Glenn Ligon to Create Site-Specific Installation at New School

An ambitious neon work will include text from Walt Whitman's 'Leaves of Grass'

By Jerry Portwood

Artist Glenn Ligon is known for provocative works that include text and interpret issues around race, sexuality, and America's history. Now he's being commissioned by The New School to install a neon work in its new University Center, which is at the corner of 14th Street and Fifth Avenue in New York City.

According to a press release, this neon work by Ligon "presents the artist's poignant and luminous investigation of the writings of one of New York City's most iconic and influential poets, Walt Whitman. Streams of neon text chosen from Leaves of Grass will travel around the perimeter walls of the University Center's first-floor Event Café. Ligon re-frames Whitman's lyrical meditations of the city, the body, temporality and the nature of the creative endeavor with a personal and political immediacy."

But don't think this will just be pretty window dressing.

"Whitman created a new space in which to consider the American experiment, and over one hundred and 50 years after its publication, the poems in Leaves of Grass continue to echo throughout the culture," Ligon said. "The quotes in this piece are reflective of a space of encounter and transience, a restless space that in Whitman's poems is characteristic of the space of the city."

The university has an incredible art collection and has been known to push the envelope throughout its history when it comes to the artwork it has commissioned, but it still seems like quite an event to have Ligon's work on view in such a high-profile spot near Union Square. The New School's president, David Van Zandt, doesn't seem conflicted on the public's reception to a potentially contentious piece of work by a great contemporary artist.

"From the famed frescoes by José Clemente Orozco to Kara Walker's recent Event Horizon, The New School has always celebrated art that challenges the status quo and reexamines history," said Van Zandt. "Drawing on this legacy, we are very pleased to inaugurate one of The New School's newest and most striking spaces with Glenn Ligon's provocative and inspiring commission."

Last year, The Whitney held the first comprehensive mid-career retrospective of Ligon's work, which included his text-based paintings, photography, and neon work. Ligon, who is openly gay, lives in New York City.