



Glenn Ligon

Circa 1971, '72, or '73



Dieu Donn  Lab Grant Program: Glenn Ligon

Circa 1971, '72 or '73

October 28 - December 23, 2004

Glenn Ligon (GL) is a 2003 recipient of Dieu Donn  Papermill's Lab Grant Residency for mid-career artists. Over the course of his residency, Ligon collaborated with Dieu Donn  Studio Director, Megan Moorhouse, to create two editions: *End of Year Reports, 2003* and *Self Portrait at Eleven Years Old, 2004*. The first is a suite of eight prints on handmade paper that recreate the artist's grade school report cards. The second is a pulp painted image of Stevie Wonder, titled as a self portrait to reference the artist's identification with his childhood musical hero.

For this publication, Dieu Donn  asked Brett Littman (BL), Deputy Director of P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, a Museum of Modern Art affiliate, and the Managing Director of *wps1.org*, P.S.1's internet radio station, to conduct an email interview with the artist. As an art critic and as the former Co-Director of Dieu Donn  from 2001 - 2003, Littman has a keen perspective on both Ligon's work and the unique collaborative situation presented to him at Dieu Donn .

END OF YEAR REPORT
 I WAS BORN [unclear]
 New York, N.Y., 1934
 NAME OF CHILD: Gleason Light GRADE: 5 DATE: May 1938
 I. PERSONAL DESCRIPTION
 Gleason is very creative, bright and cunning. He has a great sense of humor and is quick to pick up unspoken feelings and things are said by others. He usually brings these out sometimes taking on a roll almost like a court jester. Sometimes he provokes friction amongst others and has a way of getting himself in trouble by teasing. Students bigger than himself. Gleason enjoys playing games with others and at such occasions interacts well with classmates. He has developed a habit of hiding his real feelings and concealing his real ideas. He is at times moody and uncooperative and lets off his anger with the world at all around him. When Gleason is happy, he will change completely and he becomes friendly and...
 Gleason has not adjusted well to the open curriculum. He has been negligent about schedule commitments and has been reluctant to involve himself in special activities, though he did participate and do an excellent job in a puppet show. Gleason often has expressed objections to doing things but seldom comes up with ideas of his own. His attitude is suggested idea of mine is always "Do I have to?" He does not allow himself to get interested even though he could. Academically Gleason is very capable and...

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 I. PERSONAL DESCRIPTION
 can produce good work with little effort. Not often has he shown excitement at work he has done and he spends most of his working up at the end of the year. Again this is not necessarily his real feeling but just his own coping of his self. Gleason has surpassed all other in the class in his analytical and comprehension abilities and seldom is confused by new work. Gleason does most of his written work at home. He spends a lot of time in school doing very little or visiting himself in writing activities.

END OF YEAR REPORT
 I WAS BORN [unclear]
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 NAME OF CHILD: Gleason Light GRADE: 5 DATE: May 1938
 I. PERSONAL DESCRIPTION
 Gleason has grown up alot this year. He never relaxes anymore and is learning to handle the daily frustrations which used to drive him to hysteria. He will make an exit and be overbearing towards fellow classmates who irritate him, but he is learning to temper his insults and be more forgiving. He likes to dominate in his relationships with the boys (he has nothing to do with the girls other than handling them). He is close friends with Paul Leroy, Terry Lewis and Gary Sumner.
 Gleason has not yet learned to be vulnerable with his peers. I think he is afraid of showing any weakness, so he tends to make the offensive. He can be very loud when he wants to make a point. He is somewhat of a talkative but he is a really poor sport when he is losing. Unless reminded frequently, he tends to procrastinate about his school-work and required assignments. He rarely hands in work on time. Gleason has an acid, witty sense of humor.
 II. ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE
 Gleason has a really fine mind. He is clever and intelligent. This is not always evident in everyday classroom performance. He will goof off if he has got away with it, and needs to be reminded forcefully of his academic obligations. In spite of his reluctance, he is an excellent story writer. He has a flair with words that tells much about his real sensitivity and intelligence. His vocabulary and spelling are excellent. He reads well but not widely. His math ability is suggestive, but he tends to be very careless on exams at times. Gleason has a good knowledge of slavery and black history, but finds standard school studies uninteresting and, as yet has developed no special interests. He tends to be politically apathetic about being black, which is a shame.
 I feel that both intellectually and emotionally, Gleason is an exceptional person. As yet, he has not shown real enthusiasm for exploring his world, and is afraid to understand or be really aware of himself of some of his feelings.

