Which I don't know if that really helped, but (laughs) that's what I thought. Just to have bigger cakes of it, you know.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Which helped you in terms of speed as well as...



Glenn Ligon: Not really in speed, but just covering—like if I wanted to just cover, and—like on this painting [*Untitled (Conclusion)*, 2004, Collection of Jill and Peter Kraus], maybe. If I just wanted to, like, cover a big area, you know. Just kind of skim the top of the letters with—I would need a cake of that. If you did it with an oil stick, it just would, you know—a couple of feet and you're done. So you had to kind of melt them down. But this again, the oil stick is on top of coal dust, so there was a...

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Both on top and below? Both?

Glenn Ligon: Looks like it's mostly below, actually.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah, it does.

Glenn Ligon: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: The letters are mostly on top of --

Glenn Ligon: Right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah. It's definitely a different feeling than the other across the...

Glenn Ligon: Right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: This one, you painted the edges too, of the canvas.

Glenn Ligon: Mm. Yeah.

(laughter)

Glenn Ligon: That's probably because they were dirty.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: (laughs)

Glenn Ligon: There are a couple more of those drawings the same way.

**[00:58:08]**

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Oh, I definitely want to ask you about this.

- Glenn Ligon: Oh, this painting [*Self-Portrait*, 2002] was done at the same—2002. It was done at the same time as that tall one over there. This painting never worked. (laughter) And I kept scraping it down, trying to make it work. And then I realized that it was sort of interesting scraped down. So that sort of became—it's kind of the leftover of a painting, as if you were scraping down a painting. But I liked being able to—you know, this is all the, uh, ghost of oil stick letters. And you can sort of see there, against a more flat, mars-y kind of black. And then there, I just left the letters that I had done. So if you scrape that off, you would get this.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: But I mean, I mean, you're obviously capable of scraping where you see nothing. But this was an intentional leaving of some...
- Glenn Ligon: Yeah, yeah.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: ...you know, like you half-erase something on a piece of paper.
- Glenn Ligon: Right, exactly, exactly.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And still make it out if you want to.
- Glenn Ligon: And I probably went back in here with oil paint.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I sort of feel that. I sort of feel that there's a brush back in there.
- Glenn Ligon: But yeah, this was a long, kind of, you know—starting, scraping it off, starting again, and it never quite worked. And then I, sort of, "It's not working" became interesting to me.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Uh-huh. It's very interesting. How did it get its name, *Self-Portrait*?
- Glenn Ligon: I think—because all of the text I use is quotation, so to take a quotation and kind of erase it in this way, so aggressively, seemed to be about my own encounter with the text in a very direct way. So it seemed like more of a self portrait than not.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Mm-hmm. It's very effective. I mean it—the scraping just makes the lettering impose on us in a way that the others just haven't. It's very, very different. And yet, the memory is there too.

- Glenn Ligon: Well, all of these paintings are sort of about, you know, loss and illegibility, and all sorts of things like that. So this was just another way of getting at that.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Mm-hmm. It's a nice, thin stretcher also.
- Glenn Ligon: I'm sure it's a cheap one. (laughs)
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Okay, it could be. But it, it has a very—a sense, physical sense. Thinness.
- Glenn Ligon: I was in Germany when I made these paintings, so I think that must...
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: There are more than one of these?
- Glenn Ligon: No, there's—this is the only one like this. But this, this was part of a series of paintings that were done for Documenta 11 [Kassel, Germany, June 8-September 15, 2002] in 2002. So it sort of went from the wall to Kassel. And that white tall one was in that show as well.
- [01:01:38]**
- Glenn Ligon: So, children's coloring books silkscreened onto canvas, which...
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Did you prime them?
- Glenn Ligon: Primed, but very strange. Like, some primed gray and then some, like, kind of—I don't know. Like, lead white? Is that possible?
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Did you buy them—you tend to buy them already pre-primed? Yeah?
- Glenn Ligon: Yeah.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yeah.
- Glenn Ligon: Yeah.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: There's definite difference in warmth and coolness...
- Glenn Ligon: Right. Yeah, it's funny. And then drawn with either oil stick or gouache.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So, where are...

Glenn Ligon: Gouache.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Gouache, yeah.

