

November 21, 2025–March 15, 2026

Glenn Ligon: Break It Down



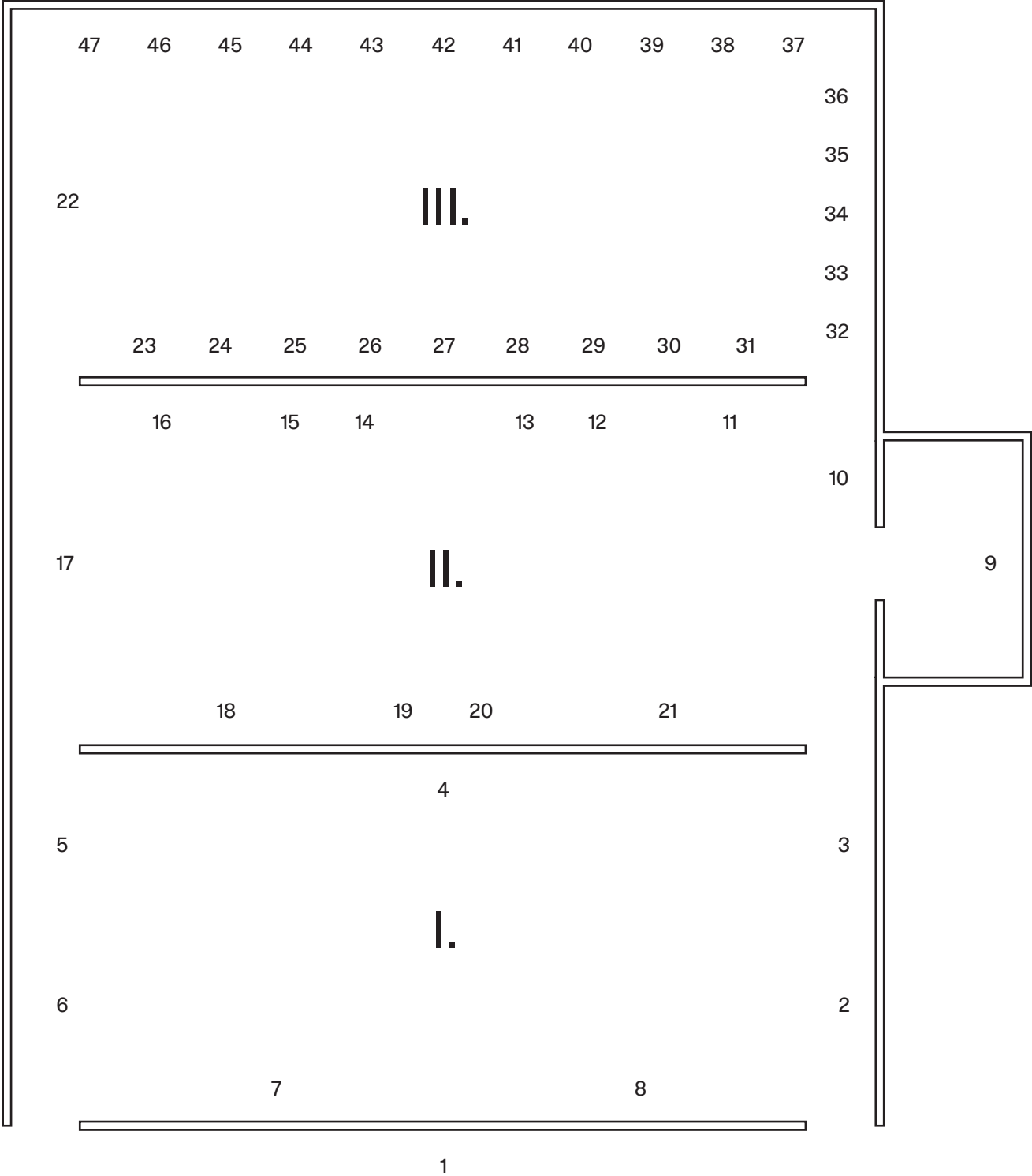
Aspen Art Museum

Break It Down is an exhibition of works by Glenn Ligon that brings together prints, multiples, and works on paper made by the artist since the early 1990s. A preeminent voice in American art, Ligon (b. 1960, New York) often incorporates language into his work to examine the ways in which identity and culture are constructed against the backdrop of the nation's complex and insidious past. Ligon appropriates a diverse range of writing, including literary passages from authors such as James Baldwin, Jean Genet, Gertrude Stein, and Zora Neale Hurston, as well as disclosures from confidants and strangers. Ligon often lays the ground for his work using stencils or templates, tools that belie the intimate, vulnerable, and expressive quality of the chosen text. In discussing his early ventures in printmaking, Ligon remarked, "I am interested in the border between what is mechanical, repetitive, impersonal, and what is autobiographical." This exhibition inhabits and troubles that border to reveal a chimeric self-portrait of the artist, one comprising photographs, reports, annotations, and stories that resist understanding.

The gallery at Aspen Art Museum is divided into three spaces, beginning with a collection of works that refer to Ligon himself, either through overt depiction or implied language. This is followed by an introspective archive that references Ligon's own existing artworks. Depictions of condition reports on the artist's paintings and possessions recur, suspending these artifacts in clinical analyses of their own decomposition.

Since the early 1990s, Ligon has made paintings using excerpts from James Baldwin's 1953 essay "Stranger in the Village." The text details Baldwin's unnerving experiences in the remote Swiss village of Leukerbad, many of whose citizens, according to Baldwin, had never seen a Black man before. In 2023, Ligon began using one of his paintings bearing the opening passage of this text as a rudimentary printing template, in which a long-fibered Japanese paper—koko—would be impressed upon the surface of the painting, and rubbed with carbon and