- BL I remember that when we first met at Dieu Donné we talked about literature (Winfried Georg Sebald's Austerlitz?). What are you reading now?
- GL I recently read José Saramago's *The Cave*, Italo Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, *A Short History of the Shadow* by Victor Stoichita, Oliver Sacks' *An Anthropologist on Mars* and the novel *Solaris* by Stanislaw Lem. All of this is research for a video and a painting project based on a short story by Hans Christian Andersen called *The Shadow*, which is about a writer whose shadow disappears, only to come back years later and take over his life. The main character in the Andersen tale does not recognize his shadow and that moment when the self is unrecognized, the notion of being a stranger to oneself, is what I want to explore in the two projects.
- BL Shadows are very contradictory. It seems that in popular culture we envision the shadow as signaling something ominous – like the killer in *Halloween* coming through the woods or Freddy Krueger sneaking up behind someone. On the other hand Balinese shadow puppets and hand shadows are comforting to children and seeing one's shadow can often be reassuring. Do you feel that shadows implicitly represent a disjunction between the self and the other? Are they the representation of form without substance?
- GL It is precisely that ambiguous line between self and other that I am interested in. The shadow has been represented as a projection of a malevolent inner self (as in the movie *Nosferatu*) and as a container of the soul, the loss of which is a loss of self. The shadow not only represents a disjunction between the self and the other, it represents an estrangement of the self from the self.
- BL Do you feel that we all have this malevolent shadow inside of us? Does this shadow act as a stand-in for bellicosity, anger, misunderstanding, self-abnegation, and racism? Also, I was just rereading your article "Black Light: David Hammons and Poetics of Emptiness" in the last *Artforum*. I am trying to understand the concept of "reconciling the desire to be from nowhere, to have no identity and



no personality, with the desire to make light ‘very black,’ when black is suggestive of a particular history, culture, and practices?” Could you explain this a little more?

GL No, I am not suggesting that the shadow is always a figure of malevolence. I want to pose a more nuanced reading of it. One of the things that interests me in David Hammons’ work is that he is fascinated by light—both by its absence and its presence—and has made several pieces that deal with this theme. What Hammons is trying to do is reconcile the desire to make dematerialized art objects and minimal environments with the desire to locate those objects and environments within specific cultural practices. In other words, what makes an empty, dark room that Hammons entitles *Concerto in Black and Blue* a space that is “very black” as opposed to merely “dark”? What I suggest in the article is that one of the ways he does that is through language. What we bring to the space in relation to the words “black” and “blue” is what makes the space “very black.”

BL Thanks for the clarification. I think that I understand your point, and maybe the contrast between James Turrell and Hammons that you pose in the essay is the way to understand how Hammons’ work deals with “very black” light by taking Turrell’s concern with the viewer’s activation of the space and the viewer’s perceptions of the space and adding into the mix questions of race and culture.

To shift gears a little, your new editions produced by Dieu Donn , *Self Portrait at Eleven Years Old*, 2004 and *End of Year Reports*, 2003 seem to mine not only your personal history but also your identification with pop culture icons (i.e. Stevie Wonder). I think that Megan Moorhouse, Dieu Donn ’s Studio Director, mentioned to me that you are going to continue the idea of “self portraits” of other pop icons. What do you hope to explore in this series?

GL Remember when you were a kid and one album or a song seemed to speak directly to your soul? The singer seemed to have made the record just for you. And you lived intensely in that album or song



for a while, playing it everyday, buying posters of the singer, dressing like him or her, imitating his or her singing style in the bathroom mirror. That singer's image was your image and that is what the series of drawings and the print at Dieu Donn  is about. I am trying to remember what singers I was into when I was younger and I am doing drawings of a singer to correspond to every year of my life. The list varies widely, from Stevie Wonder and Michael Jackson to David Bowie and Jessye Norman. It is about how you can become so intensely identified with pop culture figures that they become part of how you see yourself in the world.