Glenn Ligon: Or flash, sorry. Flash. Flash and gouache, I think.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Uh-huh. Hmm. We don't have the smearing.

Glenn Ligon: No.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Kind of eliminated that, you were (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

Glenn Ligon: Just trying to, just following kids' marks, to—just really trying to draw the way they would draw. So I made giant crayons, basically.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's hard to do it the way that kids do it.

Glenn Ligon: It's incredibly hard to do it, right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: When we're not kids anymore.

Glenn Ligon: Incredibly hard to do. Hmm.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Okay.

Glenn Ligon: Okay.

**[01:03:10]**

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I was so interested in what you said earlier about the neons. So I'd like to kind of go over that again so you can explain it to me a little bit better—for me about the use of the neon and what it, how it related to your other techniques.

Glenn Ligon: Well, I just—it's, you know—it's not a quote, you know, in that the word "America" is just the word "America." But it started with a literary reference. I was thinking of Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*. So that's kind of where these things came about. So, they—in the, in the line of my work, which is always, sort of, quotation, from, often from literary sources, this was kind of in that line. And I was interested,

also, because neon is handmade. So if you look at these neons, you can see the, the bottom of the letters there were done straight. And there, were done with these curves. And that was sort of choice of the neon. (laughs)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: You mean, a hand is molding the tube, as, as they're made.

Glenn Ligon: Right, exactly. They're, they're hand...

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's not your hand, but somebody's hand...

Glenn Ligon: Right, they're actually hand-blown, you know, heated up glass tube. He's shaping it on a template. Yeah, it's all made by hand. So every letter is different, even though they were using a template. And then they were painted black on the front, in the case of that one. Black all the way around in the case of that one, so the joints between the letters—which seem to be sort of silicon, actually.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: I'm sorry, seem to be what?

Glenn Ligon: They seem to be, you know, I think that's silicon. I think it is just holding the letter together, but it's not painted where the silicon is holding the letters together. So that, so it looks like that's glass, but it's not, I think. I have to check with my fabricator about that.

Matthew Skopek: Actually, it even looks like it may have been painted with a paint of stick tube --

Glenn Ligon: Right.

Matthew Skopek: -- (inaudible) silicon.

Glenn Ligon: Right.

Matthew Skopek: That's kind of pulled away.

Glenn Ligon: So that was sort of a funny—because norm—the last one—This is an exhibition copy of this piece, but the, the original, I think, the paint, where it chips is where you see the light. So, like, there, you know. Because they were mounted on these glass mounts and then tied with wire, so, that chips the paint.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Which it will...

Glenn Ligon: Right, which I want, over time. But it's funny that it's—in this one, it's just where that silicon is.

**[01:06:07]**

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: How do you feel about this being an exhibition copy?

Glenn Ligon: (laughs) Well, it's sort of funny. I don't think I've thought it through well enough, you know. Because there is an accumulation of things that happen when you take the piece up and down. So that chipping of the paint, sort of, more and more light comes out of it. So in a way, they've shortcutted that by manufacturing it slightly differently. Like the, the original's owned by the Tate, and it doesn't have those points of silicon light in them. I don't mind it, but I think I need to think that through more.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's different.

Glenn Ligon: Yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It's different in feeling, too, right.

Glenn Ligon: Yeah. I remember having this discussion, because I saw a Joseph Kosuth photostat at another museum. And it's going in a show, and they were sort of lightly restoring the edge, you know, just kind of watercoloring the cracks in the edge. And we got into this whole discussion about it as an object, you know? If you're making a piece that's about an idea, why are you showing—why are you restoring this photostat that—museums don't throw things away. So note—so what they were going to do is show the restored piece, and then switch it out for a photostat that they would make later on. So halfway through the show, they were going to take down the original and put up just a photostat of it. And I thought, “Wow.” (laughter) “That's very interesting.”

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It is. We, we think about this a lot. People, conservators think about this a lot, because when you were talking about the difference of this one, and the original at the Tate, and how the wearing of the wire against the tubing actually affects it visually, because you see more of the light through it. I thought to myself, “Well, that's aging.”

Glenn Ligon: Right, yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: You know, that's part of the life of it, and aging. And so when you have an exhibition copy, you have something that's new.

