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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Museums Review **In the galleries:**

Glenn Ligon exhibition draws on Baldwin, Stein and Warhol

By **Mark Jenkins**
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Words are prized in Glenn Ligon's art, but legibility is another matter. The celebrated New York artist's show at Georgetown University's Maria & Alberto de la Cruz Gallery, "To be a Negro in this country is really never to be looked at," both highlights and eclipses parts of lines from James Baldwin and Gertrude Stein. The text has meaning to the artist, yet he largely obscures it with heavy black materials, including paint, oil stick and coal dust.

Glenn Ligon. "Grey Hands #3," 1996.

Such obliterations represent "the gaps and areas of opacity and unknowability that are part of any encounter with what is perceived to be an other," Ligon's statement explains. Thus, various kinds of writing will serve his purposes just as well, if differently.

The Baldwin passage is from a memoir that recounts being an African American in a small Swiss village; the Stein excerpt is a racist stereotype from one of her works of fiction. Baldwin's words share something of how Ligon sees the world; Stein's reflect how the world (or a stubborn lump of it) sees him.

Ligon's experience as a black gay man is central to his often black-and-white work. So is his time as a protege of Andy Warhol, whose use of repetition and borrowed, mechanically reproduced images inspired Ligon. This show includes a secondhand contribution from Warhol: a facsimile of the pop artist's 1974 "Washington Monument" wallpaper. Atop the repeated sketch of the landmark and greenery, Ligon has placed five pictures from his "Grey Hands" series. These photographic close-ups of participants in the 1995 Million Man March were silk-screened and then overpainted, as Warhol might have done. The contrast between the two artists' contributions to this wall-filling piece expresses another twofold view of African American life.

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The only splash of color comes in one red-tinted version of the series derived from Stein's words. The variation doesn't offer a reprieve from the show's severity. Overlaid on the smeary black text, the red is far from cheerful, a scarlet letter in a sequence of urgent missives.

Across the atrium from Ligon's show, Georgie Friedman distills chaos into a calming video loop. Hurricane Katrina was the original motivation for the principal piece in "Vortex," the Boston artist's exhibition at Spagnuolo Gallery, so the serenity is ironic. (The two venues are in the same building, although they have different street addresses.)

Friedman filmed ocean waves, and then digitally melded them into a pulsating circle. The video turns the sudden intensity and violence of an ocean storm into an ever-changing but essentially orderly vision, its roundabout action emphasized by a droning score by the artist and her uncle, Jere Friedman. Friedman is compelled by mankind's dual roles — as both victim and perpetrator — in an increasingly destructive climate. Yet this squall warning is less ominous than transcendental.

Glenn Ligon: To be a Negro in this country is really never to be looked at Through April 7 at Maria & Alberto de la Cruz Gallery, Georgetown University, 3535 Prospect St. NW.

Georgie Friedman: Vortex Through June 2 at Spagnuolo Gallery, Georgetown University, 1221 36th St. NW.

Georgie Friedman, "Eye of the Storm III," video installation detail, on view at Georgetown University's Spagnuolo Gallery.

GEORGIE FRIEDMAN

Shadowlands

The Washington Sculptors Group show at the American Center for Physics can be seen as an array of scale models, but these 3-D pieces don't literally represent scientific phenomena. The nine artists who contributed to "Shadowlands" are informed by physics, yet not bound by its laws.

If the show's title refers to territory uncharted by science, it also acknowledges the role of shadows in many of the works. Jean Sausele-Knodt's complex constructions of wood, metal and concrete cast elaborate patterns on nearby surfaces. So do John A. Schaffner's painted-wood sculptures, which spiral eccentrically to define figures in space. The shadowing is more tightly contained in Hsin-Hsi Chen's intricate paper sculptures, whose multi-planar surfaces are covered with tonebrous graphite, charcoal, ink and paint.

Several participants employ or build lattice-like forms. Janet Brome arranges window screens, spattered with pigment, into tiers that produce undulating grids on panels painted in contrasting hues. Elsabe Dixon, who keeps bees, covers her wire exoskeletons with tinted wax. Shanthi Chandrasekar's "Wormhole," the closest thing to a real-world diagram in the show, twists fabric into a narrow tunnel that links two circular nets.

Alan Binstock takes a different approach to light and shadow, casting forms of layered glass and resin in watery translucent hues. These rounded pieces, which resemble eyes but also planets, diffuse the light yet don't block it. Binstock's lenses offers a view through, and beyond, the shadowlands.

Shadowlands: 3-D Adventures in Light and Space Through April 12 at the American Center for Physics, One Physics Ellipse, College Park, Md.

Quietly Powerful

Louisa Neill's tiny ceramic sculptures seem to exemplify the aesthetic of a "Quietly Powerful," a multimedia Sense Gallery show that features more than 30 artists. Neill's wall-mounted boxes are partly filled with miniature rocks and slabs, made of the same material and apparently movable. Austere yet toylike, the pieces are an exercise in dollhouse minimalism.

Equally delicate are several works that evoke nature without explicitly depicting it, notably Trenton Jung's set of small botanical abstractions and Dianne Szrepanniak's watercolor in shades of yellow, as if the paper has been stained with flower petals.

Not all the art is so tranquil. Tory Cowles dominates a corner of the room with a towering assemblage of steel and wood whose jagged pinnacle gnarls toward the ceiling. In a selection devoted to "interests" — according to a gallery note — the sculpture is confident and outspoken.

Cowles's creation shares with several others a reliance on found objects. Dainty paper pieces by Amanda Malina fill a center on apple seeds. Mila Brown plants a fallen birch tree amid a flowery collage and Sue Kassewitz incorporates rope, floats and a buoy into a nautically themed fabric piece. Such works may be lovely, but they evoke a big, noisy universe.

Quietly Powerful Through April 14 at Sense Gallery, 3111 Georgia Ave. N.W.

Print version

Georgie Friedman. "Eye of the Storm III," video still, 2018.

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