

**NEW
MUSEUM**

**KIDS
MENU**

FINDING WORDS

Conceived by curator Okwui Enwezor (1963-2019), “Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America” highlights works by artists who address mourning, commemoration, and loss in response to a national emergency of Black grief. Many of the works in “Grief and Grievance” offer alternatives to historic and contemporary erasures of violence against African Americans, instances where there is often little-to-no historical record by depicting existing and newly imagined rituals of celebration and mourning of life. These works create space for healing, resilience, and resistance, suggesting possibilities for a better future. Similarly, anticipating the 2020 election, the exhibition is organized in response to two concurrent movements: the Trump administration’s stoking of white grievances and racism, and a renewed civil rights movement envisioning and voicing demands for justice, led by Black Lives Matter and collaborators. Read more about the exhibition [here](#).

This lesson focuses on ***A Small Band***, 2015, artist Glenn Ligon’s visual poem with the words “blues blood bruise” spelled in neon lights on the New Museum exterior.



KEY WORDS AND PHRASES

- **Visual poetry:** writing in which words express meaning through: their visual form, art and design techniques, the ideas they express, and sometimes their perceived sounds or rhythms
- **blues:** 1) a genre of music originated by African Americans in the South, often expressing experiences of shared struggles; 2) feelings of sadness or despair; 3) police officers' blue uniforms and, by extension, police officers themselves
- **ambiguity:** words or situations with multiple meanings or interpretations

Background for Caregivers:

Please note that caregivers of young children should read the background information provided for this work and the history of anti-Black violence that informs it for their own preparation. We recommend considering how to share truths about police violence and injustice with

age-appropriate language that is sensitive and responsive to children's knowledge and experiences. Here are some examples for discussing the specific historic context informing Glenn Ligon's *A Small Band* with young children:

The artist who made this installation was thinking about Daniel Hamm, who was hurt badly by the police. Hamm was forced to say he did something he didn't do and was wrongly punished.

- *How does it make you feel to hear this? How do you feel when you or someone you know is treated unfairly?*
- *What can you do if you are treated unfairly, or if you see someone else treated unfairly? Let's think about people you can tell and ask for help.*
- *What are your wishes and hopes for change?*

You may wish to find examples online or point out ways you are already engaging with organizations and people in your community who share hopes for racial justice and are working together toward change. Perhaps introduce the activity as a way to practice using art to find words and images to share feelings about racial injustice and unfairness with others.

Glenn Ligon, *A Small Band*, 2015

The words “blues blood bruise” blink in and out of sync, sometimes lit individually and sometimes simultaneously. Known for paintings and sculptures playing with the meaning, context and ambiguity of words used to describe black life in America, Ligon chose “blues blood bruise” from a quote by Daniel Hamm, a black man wrongfully imprisoned for a crime he did not commit as a teenager.

In **Hamm's words**, “I had to, like, open the bruise up and let some of the blues...bruise blood come out to show them.” Hamm was describing being beaten by police who tried to force a false confession, and making himself bleed to stem their violence. Ligon, studying articles about the 1964 event, became fascinated with Hamm's accidental interchanging of “blues” with “bruise.” Ligon also listened to a **musical composition by Steve Reich**, who manipulated Hamm's speech cadences, repeating select words and changing their speed, inadvertently suggesting new meanings. According to Ligon:

“...Daniel Hamm saying, ‘I had to open the bruise up to let some of the bruise blood come out to show them,’ he actually makes a slip of the tongue. He says, ‘blues blood.’ It's subtle, but once you hear it, you hear it... that slip of the tongue is interesting because it makes blues and bruise go together... I'll read you a little quote Ralph Ellison says about the blues. ‘The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy, but by squeezing from it a near tragic, near comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal

catastrophe expressed lyrically.’ Now, perfect in a way, because that... squeezing has some resonance to Daniel Hamm’s autobiography...”

– **Glenn Ligon, Artist Talk: Glenn Ligon, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts**

To learn more about Ligon’s use of language to speak critically about black life in America, and the power of words to convey multiple meanings, you can **listen** or **watch** a video of him speaking.

START WITH ART: GLENN LIGON



- What thoughts, images, colors, and feelings come to mind when you see

or hear the words blues, blood, bruise? Blues is both a kind of music and sometimes describes a feeling. What does “feeling blue” mean to you?

- If you were to rearrange the order of the words, would the meaning change? How might you rearrange them?
- What do the words have in common? Do they look or sound similar?
- The artist chose to put the words on the outside of the Museum instead of inside the building. Why do you think they made that choice?
- How can Ligon’s use of **ambiguity** inspire us to make our own found word poems?

LOOK AROUND

- Do you see words in magazines, newspapers, or on buildings that catch your eyes?
- Are there songs or poems with words you remember? What do they mean to you?
- Are there sayings, thoughts, prayers, or quotes you know with special meaning?

MAKE ART

Let's create a found word collage, or visual poem, by arranging familiar words into new combinations.

Materials

- Paper
- Scissors
- Glue or tape
- Magazines, catalogs or newspapers
- A pen or pencil for writing

Making

1. Find three words from magazine or newspaper headlines that stand out to you. Alternately, think of three words from a poem, song, quote or saying that have meaning for you, and write them on a piece of paper, leaving space around them. You might choose words for how they sound, the shape of the letters, or their colors.
2. Cut out your words, and play with multiple arrangements, noting how the order of the words changes their meaning.
3. Once you have an order you like, glue your words onto a paper, or re-write them in large print on a piece of paper.
4. Share your words with friends or family members and ask them what they think they mean or how they make them feel.

REFLECTION

- How did your feelings and meanings for your words compare with what

friends and family members think?

- Consider hanging the words in a place where you can see them over time. Does their meaning change with the space around them, or the time of day?
- How might your words sound as a song? How fast or slow would you sing them? How does repeating them affect their meaning? Consider creating a song or music for your words.

Did someone forward this email to you? If you would like to receive these art activities directly, sign up [here](#).



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235 BOWERY
NEW YORK NY
10002 USA
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IMAGES: Glenn Ligon, *A Small Band*, 2015. Neon, paint, and metal support. Three components; “blues”: 74 x 231 in (188 x 586.7 cm); “blood”: 74 3/4 x 231 1/2 in (189.9 x 588 cm); “bruise”: 74 3/4 x 264 3/4 in (189.9 x 672.5 cm); overall approx. 74 3/4 x 797 1/2 in (189.9 x 2025.7 cm). Building façade. Photo: David Hollely.

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New Museum
235 Bowery
New York, NY 10002

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