graphite. Within the exhibition's final chapter, in their largest installation to date, these warped reflections of Baldwin's words surge and recede with varied degrees of legibility. The ghostly testimonials consider the ways in which the self inhabits what we make and what we say, the ways in which it dissolves and lingers across time.

Glenn Ligon: *Break It Down*
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List of works

1. *Hands (Diptych)*, 1997

Silkscreen ink and gesso on canvas

78 × 276 in.

Denver Art Museum: Gift from Vicki and Kent Logan to the Collection of the Denver Art Museum

Political defiance and the role of the citizen are of great importance to Ligon, who has drawn upon the iconography of protest in his work. In this two-panel silkscreen, Ligon features an enlarged, abstracted detail of a found photograph documenting the Million Man March, a monumental gathering of Black Americans in Washington, DC. The gathering, held on October 16, 1995, was conceived as a day of symbolic unity by Louis Farrakhan, the leader of the Nation of Islam, though the results were ambiguous. Centering upon established, traditional notions of masculinity, sexuality, and power, the Million Man March left little room for differentiation among the participants, whom Ligon captures here in an anonymizing depiction of raised hands. The right panel, a deep black void, suggests the potential of inactivity or threat of disappearance, emphasizing a duality of presence and absence that characterizes much of Ligon's practice.

I. In the 1980s, as Ligon embarked on his career as an artist, attitudes around visibility and portraiture were shifting. Multi-culturalism became a potent force in art, with many artists of color feeling pressure to depict their identity through figuration. Using templates and mechanisms of serial reproduction, Ligon challenged these trends, presenting himself through textual description, or depicting his face in depersonalized, obscured photos. Across the works in this gallery, Ligon considers what it means to be, as he has said, "a subject that is not there."

2. *End of Year Reports*, 2003

Suite of eight photocopy and silkscreen prints on handmade paper
Each 11 × 8½ in.

