

GLENN O'BRIEN: CENTER STAGE

Alvin Baltrop, Sarah Charlesworth, Dan Colen, Sara Cwynar, Les Levine, Eileen Myles, Dennis Oppenheim, Richard Prince, Rene Ricard, Walter Robinson, Claude Rutault, André Saraiva, Tom Sachs, Dash Snow, Andy Warhol, Ouattara Watts, and Martin Wong

September 17 – November 27, 2019



Martin Wong, *TV Party*, 1988

Glenn O'Brien was a great many things to a great many people. Editor, television producer, screenwriter, critic and cultural scene maker, he began his career at *Andy Warhol's Interview* magazine. Glenn also was a formidable creative director who elevated advertising to the realm of art. "I can't help but feel like my ads are better than Barbara Kruger's," he once famously declared. "Although hers are art and mine, well they are just ads. They have a logo. But I think art has logos now, too, so maybe there is no difference." And I loved him for that.

Glenn was brilliant at so many things, moving effortlessly from one to the other, or doing them all at once and adding more, all the while making you believe that you could do it, too. "I like to keep busy," he would say, deadpan. High and low. Facetious and profound. Punk and regal.

With a youthful spirit that never left him and a steadfast refusal to stay in any lane, Glenn was of the race of conquerors who forever exists in the continuous present.

In fact, conqueror he was from our very first interaction. I had sought Glenn out, years ago, while reaching a handful of artists to take on the Saint James nautical shirt. I had spent a day or two guessing his email by trying multiple combinations of his first and last names. One worked. Within minutes he gave me this answer, forever incised in my memory: "These are my favorite shirts in the world. I'd be really into it. And if you can believe ancestry.com, I'm descended from William the Conqueror."

Generous, inclusive, but also grander than life. Extra-ordinary. Glenn catapulted himself into the pantheon of great heroes, and for this he was right. Glenn was *sui generis*.

For me, Glenn was a pivotal *rencontre*.

It would be impossible to claim exhaustiveness with any portrait of Glenn. This exhibition proposes one possible approach, in the manner of a *portrait en creux*, which in literature is when the author defines a character by focusing our attention on the background, on the company he keeps, as well as his actions in the world.

The expression "*en creux*" refers to the engraving technique *intaglio*, in which a surface is etched or incised to hold the ink. It is the opposite of relief engraving, and the literary equivalent of the quiet, but often revealing, negative space we find in sculpture and painting.

Glenn defined himself above all as a writer. Words are the continuous thread of the exhibition—in their presence, absence, repetition and silence. This *portrait en creux* of Glenn is meant to suggest, but not to impose. Collectively, the artists and works offer a faceted reflection of his profound optimism, wit and spirit.

My deepest gratitude to Gina Nanni for her wonderful support and friendship.

— Natacha Polaert

Martin Wong

TV Party was Glenn O'Brien's magnum opus, a public-access television show in New York City that ran from 1978 to 1982. Part performance art, part improv, part experimental video, it started as a nod to Hugh Hefner's *Playboy After Dark*, but for the downtown set. Martin Wong's "TV Party" was made years after *TV Party* ended. Part of Wong's hand-signs series, "TV Party" was first shown at his 1988 solo exhibition at Exit Art in New York City.

Sara Cwynar

"Girl from Contact Sheet (Darkroom Manuals)" could evoke a first crush, but she could also be a young fan of *TV Party* whose mind is being blown by Glenn O'Brien.

Les Levine

The first artwork Glenn O'Brien ever purchased, while still a student at Georgetown University, was a set of "disposable" sculptures by Les Levine from Max Protetch. "Diamond Mind" is a performance videotape set in a control room at Syracuse University. Levine's speech also relates to "various connections and partings one goes through in life ... being born, dying, being unattached from the physical sense of image as we can know it. Understanding this process or image modulation of self is like finding a diamond in your mind."

Dennis Oppenheim

"A Search For Clues" was an ad campaign conceived and produced by Dennis Oppenheim on the occasion of his 1976 solo exhibition at M.L. D'Arc Gallery. It features his then seven-year-old daughter, Chandra Oppenheim, with a surrogate of the artist in an entirely silent ad. As an ad man himself, Glenn O'Brien worked on some of the most iconic advertising campaigns of his time. Among them was the infamous Calvin Klein campaign shot by Steven Meisel that was attacked by Bill Clinton as child pornography, investigated by the Justice Department, and parodied by Beavis and Butthead. "To me," Glenn said, "that was the highest compliment."

Eileen Myles

Eileen Myles wrote "A Poem" inspired by a conversation she had with Glenn O'Brien. Glenn never knew the poem existed. "Glenn spoke to me about poetry once in the 80s and about the problem of making no money from it. The conversation stuck with me and totally inspired 'A Poem,' which was pretty much an inventory of the moment and maybe writing's attempt to value it, or it value poetry."