- BL I remember wanting to dress and act like Sting (from the early Police albums) when I was 13. A little later it was Bowie from the Station to Station album. Are you interested in the uneasy relationship between what is classified as high and low art?
- GL I think that all those distinctions between high and low have lost their potency. The high is the low, and vice versa.
- BL Are you interested in process in your work? I imagine that working with handmade paper is very different than painting or working with photography. Was there anything specific that you learned or experienced at Dieu Donn ?
- GL The difference between my studio practice and working with Dieu Donn  is that in the studio it's just me. Working with Dieu Donn  was much more collaborative because the technical aspects of the medium were new to me and I relied on the staff to figure out how to make things work. While I am used to endless revisions in the studio, I was much more conscious of getting my ideas to a certain level of polish before I presented them to Dieu Donn . Overall, it was incredibly easy, which is not the usual process for me. I have fifty more ideas for projects I want to do with them.
- BL When I was at Dieu Donn  I was always happy to see artists learning to work collaboratively with the

LEFT AND CENTER: End of Year Reports, 2003 (two prints from a suite of eight), photocopy and silkscreen on pigmented cotton and abaca paper, 11 x 8 1/2 inches
 RIGHT: Megan Moorhouse and Rachel Gladfelter editing, Self Portrait at Eleven Years Old, while Eve Biddle looks on

studio staff. In my mind, hand papermaking is taking discrete materials (pulp, water, pressure) and making them into something that is cohesive and whole through the interaction of the artist and the papermaker.

One last question, I want to ask you how you would define collaboration? Have you ever collaborated with another artist or writer? I have been doing a lot of research into collaborative art and design groups and have really had a hard time getting a handle on what true collaboration is. Often I feel that what is presented as collaborative is the layering of ideas or a record of a client/fabricator relationship of compromise rather than a true synthesis of styles.

- GL Well, there seem to be two kinds of collaborations: one of an artist collaborating with another artist and one of an artist collaborating with a technician or workshop. The distinction I would make between the two is that collaborations between artists, if they work, are about inhabiting each others' concerns, about creating something that is a hybrid, not quite one artist or the other. With a workshop it is more about translating ideas an artist has into a new media, with the workshop not only supplying the technical knowledge to execute a vision but also suggesting avenues that the artist might not ever have gone down. I have done both kinds of collaboration but I think the collaborations I have done with workshops or technicians have been most successful because the egos involved are more under control.

This email interview was conducted from September 14 through October 5, 2004.

LIST OF WORKS PRODUCED

End of Year Reports, 2003

suite of eight prints

published by the artist in an edition of 10 with 4 proofs

photocopy and silkscreen on pigmented cotton and abaca paper, 11 x 8 1/2 inches

paper handmade by Megan Moorhouse at Dieu Donné Papermill

printed by Luther Davis at Axelle Editions, Brooklyn, NY

Self Portrait at Eleven Years Old, 2004

published by Dieu Donné Papermill in an edition of 20 with 13 proofs

cotton base sheet with stenciled linen pulp painting, 36 x 30 inches

collaborator: Megan Moorhouse assisted by Rachel Gladfelter

Glenn Ligon [b. 1960, Bronx, New York] is a painter who lives and works in New York. Ligon received his BA in 1982 from Wesleyan University and completed the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program in 1985. He has since had solo exhibitions at institutions including Dia Center for the Arts, New York, NY; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY; Regen Projects, Los Angeles, CA; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN; St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, MO; ArtPace, San Antonio, TX; and the Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, NY. Ligon received a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship in 2003, a Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant in 1997, a National Endowment for the Arts award in painting in 1991, and an N.E.A. award in drawing in 1989. This Lab Grant Residency marks his first work in handmade paper.

Founded in 1976, Dieu Donn  Papermill, Inc. is a non-profit artist workspace dedicated to the creation, promotion, and preservation of contemporary art using the hand papermaking process. In support of this mission, Dieu Donn  collaborates with artists and other partners, presents exhibitions, conducts educational programs, and maintains an archive of paper art.

The Dieu Donn  Lab Grant Program, initiated in 2000, provides mid-career artists with a twelve-day residency to collaborate in hand papermaking at Dieu Donn  Papermill. Through this program, Dieu Donn  intends to produce exciting new work with artists who have a mature vision and long-standing commitment to artistic practice, thereby raising the profile of hand papermaking as an artmaking process and breaking new ground in the field. Past participants in the program include Melvin Edwards, Jane Hammond, Jim Hodges, Dorothea Rockburne, and Robert Cottingham.

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This is issue number 6 of the Dieu Donn  Lab Grant Program publication series documenting Dieu Donn 's residency program for mid-career artists.

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