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Isaac Julien's stills: visual pleasures, multifaceted meaning

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Isaac Julien, "Pas de Deux with Roses" (1989). Photo: Jessica Silverman Gallery.

Lushly printed black-and-white photographs of gorgeous men posing alluringly in decadent settings.

That incomplete sentence alone explains a good part of the appeal of Isaac Julien's current exhibition, "Vintage," at Jessica Silverman Gallery. The show's visual pleasures would be enough to justify a steady stream of visitors for the next two months; what makes it important to see is the multifaceted nexus of meaning at its core.

There are so many ways to go at that core. Start with the installation itself: In the main gallery, a selection of 26 images is arrayed on three walls, each wall punctuated by one outsized work, 8½ feet across. "Filmic" is the only word for the experience, with the smaller prints serving as a loose through-line and the large ones the key moments, blown up to screen size. The presentation is particularly suited to this series of photographs, based as it is on Julien's 1989 16mm film "Looking for Langston." (The "vintage" label refers to the age of the pictures, now being released for the first time, as well as their classic look.)

But, all credit to the artist and gallery, it's not just a reduction of the film to a bunch of photos; there are distinctive differences between the projects. The success of the exhibition, in fact,

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depends upon that distinction. I saw the show before viewing a DVD version of the film (the gallery is selling copies for \$25) and found it satisfying on its own terms.

The images are film stills, using that phrase in the original, technical sense to mean that they are posed pictures – related to the film, but not enlarged from film frames. (The history of that essential distinction between “film still” and “screenshot” is, to my knowledge, unexplored. An exhibition or dissertation subject, someone?) Considered individually, each is a holistic work of art – enigmatic, to be sure, but rich with associations and rewarding of analysis.

Take, for example, a picture titled “Pas de Deux with Roses.” The setting is a party, probably at a nightclub. From what we can see, all the guests are male (I count at least seven) – a racially mixed crowd, all dressed to the nines in tuxedos, all movie-star handsome. The picture announces itself as a fantasy: all of it – from the glimmering illumination, to the just-so arrangement of the blossoms, to the suggestive direction of the men’s glances – exudes perfection. Two men in the foreground dance together as if in a dream; they are, literally, floating on a cloud. For many gay men, this must be a credible rendition of heaven; for all of us, it is a glimpse into an ideal world where race and gender take a back seat to joy and beauty.

In formal terms, the series is in fine tune tonally and compositionally, and it is rich with reference to the history of the movies (from the 1920s to the film noir era) and to such noted portraitists as James Van Der Zee (acknowledged as an influence in the gallery press release), Carl Van Vechten (understandably unacknowledged, given the wisps of racism in Van Vechten’s writing), George Hurrell and Robert Mapplethorpe.

So, the individual photographs, each with an evocative title, work on their own and as part of an episodic series. Knowing the film, however, adds a new layer of meaning. It is a shame to watch a digital version of “Looking for Langston” on a computer screen, as I did, when it was conceived as a projected film of luxuriant silver-screen tonalities, but the textual complexity comes through. It was written and directed by Isaac Julien. Black, British and gay, Julien chose to focus largely on American sources, weaving together a hypnotic rumination on race, homosexual desire and, particularly, black cultural history. Documentary clips of Langston Hughes reading, backed up by a jazz quartet, intertwine with excerpts from works by James Baldwin, Essex Hemphill, Bruce Nugent and Hilton Als. Strains of obscure songs like George Hannah’s “Freakish Man Blues” and Ma Rainey’s “Sissy Man Blues” filter in and out. Historic footage is intercut with a collage of newly rendered images: an all-male nightclub where men drink and dance together; lovers meeting and embracing, in the comfort of a bed or furtively in a park; angels gracing a funeral.

“You’re such a beautiful black man/ but somehow you’ve been made to feel/ that your beauty’s not real.” The film is a balm, an attempt to find an antidote for a disease that has sickened our society, an effort to recover and celebrate that beauty. When, at a point late in the narrative, a gang of thugs storms the nightclub wielding truncheons, they find nothing but smoke in an empty bar.

The other rooms of the gallery similarly relate to films created by Julien. “Trussed” (1996), as presented here, consists only of a trio of dancing young men who manage to make transparent plastic disco shorts look good.

“The Long Road to Mazatlán” (1999–2000) looks better on the walls. The pictures are rendered as photogravures in soft grays, or subtly inked in incongruous colors. Gravure is a painstaking process. These works are, like those in the first exhibition space, independent from the film they recall, and

they are all the more intense – distilled – as a consequence of the time and care they required to make. I briefly met the artist while viewing the exhibition, and he told me that these were “photographs one took” – by which I assume he meant that he took, indicating that the team of cinematographers and photographers he normally oversees were not involved. He added, “If clicking the button’s important.”