New School’s New Neon
By Carol Vogel

The New School has commissioned its first site-specific artwork for its new University Center building, designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, on the corner of 14th Street and Fifth Avenue in Greenwich Village. The work, scheduled to be on view in 2014, will feature text from Walt Whitman’s “Leaves of Grass” rendered in neon lights. It is the creation of Glenn Ligon, an artist known for work that uses phrases written or uttered by personalities or writers he admires, including Mary Shelley, James Baldwin and Malcolm X.

When Mr. Ligon, who is African-American, had a midcareer retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art last year, the words “negro sunshine” appeared on the Whitney’s facade. The phrase, taken from “Melanctha,” a 1909 novella by Gertrude Stein, seemed startling when viewed out of context. A solo show of his neon sculptures opens on Friday at the Luhring Augustine Gallery in Chelsea.

Tim Marshall, the New School’s provost, said Mr. Ligon’s work was chosen from proposals solicited from artists selected by the faculty.

Mr. Ligon’s piece will be pink neon running around the top of a wall in the center’s first-floor cafe. “It’s two rows of quotes, or about 400 feet of text,” Mr. Ligon said in an e-mail message. When he decided on that text, he said, he was mostly thinking about “encountering strangers, the life of the street, desiring bodies — something for students to think about when they are tired of thinking of their G.P.A. or tuition.”

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