Glenn Ligon: Right, exactly.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And if aging is something that you find interesting or accept—not only acceptable, but even, maybe, you know, important as, as you begin to—to see it, like in the Kosuth, maybe, what you were saying. Maybe that's something that's important to retain, even, even in an exhibition copy.

Glenn Ligon: Right. But the problem is that neon is fragile, so eventually, one of those letters in the original will break.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Right. That's right.

Glenn Ligon: You know? (laughs) And somebody's going to remake that piece, and it's going to be new. That letter's going to be new. And so all of the, kind of, abrasion that happens from...

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Do you want to sit down? Are you ready to sit down?

Glenn Ligon: ...taking a piece up and down. Yeah. Is not going to happen for a while for that one letter. And it's, it'll be interesting to see how it—if you can see that, you know? I imagine you can see that, you know? Which is what was interesting in the Kosuth, to see, like, "Oh, this is just a photostat. But this piece is about this idea." But here is this object, this original, that nobody in this museum is going to throw in the trash, you know? (laughs)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Because, in essence—I think about this lot as a conservator. Museums are holders of history. That's what we are. And so we seem to feel this obliga—we do have an obligation to retain the original. But then, how the artist begins to think about that, and how that changes over time—not just in terms of practicality, which is what makes sense for a neon sign. As you're right, it's going to be—the probability of it breaking is great. But it also affects the look.

Glenn Ligon: Right, right.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So that's, that's tricky and that's hard.

Glenn Ligon: They're—I mean, there are interesting things like, you know, Richard Prince photographs. In his retrospective, there were exhibition copies. But the originals were printed in the '70s, and photographs from the '70s have a particular look.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yes they do.

Glenn Ligon: And these exhibition copies didn't look like that, you know?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's right.

Glenn Ligon: And I thought, "Well, that's really interesting. Because you're not having the same" —and there's, sometimes, they were the original, you know, depending on the lender, it was the original photograph. And they looked radically different. And I thought, "Well, that's so"—I don't know. I've never heard him talk about that. I don't know if he cares or not. I assume he—that was a decision that he made. But I found it really fascinating. And...

**[01:10:43]**

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: In your work, with the neons. I guess the neons are what are bringing that to the fore in your work, because they *can* be refabricated. And even though they retain an individuality of the person who actually made them, they—they can be made in different ways.

Glenn Ligon: Right. And they can be made badly, too. Like, glass—glass, apparently—I didn't know this. There, you know, has batches. There are batches of glass. And the color isn't ever exactly the same. So one time we had something remade and the color of the glass was different, even though it was sort of the same, you know? The same color, same manufacturer—different color, actually. And the, the person who had had the piece remade was a bit freaked out by that. And I thought, "Well"—(laughs)

Matthew Skopek: Did it bother you?

Glenn Ligon: Yeah, it did bother me, actually. But I realized, like, "Oh, that's kind of—you can't exactly control that." You know?



- Matthew Skopek: Did it—it bothered you—the new color bothered you or the difference? Because, I mean, you didn't know what color you were going to get the first time you had it made, so...
- Glenn Ligon: The difference was I could see it. Yeah, and that, the new color bothered me. It was a bit too, sort of, creamy or something. But I think that problem is going to come up again if people have to keep remaking these. Especially if you're not remaking the entire piece. So the "M" in that neon breaks, and you remake it, but it's not the same color, because the glass batch is different, you know?
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, you're becoming a conservator. That's, that's what conservators do.
- Glenn Ligon: (laughs) Not my problem.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: No.
- Glenn Ligon: But...
- Matthew Skopek: Maybe, in that situation then, would it be better to remake the entire thing and have...
- Glenn Ligon: That's what we've been doing.
- Matthew Skopek: ...all the rest of the...
- Glenn Ligon: It's, but that's an expense, you know, the museum has to decide what expense...
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: And you end of up with a new...
- Glenn Ligon: Right, you're add, you're—right.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: ...you then go into—you're erasing history. Aging, rather. That's the kind of thing conservators deal with all the time. When one portion, you know, there's a damage to an eye or something, you have to go back in. Or, okay, representational work is one thing, which is easier in a certain way. Certain way. But it, but if there's one section you have to go back into, sometimes you have to make it meld with the rest of it. And so, it's, it's a real balancing act. And I think that's what you're talking about. If one letter breaks, and they make a new one, and the

color of the glass is different, do you accept that as a bold difference? Or do you try to ameliorate it? But with neon, you probably don't have as much flexibility ameliorating it. I don't know.

