

# Times LIVE

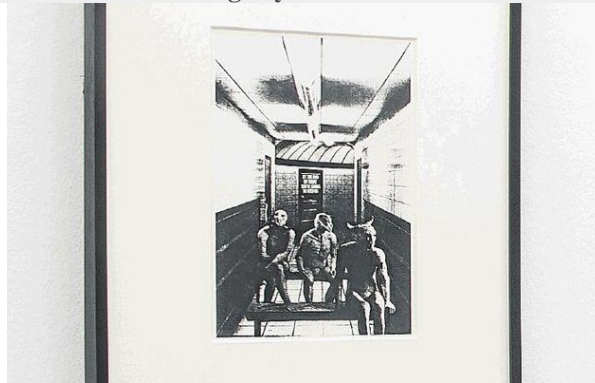
## Cross Context: Police brutality in the spotlight

Tymon Smith | 22 March, 2016 00:12

<http://www.timeslive.co.za/thetimes/2016/03/22/Cross-Context-Police-brutality-in-the-spotlight>



POTENT: Glenn Ligon's Untitled (Bruise/Blues) on show at the Stevenson Gallery is proof of the power of the word  
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**On April 17 1964 six Harlem residents were beaten up by the police during the riots there.**

In their trial one of the "Harlem Six" - teenager Daniel Hamm - testified that after his beating, he was forced to open up his bruises to make them bleed so that he could receive medical attention.

What Hamm wanted to say was: "I had to, like, open the bruise up and let some of the bruise blood come out to show them."

In a slip of the tongue, Hamm actually said "blues blood" rather than "bruise blood".

In 1966 minimalist composer Steve Reich used a loop of Hamm's testimony in his piece "Come Out", composed for a benefit to raise money for a retrial of the Harlem Six.

Fifty years later and Hamm's testimony, with Reich's music, became the inspiration for a neon work by American artist Glenn Ligon, Untitled (Bruise/Blues), which is now showing at the Stevenson Gallery in Johannesburg.

Described by the Guardian as Barack Obama's favourite artist, Ligon's work deals with issues of identity, language and sexuality and this piece, while deceptively simple in form, resonates strongly with the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement and the increasing outcry against police brutality in America.

The installation, taking up the first space of the gallery, consists of two suspended, flashing blue neon signs, one saying "bruise", one saying "blues", slightly out of sync with each other and gradually hypnotising viewers into a private contemplation of issues of brutality and violence.

Hamm's Freudian slip from half a century ago becomes a potent symbol of how the more some things change, the more others remain the same. With its simple word-based signage, Ligon's work shows that the adage about sticks and stones is simply no longer true.

In a shrewd curatorial move the Stevenson has paired Ligon's piece with an exhibition of black-and-white photomontages by South African artist Jane Alexander.

These span the years between 1981 and 1995 and reference images from the state of emergency in 1985 in South Africa and photographs taken by Alexander during a trip to East Berlin in 1982.

Alexander's iconic Butcher Boys makes an appearance in several of the montages - their half-human, half-animal forms still as powerful a representation of brutality and violence as ever.

The juxtaposition of Alexander's commentaries on the links between the repression of different totalitarian regimes and Ligon's response to police brutality creates a conversation that flows across borders and between different representational strategies.

It's not an optimistic exhibition but it is a poignant exploration of pertinent themes that highlight the similarities between the responses of artists to the ugliness of political oppression and how, in the light of Marikana for instance, such ugliness continues to infect democratic societies.

It's discomfoting to think that 31 years after Alexander made her photomontage of the Butcher Boys under a sign that reads "By the end of today you're going to need us", the sentiment still rings true and that 52 years after his testimony, Hamm's "blues/bruises" still resonates so strongly with the black community today.

- *Glenn Ligon: Untitled (Bruise/Blues) and Jane Alexander: Photomontages 1981-1985 are at Stevenson Johannesburg until April 15*