

ARTFORUM

Critics' Picks: Isaac Julien

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Isaac Julien, *Masquerade No. 3*, 1989/2016, Kodak Premier print, Diasec mounted on aluminum, 71 x 102".

Isaac Julien's films and immersive video installations have been stunning audiences for decades. It comes as no surprise, then, that the artist's sumptuous large-scale photographs envelop you cinematically. Mounted on aluminum, the four enormous prints that anchor the exhibition glow with the sheen of the silver screen. Julien uses his distinct vision—supple, imaginative, alluring, expansive—to meditate on the black body, sexuality, and history.

Photography has always been a central aspect of Julien's practice. The images here are culled from shoots for three of his early films: *Looking for Langston* (1989), *Trussed* (1996), and *The Long Road to Mazatlán* (1999–2000). *Looking for Langston* is a landmark queer film: a portrait of longing for Harlem Renaissance writer Langston Hughes. The pictures from this series filling the main room of the gallery, via black-and-white cinematography and vintage attire, take us to a bygone era, while positioning themselves in the glossy contemporary moment of their making. *Masquerade No 3*, 1989/2016, gives us an angle never depicted in the film, where the tuxedoed actor playing Hughes gazes lustfully from afar at a nude figure in the foreground, whose back is turned to us. The naked man is seductively cropped—we see only his torso, ass, and thighs.

Julien's photographs extend the settings of his films into different kinds of fantasy/documentary terrain. In a group of stylized "behind-the-scenes" photographs, including *Mise en Scene No 2*, 1989/2016, and *Assemblage*, 1989/2016, we see Julien, auteur and "auteur," among cast members and camera equipment. He looks magnificent—as glamorous and charismatic as an old Hollywood director, simultaneously here and elsewhere, real and fictional, opening up connections across time and space.