Walter Robinson

Glenn stopped smoking a while back, but when he did smoke, it was Marlboro Lights. Walter Robinson's "Marlboros" evoke the writer's staple, an artifact of a bygone era that finds resonance in Myles's poem, "Cigarettes and coffee were always enough in my youth."

Sarah Charlesworth

Glenn defined himself above all as a writer. "Nouns" is related to Sarah Charlesworth's *Modern History* series from 1977-1979, in which she isolated the images printed in various newspapers and removed the text in which they appeared. In this front page of the *New York Times* from October 11, 2003, all words other than nouns—and the nameplate—were redacted.

Richard Prince

Richard Prince and Glenn shared an affinity for great jokes, especially Borscht Belt humor. Bingo!

Dan Colen

In this series of sculptures, Dan Colen rendered rocks to look like enlarged M&M candies. The scale, texture, and saturated color of the faux M&Ms create a physical experience that teases out our personal associations—nature versus artifice. And what could be more iconic than M&Ms in today's pop culture?

Alvin Baltrop

"Alvin Baltrop's pictures show a gone world, but the ghosts that inhabit these images retain the power to haunt our own time," Glenn once wrote. Baltrop portrays the derelict, abandoned West Side piers along the Hudson River, the scene of gay cruising, drugs, and prostitution. This teenage runaway is enveloped in an almost beatific light—a light that could have been streaming from "Day's End," Gordon Matta-Clark's "sun and water temple" intervention at Pier 52 in 1975.

Rene Ricard

Rene Ricard grew up in the small town of Acushnet, Massachusetts. "Judge" is about his abusive, alcoholic father, who went to jail for life on a murder charge—*this* murder charge. Perhaps like Baltrop's teenage runaway of the West Side piers, Rene also is the gay son of a violent father who found solace in New York. Both works evoke what you leave behind when you come to New York and the family you make for yourself.

Andy Warhol

Frederick Hughes was Glenn's mentor during his years at *Interview*, where Andy Warhol hired Glenn straight out of college as art director for his magazine.

Ouattara Watts

Ouattara Watts makes paintings to be read. After a chance encounter with Jean-Michel Basquiat at Basquiat's 1988 Paris opening, Basquiat convinced Ouattara to come to America. Glenn was the first person Basquiat promised Ouattara he would meet on arriving to New York. ("My best friend Glenn," Jean-Michel would say.) "They were kindred spirits who hit it off immediately," Glenn later wrote. "Both men had a princely attitude and the sensibility of a magician, not to mention a gift for painting." "Le Faiseur de Roi" ["The King Maker"] portrays the Glenn who launched and championed a thousand careers.

Claude Rutault

Claude Rutault was the first French artist invited to a residency at MoMA PS1, the same winter *TV Party* launched. Rutault considers himself a painter, although he does not physically touch paint or his canvases. Instead he has a set of instructions, "de-finitions/methods" to guide the works. "glenn o'brien was a writer. my work starts with writing, i write paintings. my work consists in painting canvases the same color as the wall on which they're hung; painting without end, perpetually actualized. beyond monochromes. for this show, all the paintings and photographs on glenn o'brien's bookshelves that are not portraits of glenn will be covered by canvases painted the same color as the wall on which the bookshelves are hung. a portrait by subtraction. painting that reveals."

Tom Sachs

These four orange skateboard wheels, hand-embossed by Tom Sachs and his team, evoke Glenn's youthful spirit, the freedom and hunger of youth that he continuously fed, but also his constant motion and steadfast refusal to stay in any given lane.

Dash Snow

Dash Snow often used bell jars as containers for arrangements of objects. In "Secret Conception" (2006-2007) crumpled sheets, a studded glove, dead flowers, and human hair are heaped on top of each other. The title "Secret Conception" refers to Snow's daughter, Secret. Glenn once said, "There aren't too many romantic artists, but I think Dash was one of them."

André Saraiva

André Saraiva's "Love Letter," made with an actual letterbox from La Poste Française, stands as a larger metaphor for the show: a letter to Glenn, for the afterlife.

About Off Paradise

Off Paradise is a new project space on Walker Street. The name evokes the old neighborhood of Five Points, at the center of which was a small, triangular park, full of hopes and grime, called Paradise Square. It also invokes Paradise Alley, the artists' and poets' colony on the then-godforsaken corner of Avenue A and East 11th Street that is referenced in Jack Kerouac's novel *The Subterraneans*. Off Paradise is a fictional place, right off Paradise, adjacent to it, but not exactly it.