Edition of 10 + 4 AP

From first grade through his senior year of high school, Ligon attended Walden School, an elite private school on New York's Upper West Side, commuting to and from his neighborhood in the South Bronx. This work gathers reports filed by Ligon's teachers at Walden throughout his adolescence, including a few entries related to his brother, disguised under Glenn's name. A portrait of the teachers as much as of young Ligon himself, the reports range from terse and muted to detailed and anecdotal. Together, they present a tender, mysterious, humorous, and prescient chronicle of the artist's youth.

3. *Self-Portrait (silver)*, 2007

Acrylic, silkscreen, and coal dust on canvas

Diptych, each 10 × 8 in.

These two small silkscreens, deepen Ligon's connections with Warhol. With a metallic ground and a luminous sheen attributed to a coating of coal dust, the hazy depictions of the artist's face and profile conjure Warhol's diamond dust paintings as well as his infamous 1964 mural *Thirteen Most Wanted Men*.

4. *Figure*, 2001

Fifty unique screenprints on Color-aid paper

Each 9 × 6 in.

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of the Contemporary Arts Council of The Museum of

Modern Art, Committee on Drawings and Prints Fund and Lonti Ebers, 2015

A set of fifty jewel-toned screen prints comprise *Figure*, a sprawling self-portrait that invokes the visual vocabulary of Andy Warhol, a major influence upon Ligon. With the bureaucratic neutrality of a passport photo, the front and back of Ligon's head are presented across each framed work, with a grainy saturation akin to those of Xerox prints. Ligon is both everywhere and nowhere in *Figure*, cloaked in shadow amid these colorful bursts. In a 2018 essay on Warhol, Ligon notes the power of shadow in Warhol's early portraits, highlighting their ability to "become both mirror and shadow," and ultimately "nothing but surface." Ligon made these screen prints by hand, which accounts for the variation in their texture and placement. The sanctity of self begins to fall away within this blunt process of multiplication.

5. *Self-Portrait at Nine Years Old*, 2008

Stenciled pulp on handmade paper

12 × 12 in.

Edition of 25 + 5 AP

6. *Self-Portrait at Eleven Years Old*, 2004

Stenciled pulp on handmade paper

36 × 30 in.

Edition of 20 + 5 AP

In these two stenciled works, made four years apart, Ligon revisits musical icons that shaped his worldview as a child. For *Self-Portrait at Eleven Years Old*, Ligon "recasts" himself as a grinning Stevie Wonder, taken from the cover of his album *Looking Back*. James Brown serves as the subject of *Self-Portrait at Nine Years Old*. For Ligon, invoking these stand-ins does not just transcend acts of emulation, but rather they speak to their power to capture young minds.

7. *Runaways*, 1993

Suite of ten lithographs

Each 16 × 12 in.

Edition of 45 + 10 AP

First presented in Ligon's 1993 exhibition *To Disembark* at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., *Runaways* consists of ten anonymous characterizations of "Glenn," a runaway enslaved person. The descriptions, accented with a dark and knowing humor, are in fact written by friends whom Ligon enlisted to characterize him in the style of a missing persons ad.

8. *Narratives*, 1993

Suite of nine photogravures with chine collé

Each 28 × 21⅞ in.

Edition of 45 + 10 AP

Exhibited alongside *Runaways* in the 1993 Hirshhorn exhibition, *Narratives* molds Ligon's experiences into nine stylized preambles that quote from and mimic the title pages of accounts of formerly enslaved individuals, resulting in revealing autofictions. With self-awareness and an eye toward history, these works provide camouflaged insights into the ironies and transgressions faced by Black artists moving within networks of culture.

II. Techniques of printmaking and the fabrication of multiples have enabled Ligon to revisit and reflect upon existing artworks

in his practice, as well as works by others, often through layering annotations or editorial marks. These acts of returning reveal an interiority and self-reflexivity rarely seen in art-making. Processes and imperfections are laid bare, raising pertinent questions around the success and failure of artworks as means of representation.

