

Figure

by Wayne Koestenbaum

1.
How frequently do you look in the mirror? Does your face please you? Are you disgusted to detect familial features? Do you worship or hate your ancestors? Do you consider your image erotic? Do you pretend that you are a star's child? If you squint, does your reflection become abstract? Is abstraction a transcendental escape from identity or a psychotic spasm of depersonalization?

2.
Color-aid paper, dignified by Josef Albers in his pedagogy and in his seminal *Interaction of Color*, has the advantage of lacking soul and intentionality; like Citroëns or Edsels, the background monochromes of Glenn Ligon's self-portraits (50 silkscreened specimens, on a range of Color-aid tints), speak with the mild-mannered tone of an apologist for big business, or with the frantic, chipper euphoria of a courtesy caller; or else these matte colors, evading revelation, merely pretend to offer assurance, regularity, and plausibility.

3.
On the back of Ligon's head sits a circle produced (I presume) by a flashbulb's reflection. Abstracted, this aureole—orifice? smudge?—overtakes the image and, like the Greek rhetorical figure of *prosopopoeia* ("a figure of speech in which an imaginary or absent person is represented as speaking or acting"), persuades us that a journey toward meaning is underway. This bright smear on the back of the head confronts the viewer with a Cyclopean candor. One eye may more accurately hail the spectator than two eyes; one eye may offer a more flattering dose of recognition that we usually receive from strangers.

4.
Andy Warhol's serial portraits, whether of shadows, Ethel Scull, or himself, propose identity as a gallantly mutating entity, wearing the mask of banality (or reticence) to shield against misinterpretation and cruel dismissal. (Better to be thought banal than to be banished or beaten.) When we see the same face again and again, each time sporting a different color, a new set of accidental striations and speckles caused by the mechanical silkscreen process, we may feel offended by the sameness or we may feel rubbed and tickled by it, nudged with a tactile incrementality (sight, too, can be haptic) toward, if not a climax, then a tsunami of hyperaesthesia, like what I imagine Roman Polanski felt when he first had sex with Sharon Tate, or vice versa.

5. The “V” formed by the gorge of Ligon’s shirt, its top buttons evidently unfastened, competes for our attention with other surface occurrences; this “V” vies with nose and lips and ears, with luminous splotches on the face, as well as with the back-drop’s aleatory dots and spurts of ink. When I inspect gradations of cream on a Robert Ryman painting (say, *Twin* [1966]), I set up a relation of fruitless quest, of interpretive adamancy; and when I choose to lose perspective by staring at Ligon’s “V,” I invest it with allegorical intensities, even if his “V” spurns my earnestness.

6. Before figuring out their final destiny, the artist might have wondered what to do with this stack of 50 self-portraits. He might have put them in a drawer and forgotten about them. He might have stigmatized them and then rescued them from his own scorn. He might have laid them out flat on a table and despaired of finding a plausible sequence. He might have doubted the rightness of framing and hanging them on a wall. He might have arrayed them in the order dictated by the Color-aid chart. He might have suspected that they reveal an embarrassing tendency, fantasy, or debt; embarrassment might hold the key to the work’s forcefulness.

7. The artist’s own likeness, a found object, solves the problem of deciding what to paint; the image’s availability permits an artist—especially one who has consistently been a painter but has also set up a renegade’s relation to that vocation—to retreat from subject matter under the guise of returning to it. The artist may yearn to be insulated from intimacy, from the viewer, from representation, from contemporary art wars, and from the joke of identity. I order a sloe gin fizz not because I want to drink it but because I remember that I am a person who tends to order a sloe gin fizz; I wear Kouros by Yves Saint Laurent not because I like its smell but because I want to be legible to others and to myself as *that person who always wears Kouros*. Ligon, by showing himself looking *like* Ligon and looking *at* Ligon, achieves the liberation of looking *like* and *at* no one.

