

Blue Black

**GLENN LIGON // PULITZER
ARTS FOUNDATION**

By Brian Prugh



When Glenn Ligon visited the Pulitzer Arts Foundation in St. Louis, Missouri, to consider doing a project, he was looking at Ellsworth Kelly's monumental painting on aluminum, entitled *Blue Black* (2000), when he "heard Louis Armstrong's gravel-strewn voice singing, 'What did I do to be so black and blue?'"¹ The song was the germ of this exhibition, curated by Ligon and conceived to explore the space between the rigorous and elegant painting by Kelly, contrasted with Armstrong's "melancholy show tune about racial inequality."² The group exhibition brings together over fifty works, ranging from abstraction and figurative painting to outsider art, film, and textile, among other mediums.

The curatorial strategy thus sets up two boundaries for the work in the show: the colors blue and black as formal elements on the one side, and associations with the colors black and blue—including race, bruising as a metaphor, and the specific kind of suffering resulting from racism and racial inequality—on the other. It also suggests an opposition: between cool, formal works like Kelly's and more socially and

politically engaged works like many included in the show. I left the exhibition not with the sense that the works were participating in a debate, but rather with a feeling that a deep current unites them.

Kelly's *Blue Black* is a tall, narrow column of a painting. A deep sky-blue rectangle sits atop a black one, the whole work 28 feet tall and 70 inches wide. Looking at it this time around, it occurred to me that it felt Doric. A little follow-up research on column proportions suggests that it is remarkably close in proportion to the Doric columns at the Parthenon, columns marked by *entasis* (from the Greek "to strain"), the art-historical term describing the way Greek columns enact their architectural function—the bearing of weight. Kelly's painting is formal, to be sure, but it embodies a kind of strain in a way very much like the column it resembles.

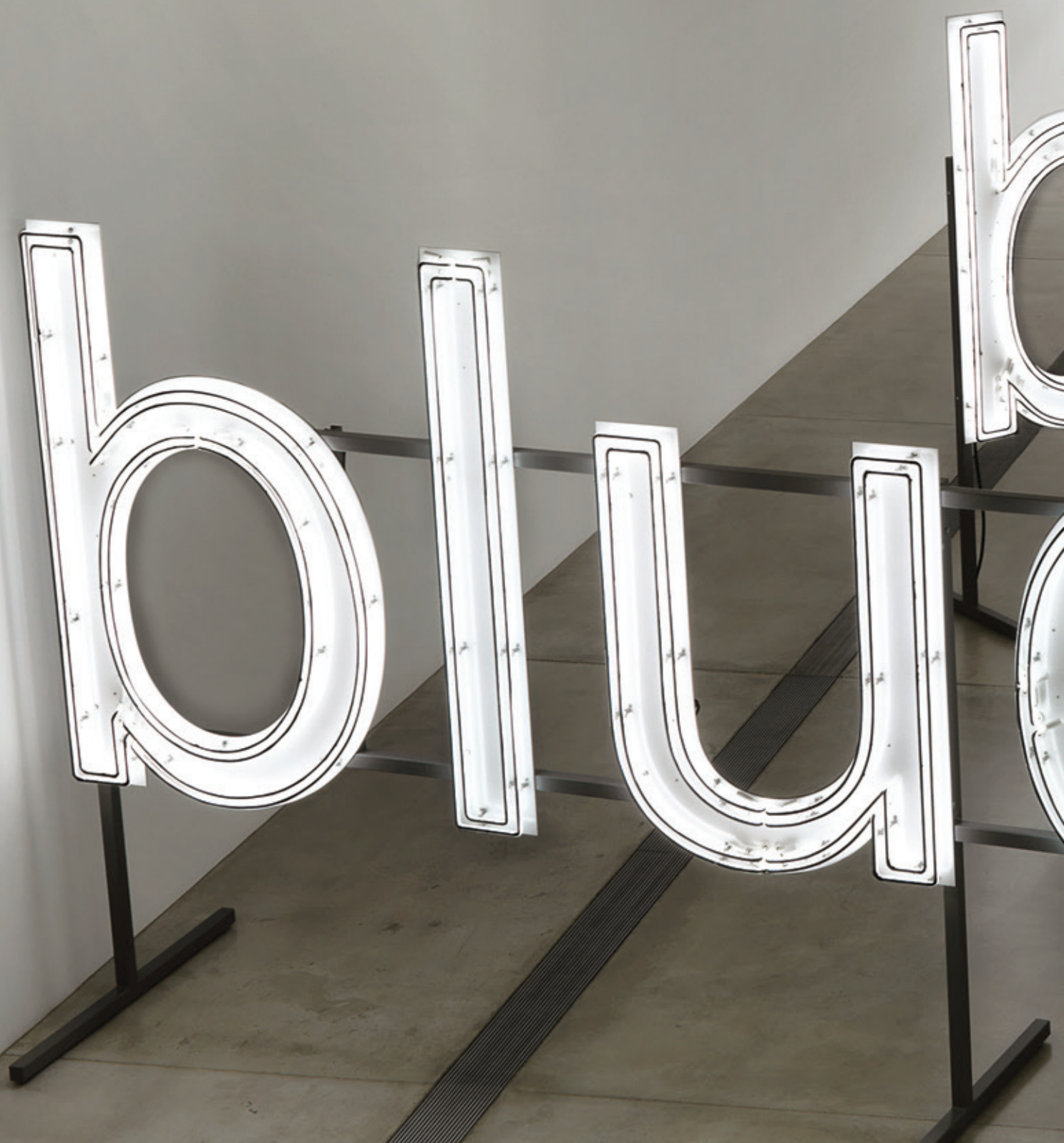
In his essay, Ligon attributes the appearance of the song in his consciousness to the work's title and colors, but I wonder if the shape of the painting—this shape with deep historical resonances of bearing weight—does not also have something to

do with the connection. Because it is a song about bearing weight, Armstrong's voice evidences the strain. Many of the works in the exhibition show signs of a similar kind of strain—strain under the weight of the history of race in America, and under the weight of what it is to be human in the face of that.