9. *Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Black Features and Self-Portrait Exaggerating My White Features*, 1997

Silkscreen on canvas
Diptych, each 120 × 40 in.
Edition of 2 + 1 AP

This diptych is both a homage and a provocation. Ligon references Adrian Piper's groundbreaking *Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features* (1981), in which the artist deploys caricature to subvert and highlight ways in which race is perceived and defined. In two towering images of his figure, Ligon captions one "Self-portrait exaggerating my black features" and the other "Self-portrait exaggerating my white features." As the images are identical, the silkscreens preclude attempts at differentiation, though Ligon challenges viewers to confront harmful stereotypes they may unearth when considering the subject's dress and attitudes. Ligon turns his self-portrait into a mirror in which viewers confront their own convictions. Following the completion of this diptych, Ligon never again represented himself in his work with such clarity.

10. *Punchline*, 2024

Digital image with hand-drawn additions in marker
12 × 9 in.
Edition of 25 + 10 AP

In this recent work, Ligon scanned a sketch for a joke painting by Richard Prince. He then disrupted the printed image directly with a marker, crossing out the majority of an anecdotal joke but leaving its punch line untouched. The casual redaction of the preceding text does not render it completely illegible, challenging the viewer to piece together the story from the beginning with its ending already known.

11. *Untitled (Four Etchings)*, 1992

Suite of four; softground etching, aquatint, spit bite, and sugarlift on paper
Each 25 × 17 3/8 in.

The two prints that form the top half of this four-part suite quote Zora Neale Hurston's 1928 essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me." The canceled templates that made these etchings, in the work *Untitled (Cancellation Prints)*, hang nearby. Barely legible, the two monochromatic panels feature the opening lines from Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man*. This text is also echoed nearby in Ligon's *Condition Report*.

12. *Untitled Plate 2 (Rivington Place Portfolio)*, 2007

Photogravure on Somerset paper
30 × 20 in.
Edition of 50 + 5 AP

13. *Untitled Plate 1 (Exit Art Portfolio)*, 2003

Photogravure
28 3/4 × 21 1/4 in.
Edition of 50 + 8 AP

These two works each present photomicrographs of Ligon's iconic *Stranger* painting series. The cross section of the painting

depicted in *Untitled Plate 1 (Exit Art Portfolio)* is broken down into three strata, each of which is annotated with a text by W. G. Sebald, Yukio Mishima, and Virginia Woolf, respectively. The trio of writings contemplate existential questions of self, instinct, and desire, though their relationship to the microscopic image is unclear. The painting under observation draws upon James Baldwin's 1953 essay "Stranger in the Village," a narrative of alienation. The merging of text and image provides an enigmatic glimpse into Ligon's literary affinities alongside a hyper-analysis of the artist's work. A related piece from 2007, *Untitled Plate 2 (Rivington Place Portfolio)*, follows a more standard depiction of image and analysis, casting its predecessor as a possible aberration.

14. *Untitled (I/America)*, 2023

Digital image with hand-drawn additions in marker
11 × 14 in.
Edition of 30 + 20 AP

15. *Untitled (America/Me)*, 2022

Digital image with hand-drawn additions in marker
11 × 14 in.
Edition of 50 + 10 AP

16. *Baldwin #5 (An identity is questioned only when it is menaced . . .)*, 1993

Oil stick and gouache on paper
50 × 25 in.
Collection of Melony and Adam Lewis

An excerpt from writer James Baldwin's 1976 book-length essay, *The Devil Finds Work*, emerges from this monochromatic work on paper. In the elliptical text, Baldwin outlines the volatile nature of identity, and suggests that subjects be agile in response to these shifting power dynamics. Written nearly two decades prior to Ligon's artistic invocation, Baldwin's text prophetically alludes to the focus on identity within artistic circles of the early 1990s. Black on black, the piece conjures Ligon's own ambiguous relationship to visibility in this work.

