

Isaac Julien at the ROM: an expedition in the here and now

By Murray Whyte

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Renowned British artist makes political works he hopes will transcend the current moment, but they're more timely than he'd like.



Six Cineplex-sized screens occupy an upper gallery at the Royal Ontario Museum, which is sliced in half, three screens each. On the right is *True North*, Isaac Julien's opening film installation of his *Expeditions* trilogy, and on the left, *Western Union (Small Boats)*, its last (the middle chapter, *Fantôme Afrique*, is absent, for reasons of square footage, you could reasonably guess, if nothing else).

Julien's footprint is significant here and in more ways than one. *Western Union (Small Boats)* looms particularly large. In crisp, vivid imagery, it echoes loudly (and literally) with the devastation of a pressing geopolitical, and human, calamity.

In the piece, Julien, who is British, and black, toggles back and forth: from scenes of African migrants bobbing in shabby vessels in the Mediterranean Sea, to the beaches beneath the chalky, opaque roughness of Sicily's Turkish Steps, and to a grand Sicilian palazzo, dripping with the opulence of generations of aristocracy.

To anyone who reads the news, the piece could feel timely, indeed. With millions of people displaced from Syria alone, recent media images of overladen boats or of bodies washing ashore just a few hundred kilometres east, have reached a numbing critical mass. Call it a moment, if you must. Just downtown from the ROM, an exhibition of the work of Francis Alys at the Art Gallery of Ontario addresses the same circumstance, just down the shore at the Strait of Gibraltar.

But for Julien, who made the work in 2007, its sudden currency is troubling but far from the point.

"It's remarkable, and maybe unfortunate, that it still has the resonance it does," he says, slowly, in his quiet, posh-sounding English accent. "But in this case, I think it's really about how you can engage the poetics of trying to utilize sound and image to explore these questions in a culture that has become quite deadened to these questions."

Indeed, migration has always been a thorny subject for countries on both sides of its divide. It's almost always from have to have-not nations in the global post-colonial disaster: Europeans took what they needed from places like Africa and North America, and when the people they took from showed up on their doorstep, they mostly locked the gates.



With an insular nationalism blossoming in western countries that have always been the destinations for such mass movements of people – see: Brexit, Marine Le Pen, Donald Trump – sealing the gates up tight has been an increasingly effective rallying cry for a certain stripe of politician.

Julien is less interested in the political than he is the experiential. *Western Union (Small Boats)* is lush, immersive, engulfing: Julien uses a black modern dancer, who alternately tumbles down (and up) a marble staircase in the palazzo, or writhes on its opulently tiled floor. He then reveals his movements to be those of his body, flailing while drowning in the open sea – a scene that seems almost to swallow the viewer whole, as the quietude of the work is shattered with a turbulent wall of sound. "I wanted the audience to have that feeling of helplessness," he says.

There's an obvious juxtaposition between have and have-not, and the notion of extravagance being beyond more than just the physical grasp of the latter seems a clear implication as he drowns amid the marble and velvet.

Julien elides such clear readings, though. "A lot of times when I make works, I like to think they can exist after their time," he says. "And sometimes that's in an uncanny manner. So that's what's striking about it now, for me."

Back to chapter one, then, and the frigid extremes of Northern Iceland and Sweden in *True North*, where Julien engages another tale of have and have-not, no less relevant to the current moment. In it, he reworks the story of Matthew Henson, an explorer who worked for Robert Peary on his many attempts to reach the North Pole (whether or not they ever actually reached it is now much disputed, adding another layer to the piece).

Peary, a decorated explorer, was white and now famous; Henson, who was black, was not and spent much of his post-expedition life in relative obscurity, recognized for his feats, finally, just before he died in 1955.

In *True North*, Julien uses the same technique – three screens, a loose, lyrical structure of gorgeous scenery in favour of more linear narrative – to sketch another tale of inequity, and it should feel familiar. In the dominant mythologies of our times, when wealthy white men accomplished virtually everything worth accomplishing, rarely have we considered at what cost. To put a finer point on it, Julien includes a chorus of Inuit throat singers, making plain there is no “first” when an entire culture had been clustered not far from the pole for millennia.

Henson, in his journals, could hardly afford to ignore such concerns: “Of course I wanted to be there, side by side with him,” intones Julien’s narrator, British actress Vanessa Myrie, a black woman retracing Henson’s steps (and adding another, gendered layer to his quiet unravelling of the myth), as she reads from his journal.

But Henson worries about Peary’s reaction should he reach the pole first. “I didn’t know what he would do,” Myrie reads. “I took all of the cartridges out of my rifle before I went to sleep. Took them out and buried them in the snow.”

Long ago, in the icy clench of a far-northern night, Henson’s deference would have had a weary familiarity. Like *Western Union (Small Boats)*, it remains more timely than it should. “For me, works need to transcend the topics of the day,” Julien said. “The test for me is, will this show in 10 years time?” With the world gathering along its dividing lines yet again, the answer seems a clear yes, though perhaps not as he’d like. Transcendence seems far off indeed, with relevance to the here and now a numbing constant. Pity, that.

Isaac Julien: Other Destinies continues at the Royal Ontario Museum to April 23, 2017.