

## Style

# N.Y.C. exhibits: The Whitney, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art

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By Jason Edward Kaufman

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A roundup of art exhibits you might catch if you're visiting New York soon:

## 'Glenn Ligon: America'

When President and Mrs. Obama decorated the White House, they selected an artwork by Glenn Ligon, the New York artist whose retrospective is currently at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The 1992 canvas, borrowed from the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum, is titled "Black Like Me #2," and like a lot of Ligon's work, it's a painting with a racially charged text. This one's a sentence pulled from the 1961 memoir "[Black Like Me](#)" by John Howard Griffin, a white journalist who artificially darkened his skin to experience the segregated South as a black man. "All traces of the Griffin I had been were wiped from existence" is stenciled in black letters across the top of the canvas, and repeats line after line until the words at the bottom dissolve into murky blackness.

Ligon, 50, is a Bronx-born African American who has devoted his career to making word-based art that elegizes his reflections on being gay and black in America.

"Glenn Ligon: America" begins with expressionistically brushed oil paintings into which he scrawls phrases alluding to his homoerotic self-awakening. Then come series of word paintings with capital letters

stenciled in black oil stick, some with coal dust and black backgrounds that render them more or less illegible. We are told they quote passages from Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin and other writers, mainly African American. “I remember the very day that I became colored,” for example, is from an essay by Zora Neale Hurston.

More stenciled words, now in hot colors, recite racially loaded jokes by Richard Pryor. On another wall are Robert Mapplethorpe’s erotic photographs of black men accompanied by excerpts from critical and theoretical texts about the once-controversial series. Billie Holiday laments emanate faintly from packing crates that, according to the wall text, represent the way a slave once famously shipped himself to freedom.

Ligon’s most famous series, from 1993, adapts 19th-century runaway slave ads that substitute descriptions of himself supplied by friends: “Ran away, Glenn, a young black man twenty-eight years old, about five feet six inches high. Dressed in blue jeans. . . .” In the Whitney’s Madison Avenue window is a neon sign Ligon recently made that reads, “Negro Sunshine,” an ambiguous phrase coined by Gertrude Stein.

In the past few decades, legions of visual artists have made paintings of words — canvases covered with dictionary definitions, synonyms, rebuses, jokes and admonitions. In general, they don’t do much for me. But Ligon’s lettered homages to writers amplify the borrowed words with a quivering sensitivity, and their repetition transforms the phrases into meditations on the plight of being black and gay in the United States.

Imagining himself as a runaway slave suggests a touching vault of imagination that — like Toni Morrison’s first-person slave novels — underlines the horror of the toxic erstwhile normalcy of slavery. The murmuring crates are a similarly doleful reminder of the lengths to which

slaves sought freedom. And his reflections on the social perception of the black male, and on his own sexuality, add complexity to the artist's examination of his identity.

These are grand themes hinging on the black and gay experience in America. Yet I have reservations about Ligon's work. His technical range is severely limited, and for all the inarguable righteousness of his project, I cannot help but feel his work is overly self-referential, lacking the universality of great art.

### **Glenn Ligon: America**

Through June 5 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Ave. at 75th Street. 212-570-3600. [www.whitney.org](http://www.whitney.org).

### **Picasso: Guitars 1912-1914**

This exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art meticulously chronicles Picasso's daily progress as he put the guitar motif through its cubist paces in a profusion of drawings, collages and paintings. Scores of graphic works and paintings are bracketed by two groundbreaking sculptural constructions: a cut-paper guitar and a sheet-metal version, both of which belong to the museum.

The constructions were groundbreaking because they are the first sculptures made by combining components rather than by the traditional methods of carving, modeling or casting. They represent a kind of three-dimensional extension of cubist imagemaking.

Cubism holds such iconic status in the history of art because it was a wholly new approach to visual representation. Until then, artists represented objects as they appear to the eye as seen from one angle.

Picasso represented things as they appear from multiple angles, and also as they are known to the mind, a combination of aspects — seen and intuited — that include what lies behind surfaces.

In other words, a cubist guitar is represented as an accumulation of its visual and material attributes — the pattern of the instrument's wood, the curving silhouette of its side, the cylindrical recess of the sound hole, the vertical of its stringed fret board, the boxlike depth of its body. It was a rethinking of perception and epistemology expressed through innovative and often beautiful visual representation of mass and space.

It's wonderful to have so many of the guitars together, but the curators are so involved with sequencing Picasso's works that they never step back to articulate what was so innovative about cubism itself. That's a problem because many viewers don't understand what's significant about these somewhat difficult works. But here's a chance to look over Picasso's shoulder as he writes that new artistic philosophy.

### **Picasso: Guitars 1912-1914**

Through June 6 at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 W. 53rd St. 212-708-9400. [www.moma.org](http://www.moma.org).

### **Three shows at the Met**

The guitar theme continues at the Metropolitan Museum of Art with an exhibition about stringed-instrument-making through the ages, with special attention to a family of luthiers from Italy who migrated to New York and continue to craft fine instruments today. Another show gathers together several versions of Cezanne's paintings of peasants sitting around a table playing cards, as well as studies of the individual sitters.

In the Asian wing is furniture, decorative screens and architectural elements from a part of the Forbidden City in Beijing created by 18th-century emperor Qianlong as a retirement retreat. He never moved in, and the long-vacant buildings were only recently restored, prompting this traveling show of exquisite woodcarvings inlaid with mother-of-pearl and intricate enamels, paintings on glass, thrones and other luxury goods that illustrate the cost-is-no-object opulence of the powerful imperial court. Look for the recurring motifs of pine, plum blossoms and bamboo, three plants that flourish in winter and represent hope for the emperor's productive life in retirement.

### **Guitar Heroes; Cezanne's Card Players; The Emperor's Private Paradise**

Through July 4, May 8 and May 1, respectively, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Ave. at 82nd Street. 212-535-7710.

[www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org).

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