17. *Untitled*, 2012

Digital print, ink marker, ballpoint pen, graphite, and tape on burnt paper
20 × 120 in.
Glenstone Museum

Ligon is celebrated for works made from neon that borrow texts and phrases from varied sources including Muhammad Ali, Gertrude Stein, and C. P. Cavafy, among others. "America", however, has been perhaps one of Ligon's most enduring textual materials. Here, the paper template that was used to bend the molten glass tubing to make one of Ligon's *America* neons is charred and marked, exhausted by process.

18. *Condition Report*, 2000

Iris print and iris print with serigraph
Diptych, each 32 × 22 3/4 in.
Edition of 20 + 7 AP

Across two otherwise identical prints, Ligon reproduces his iconic 1988 painting *Untitled (I Am a Man)*, itself a reinterpretation of signs carried by striking Black sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1968, presenting the right version with annotations of a condition report by an art conservator. Ligon's original was his first text-based painting, and in the twelve years since its making, the work began to crack and show signs of aging. Ligon has

expressed that “history is not static and painting is not static,” and these material changes in painting are often echoed by changes in conceptual associations. This instability is visualized by Ligon, who troubles monolithic beliefs in art and history as fixed entities.

19. *Black Rage (back cover)*, 2019
Silkscreen and digital print
11 × 8½ in.
Edition of 100 + 29 AP

20. *Untitled (Condition Report for Black Rage)*, 2015
Silkscreen and digital print
11 × 8½ in.
Edition of 30 + 6 AP

The logic of 2000's *Condition Report* is here applied to the front and back covers of a worn copy of *Black Rage*, a book written by psychiatrists William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs. *Black Rage* was first published in 1968, in the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination, and received immediate media attention. Here, the markings and signs of deterioration shift from a personal possession to an art object, one that synthesizes the consequences of America's history of racial violence. Annotated with the impersonal markings of the conservator, the potent book assumes an uncharacteristic passivity.

21. *Untitled (Cancellation Prints)*, 1992 and 2003
Etching with aquatint, sugar-lift, and spit bite
Diptych, each 28¼ × 20 in.
Edition of 15 + 5 AP

The text in this diptych is derived from Zora Neale Hurston's 1928 essay “How It Feels to Be Colored Me.” Characteristic of Ligon's other works that re-present existing texts through stenciled application, the work is set apart by the large X spanning each etching, signaling that the original print template has been canceled and rendered unusable. Upon encountering the original etching plates years later, Ligon himself applied this cancellation mark and authorized a reprint once the mark was applied. “Canceled but present,” Ligon explains, “new but haunted by the ghosts of their earlier meanings, the prints speak to the mutability of questions of racial identity and a shift in the cultural context in which the original works were received.”

III. The concluding chapter of the exhibition focuses on a new body of work derived from Ligon's ongoing engagement with James Baldwin's 1953 essay “Stranger in the Village.” The text describes Baldwin's disquieting experience in the remote mountain village of Leukerbad, Switzerland, where many of the villagers had never met a Black man. The affinities between Baldwin's story and Ligon's own experiences of estrangement imbued the relationship with autobiographical resonance. In 1996, Ligon made a painting in which an excerpt from the essay was applied with oil stick and paint through a stencil on canvas. This body of work has become a signature for Ligon himself, who, from the outset of the series, has witnessed Baldwin's ascent from a revered, though niche, American writer to a global literary icon. Over the past two years, Ligon has created unique works on paper from rubbing carbon over dampened Japanese paper, known as kozo, atop the surface of a textured painting in a process akin to gravestone rubbing. The results are warped, dizzying, and varied, oscillating between moments of legibility and impenetrable density. In their velocity and weightlessness, the drawings assume a spectral quality.

Presented here is a collection of works made between October 2024 and February 2025. The painting from which the drawings were made hangs nearby.

22. *Stranger Study #41*, 2023
Oil stick, black gesso, and carbon on canvas
40 × 32 in.

All following works measure 25 × 19½ in.