The most commanding painting in the exhibition is Kerry James Marshall's *Untitled (policeman)* (2015), a portrait of a Chicago Police Department officer astride his squad car on a blue night. There is a tightly constructed pictorial logic that gives the limbs of the officer such visual force; the composition of this painting is a primary source of its power. Recalling Picasso's portrait of Gertrude Stein, Marshall's officer mirrors the pose. The historical resonance of the work builds upon this reference, opening up another level of interpretation. The experience of the work unfolds over the course of looking, and perhaps because of the famously masklike character of Picasso's rendering of Stein's face, Marshall's officer's features took on a masklike character, too.

Indeed, despite his







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athletic posturing, the personality of the officer seems somewhat hidden. But it is a revealing hiddenness. The officer positions his body with authority, but there are manifold tensions playing across this pose—a tension between the noble vocation to serve and protect the innocent and the ways that policing has systematically inflicted damage on black communities, in particular. There are tensions related to the obscuring of identity that comes along with serving as a functionary of the city government, symbolizing the enforcement of “peace” and “order.” The echo of the Stein portrait invokes the weight of history, the weight of tradition, the weight of the medium. All of this hangs on the painting like the uniform on the officer. Yet, a face looks out from the uniform—and if it is masklike, it is only to affirm the existence of what is hidden; the individual straining against the forces (both natural and human) that would destroy it in an instant, and through which it must navigate some meaningful existence.

— A large painting on paper by Kara Walker, *Four Idioms on Negro Art #1* (2015), is flanked by a painting by Malcolm Bailey (at right) and two paintings by Jean-Michel Basquiat (at left). Walker’s painting is a study in brutality: soldiers with helmets and guns, silhouetted in black, attack and wreak havoc on brown nude figures, whose bodies are trampled and tossed about in a grotesque massacre. Glancing to the right, Bailey’s painting, *Untitled* (1969) looks like fanciful decoration by comparison. A bright sapphire blue with white filigree brushwork, it seems unconcerned with the travesties depicted in Walker’s painting. Upon closer inspection, the flower at center is of cotton, and the abstract designs flanking it are sketches of a plan for arranging slaves below decks on a slave ship, giving the painting an unexpected punch. Thus, in very different ways, both paintings shoulder the weight of America’s ugly history that continues to exert a hold on contemporary culture.

Basquiat’s two little canvases, each entitled *To Repel Ghosts* (1986), are the only works in the show that seem to escape weight entirely. On a ground the same blue as Bailey’s, the white letters on the painting are crossed out with black paint. The brilliance of these incredibly simple paintings is that they stake a claim and set a task for the painting. In the context of the surrounding paintings, the ghosts immediately suggested are the restless victims of slavery and racism demanding justice. Basquiat acknowledges this



history, while announcing a desire to escape its haunting. But there is a way in which the act of creating a ghost repellent allows the ghosts to dominate the object. So, he crosses it out. And that little action makes these canvases seem to defy gravity, like the leap of a ballet dancer, that looks so effortless and yet is utterly controlled and practiced. —

— The central metaphor of the exhibition is that of a bruise, which shows up in Byron Kim's *Innocence over Blue* (2016)—a painting about a bruise—and Ligon's *A Small Band* (2016), a neon light installation of the words: "blues," "blood" and "bruise," not to mention the Armstrong song that helped inspire the show. The bruise, a visible manifestation of an interior injury—a wound that sits just below the surface of the skin, and that is healing—is very much like entasis, in that it shows an unseen force, makes visible an unseen strain. —

— As I try to think about how to sum up the show, my thoughts keep returning to Susan Rothenberg's *The Caribbean* (2015), an innocuous-sounding

painting of two bathers in the Caribbean. But there is something at work much more intense than a nighttime dip in the ocean. For whatever reason, I get the feeling that the water is deep, really deep. A diagonal black sky imperils the scene. Cerulean and cobalt blues, sitting next to each other, create a vibration that amplifies the unease, for all its delicate loveliness. The two heads bobbing above the water seem oddly distant from one another, each one absorbed in the activity of keeping their weight on the surface. —

— The strain here is palpable, the ability to bear it is fragile, and the elemental aloneness of the figures inescapable. —

Blue Black is on view at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation from June 9–October 7, 2017.

1 Glenn Ligon, "Blue Black," catalogue for Blue Black, published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same name at Pulitzer Arts Foundation, St. Louis, MO, June 9–October 7, 2017.

2 Ibid.

TITLE PAGE:

Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled (Policeman)*, 2015. ©Kerry James Marshall.

PAGE 31:

Installation view of *Blue Black*, Entrance Gallery. Pulitzer Arts Foundation, 2017. Photograph © Alise O'Brien Photography.

PREVIOUS SPREAD:

Glenn Ligon, *A Small Band*, 2015. Neon and paint, 74.75 x 797.5 inches. Courtesy of the artist; Thomas Dane Gallery, London; Lühring Augustine, New York; Regan Projects, Los Angeles © Glenn Ligon. Installation view of *Blue Black*, Pulitzer Arts Foundation, 2017. Photograph © Alise O'Brien Photography.

OPPOSITE PAGE:

Installation view of *Blue Black*, West Gallery. Pulitzer Arts Foundation, 2017. Photograph by Jim Corbett © Alise O'Brien Photography.

BELOW:

Susan Rothenberg, *The Caribbean*, 2015. Oil on canvas, 50.25 x 72 inches.