8. Some colors are more gay than others, though all colors may, to a certain temperament, suggest a farcical polymorphousness. It’s late in history to bring up “gay” as if the concept still provoked controversy, but Ligon’s deadpan

adoption of a color wheel inspires in me a wish to sigh, like Ruth amid her alien corn, nostalgically for my homeland of shade and nuance, my chromatic *chora* of hue, my underground of spurs and thongs and shame. If Ligon’s series of figures are tenants of a revamped periodic table (Miss Helium, Miss Neon, Miss Krypton), then they speak to me of deadly experiments, of a subcultural laboratory’s orgiastic trial-and-error. These portraits obey an austere formal logic; and yet their soldierly sameness unleashes more than an inkling of revolutionary unrest. In cabals, Ligon’s figures gather, parading homogeneity; their numerousness exhibits a communitarian tendency that Walt Whitman might have called “adhesive.” Whether a restive crowd, a gang of loners, a melancholy family, a mise-en-abyme, a reshuffled kinship system, or a toy army, this alliance evades inventory or description, especially when the heads lose individuality and disappear into the reigning monochrome. Ligon’s work often plays with the dialectic of manifestation and erasure: effacement is one of his Circean signatures.

9. From Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*: “You wonder whether you aren’t simply a phantom in other people’s minds. Say, a *figure* in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy.” (Emphasis mine.) The word “figure,” as if in one of Ligon’s text paintings (for example, *Untitled [“I Am An Invisible Man”]* [1991]), comes with invisibility written all over it. When you see me, do you see nothing, or do you see a figure for a race, a history, a burden, a call, a crux? In Ligon’s portraits, plural heads in varying degrees of visibility or opacity, of wholeness or fragmentation, articulate *figure* as the problem of *existing as a figure in another person’s mind*. Looking at the portraits, I imagine that a claustrophobic comfort sleeps within figuration’s booby trap: illogically, I interpret this predicament of *being invisible within a state of heightened visibility* as a swaddled, pacified condition. Perhaps I misconstrue Ligon’s representation of anonymity-within-legibility as a “holding environment,” in D. W. Winnicott’s terms; I mistake Ligon’s tight embrace of genre (serial self-portraiture) as a fugitively secure containment. He portrays the cocooned calm of pretending to be recognizable but retaining, as secret armor and closely-hugged companion, the right to be unrecognizable. I pretend to behave, to produce coherent creations, to operate within countenanced vocabularies, in order to secrete myself from your surveillance.

10.

I grew up on Augusta Way, a block away from Bela Drive. I imagined that Bela Drive bore a likeness to Bela Lugosi, who did not appear in *The Invisible Man*, though he starred in *Dracula*, a drama of identity-replication, contamination, and bloody diaspora. I believed that Bela Drive could not claim the authenticity or primacy of Augusta Way. In fact, my street had no firm lease on identity, on self-sureness, but borrowed its aura from Bela Drive, which reigned over all replicas and contenders. Serial reproduction—a sequence of silkscreened Color-aid self-portraits, members of a second or third generation of same-yet-different images—raises the theme of neighborliness, of adjacency. Gazing at Ligon's figures, I return to an early moment in my life, a moment of discovering the notion of *the nearby*, *the not-I*, and of discovering that my own location lacked solid footing and was liable to spill into abutting identities. Perhaps I might fix my self's place, seize it in a single pose, by repeating it; and thus, when I behold art that performs patient, incremental seriality or stacking, I feel the lure of a homecoming—a return to a consoling strategy, an insistence on repeatedly traversing a given terrain (the field of “I,” of “you,” of “here,” of “not-here”). My grammar school had two parallel kindergarten classes; my teacher was Mrs. Crandall, and the other group's teacher was Mrs. Hoagland. Mrs. Crandall is a figure of *the room to which I was assigned*. Mrs. Hoagland is a figure of *the room to which I was not assigned*. Being absent, in elementary school, was a sin, or at least a noticeable blip, a sign of an internal inconsistency, of a failure to appear. I recognize Glenn Ligon in these images but I also recognize his absence.