23. *Untitled 11.15.24 #3*, 2024
Carbon and graphite on kozo paper

24. *Untitled 11.15.24 #1*, 2024
Carbon and graphite on kozo paper

25. *Untitled 2.23.25 #1*, 2025
Carbon and graphite on kozo paper

26. *Untitled 11.11.24 #1*, 2024
Carbon and graphite on kozo paper

27. *Untitled 2.26.25 #1*, 2025
Carbon and graphite on kozo paper

28. *Untitled 11.1.24 #2*, 2024
Carbon and graphite on kozo paper

29. *Untitled 11.18.24 #6*, 2024
Carbon and graphite on kozo paper

30. *Untitled 11.18.24 #3*, 2024
Carbon and graphite on kozo paper

31. *Untitled 11.12.24 #1*, 2024
Carbon and graphite on kozo paper

32. *Untitled 11.16.24 #3*, 2024
Carbon and graphite on kozo paper

33. *Untitled 11.11.24 #2*, 2024
Carbon and graphite on kozo paper

34. *Untitled 10.31.24 #2*, 2024
Carbon and graphite on kozo paper

35. *Untitled 11.12.24 #3*, 2024
Carbon and graphite on kozo paper

36. *Untitled 11.12.24 #2*, 2024
Carbon and graphite on kozo paper

37. *Untitled 11.1.24 #1*, 2024
Carbon and graphite on kozo paper

38. *Untitled 11.15.24 #2*, 2024
Carbon and graphite on kozo paper

39. *Untitled 11.18.24 #2*, 2024
Carbon and graphite on kozo paper

40. *Untitled 10.31.24 #3*, 2024
Carbon and graphite on kozo paper

41. *Untitled 11.16.24 #2*, 2024
Carbon and graphite on kozo paper

42. *Untitled 11.11.24 #3*, 2024
Carbon and graphite on kozo paper

43. *Untitled 2.23.25 #2*, 2025
Carbon and graphite on kozo paper

44. *Untitled 10.31.24 #1*, 2024
Carbon and graphite on kozo paper

45. *Untitled 11.1.24 #3*, 2024
Carbon and graphite on kozo paper

46. *Untitled 10.31.24 #4*, 2024
Carbon and graphite on kozo paper

47. *Untitled 11.18.24 #4*, 2024
Carbon and graphite on kozo paper

Glenn Ligon (b. 1960) is an artist living and working in New York. Throughout his career, Ligon has pursued an incisive exploration of American history, literature, and society across bodies of work that build critically on the legacies of modern painting and conceptual art. He earned his BA from Wesleyan University (1982) and attended the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program (1985). In 2011 the Whitney Museum of American Art held a mid-career retrospective, *AMERICA*, organized by Scott Rothkopf, which traveled nationally. Important solo exhibitions include *All Over the Place*, The Fitzwilliam Museum at the University of Cambridge,

England (2024–25); *Post-Noir*, Carre d'Art, Nîmes (2022); *Call and Response*, Camden Arts Centre, London (2014); and *Some Changes*, The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, Toronto (traveled internationally) (2005). Select curatorial projects include *Grief and Grievance*, New Museum, New York (2021); *Blue Black*, Pulitzer Arts Foundation, St. Louis (2017); and *Encounters and Collisions*, Nottingham Contemporary and Tate Liverpool, England (2015). Ligon's work has been shown in major international exhibitions, including the Venice Biennale (2015, 1997), Berlin Biennial (2014), Istanbul Biennial (2019, 2011), and Documenta XI (2002).

Aspen Art Museum

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Hours

Tuesday–Sunday, 10 AM–6 PM
Closed Mondays

Admission to the AAM is free courtesy of Amy and John Phelan.

Glenn Ligon: *Break It Down* is curated by Daniel Merritt, Chief Curator.

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Cover image:

Self-Portrait (silver) (detail), 2007

Acrylic, silkscreen, and coal dust on canvas

Diptych, each 10 x 8 in.

Photographer Credit: Ronald Amstutz © Glenn Ligon;

Courtesy of the artist, Hauser & Wirth, and Thomas Dane Gallery.



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