Glenn Ligon: That depends. But there's also, I guess, a question of, you know, the—the mechanics of the neon. Like this thing flashes. It's got technology in it that makes it flash like this. And I'm sure that technology is going to go out of date. So do you update it? Or do you keep fixing it? Because the neon maker that I work with works on [Bruce] Naumans, you know? They're these editions that, you know—There's this poke in the eye edition that was done by New Museum. And when you stand next to it, you hear it. It makes a lot of noise. I'm like, "Matt, why does it make so much noise?" Like, because it's got this kind of, like, almost like clockwork inside of it that no one ever uses anymore, you know? It's just outdated technology to make it go off and on, you know?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: That's true.

Glenn Ligon: And people fetishize that, but it's totally inefficient, it's not really going to last, (laughs) it needs to be replaced. But everyone's like, "Oh, well the sound was part of it." It was like, "No, the sound wasn't part of it. It's just, that's what neons did when they made them in, you know, 1975 or whenever. (laughs)

Matthew Skopek: But in the same way that plays into the, the photos you were talking about. The photos were printed in the '70s were very different. So that, if you made it without the noise, then it's going to be like "new neon," and it would be like that that (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

Glenn Ligon: Yeah. But if you were going to make it with the noise, you're faking the noise.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Yes.

Glenn Ligon: That's the problem. Because that machine—the machinery that they would use to make that neon go off and on does not make that noise anymore. You know?

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So with regard to your own piece...

Matthew Skopek: But can you repair the original machinery?

- Glenn Ligon: Yeah, but at a certain point you—you know? (laughs) It's just kind of like, it's an old windup toy. At a certain point, you can't fix it, you know?
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, would you—let's, let's get back to this. And let's end with this, because I think it's really interesting. The transformers, or whatever they are on the bottom. The cords, and everything—is that, that's all part of it?
- Glenn Ligon: Yes, but (laughs) oh, I don't know. We've already changed it. The wires that that piece came with retain the memory of—it was a certain kind of wire. And that wire that was originally used in the piece, sort of retained the memory of the shape that it was in. And so it looked, when it got installed with the original wiring, it looked terrible.
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: It was wobbly like—you mean not straight?
- Glenn Ligon: Yeah, yeah, just kind of not straight. And I thought, "Oh, replace the wire." Now this wire, apparently, is different. It has some—it's silicon instead of something else on the covering. It's much more flexible, it drapes. But this was a big discussion about whether it could be changed or not, you know? But I thought, "It's just wire." (laughter) You know? But it the—it makes the piece looks different, so it's not just wire, you know?
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: So one of the, the dominant criterias [sic] was the straightness of the line?
- Glenn Ligon: Yeah, I just wanted it to drape straighter, like this, you know? Or these. And it just, because it was sort of wire that'd been, kind of, mucked around with, it just kind of went like this, down to the floor, instead of just going down. So, so we kept the original wire, but it sort of, I don't know, you know? It's kind of meaningless in some ways. But in other ways, really important, you know?
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Well, it's interesting, because it's a material that was needed to create this work, but it took on a visual importance --
- Glenn Ligon: Right, because...
- Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: ...when you saw it installed.

Glenn Ligon: ...right, yeah, because all of this, I've always installed the neons with the transformers, and the animators, and the wires present, instead of embedding that all in a wall, or something.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Right. So, in the future, should there be a different technology, we would still want the appearance of the wires, the transformers, and the other?

Glenn Ligon: Mm, tricky. Guess so. (laughs)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: We're going to hold off on that one.

Glenn Ligon: I don't know. (laughs)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Okay. Well, thank you.

Glenn Ligon: Thank you it was, yeah.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: This has been really, really interesting, and I thank you...

Glenn Ligon: Oh, thank you for doing it.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: ...for, for talking to us about it. Is there anything else you would like to comment about?

Glenn Ligon: No, I think I'm okay. Thanks.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: Thank you.

**[END INTERVIEW]**