



"It's not answers; art is about getting to good questions."

GLENN LIGON

Glenn Ligon

*Warm Broad Glow II*, 2011

Neon, paint, and powder-coated aluminum

21 1/2 x 240 in. (54.6 x 609.6 cm)

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, purchase, with funds from with Marcia Dunn and Jonathan Sobel

*Warm Broad Glow*, 2005, is artist Glenn Ligon's first neon piece. The work is simply the phrase "negro sunshine," taken from Gertrude Stein's 1909 novel, *Three Lives*. She wrote, "Rose laughed when she was happy but she had not the wide, abandoned laughter that makes the warm broad glow of negro sunshine. Rose was never joyous with the earth-born, boundless joy of negroes." The author was speaking to a broad racial stereotype of her day, but Ligon removes the text from its original context, presenting it in neon lights within the museum walls, and offering viewers the opportunity to engage the phrase from a contemporary perspective.

Ligon asks his audience to consider the evolving nature of language and the stereotypes it can conjure. The outdated language utilized in *Warm Broad Glow* recalls the mind-set of a historical era, but evokes a wide range of associations today, from minstrelsy to gospel choirs. Each generation contends with issues of race in its own way; it is important to carefully consider the labels applied in the past to understand why they have evolved. What has changed in the century since Stein's novel? Other authors and speakers quoted in *Glenn Ligon: AMERICA* include Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, Jean Genet, Richard Pryor, Richard Dyer, and Jesse Jackson, and singers such as Billie Holiday, Bob Marley, KRS-One, and Ice Cube. Beyond the traditional mediums of speech—print and song—Ligon also explores how notions of race have evolved in coloring books, photography, marches, and portraiture, reaching into the past to address these issues in the present.

Ligon turned a metaphorical phrase—"negro," by definition, "black"—into a literal manifestation in *Warm Broad Glow* by painting the front of the neon sign black, with white light escaping from behind, creating a halo effect. Since the color black is characterized by the absence of light, the oxymoron of "negro sunshine" speaks to the unrealistic nature of the stereotypes it references. Ligon's use of industrial materials often associated with advertisements adds yet another layer to the work and draws on the precedence of other twentieth-century artists who use neon lights, such as Bruce Nauman and Mario Merz.