

The BAY AREA REPORTER

Talking with Isaac

By Sura Wood

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Filmmaker/photographer Isaac Julien. Photo: Courtesy the artist

The gay, black filmmaker/photographer Isaac Julien is soft-spoken, thoughtful and one natty dresser. Julien, a major figure in British visual art and queer independent cinema who grew up in London's East End, arrived at the Jessica Silverman Gallery in San Francisco last week fashionably turned out in a summery indigo suit, white shirt, skinny marine blue tie and foiled white sneakers. He was in town for a pair of appearances at the Pacific Film Archive, and for *Vintage*, a show of his early, mainly black & white photographs.

The gallery exhibition, which draws from three bodies of work – *Looking for Langston* (1989), *Trussed* (1996) and *The Long Road to Mazatlan* (1999-2000), named after the Tennessee Williams play – showcases his stylish, moody, richly subtextual, gorgeously sensual pictures. The images are also cinematic, in part, because they were taken on the sets of his films. Although he has been exhibited at prestigious museums, including MoMA in New York two years ago, Julien is probably best-known for his 1989 movie *Looking for Langston*, an erotic, poetic meditation on the African American author Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance. A first in that it addressed and reconstructed Hughes' ambivalent sexual identity, the impressionistic film is a story of repressed gay desire that eroticizes black bodies and combines archival 1920s footage with fictional scenes. "I never meant to make a life of Langston Hughes," reflects Julien in his book *Riot*, but the film has nonetheless remained a signature piece, informed by Roy DeCarava's pictures of 1920s Harlem, Robert Mapplethorpe, the homoerotic male nudes of fashion photographer George Platt Lynes, and James Van der Zee's baroque, staged portraits of the dead, which Julien discovered during the height of the AIDS epidemic.

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Viewing the *Langston* photographic series is like stumbling onto hushed encounters or overhearing fragments of distant conversation. "Pas de Deux," for instance, shows two handsome black men slow-dancing in formal attire. They're in sharp focus on the left side of a large image; the setting is glamorous, the atmosphere smoky, intoxicating and charged with romantic possibility. The tableaux vivants of "Trussed," with their backstage, club-scene ambience and S&M vibe, suggest an underworld where forbidden desire lies just across the room, while the color photogravures (some of them blue-tinged) of "Mazatlan" conjure a mid-1970s Tex-Mex landscape of cold bottles of Corona and cowboys not really at home on the range.

Eros and history, and the deconstruction thereof, have figured prominently in Julien's work, but recently he has expanded on his astute grasp of global politics and art in two new pieces that will be at Fort Mason at the end of the year: *Playtime*, a seven-screen film installation shot in Reykjavik, Dubai and London, with James Franco as an art consultant, and a sister work called *Kapital*.



"Film Noir Staircase" (1989/2016) by Issac Julien. Ilford classic silver gelatin fine art paper, mounted on aluminum and framed. Photo: Courtesy the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery.

I sat down with Julien for a chat at the gallery. The following are edited excerpts from that conversation.

Sura Wood: I was struck by the intimacy of your photographs. In some, one can sense the intense feelings of these black men and the connection between them. Is that what you were striving for?

Isaac Julien: Even now, how many images of this nature do we see? You don't see too many images like that in the museum. We don't really have them in the space of art. That's one of the reasons why I made *Langston*. Not just around the question of black gay desire, but also the role of black artists in relationship to modernism. *Langston* was difficult to make because it talked about personal issues to me, and experiences connected to a black queer body politic. It reflected so closely my own sensibilities.

How has queer cinema changed since you made that film?

We now have queer TV series, queer characters, but if you think about the films of mainstream Hollywood, they reflect a tiny minority aspect of society – essentially the same stories, the same

characters, who are ordinarily white and heterosexual. Everything else gets constructed as marginal. Dare I say there's something perverse and not terribly healthy about film today? It's why I'm in the art world.

Has film noir been a powerful influence for you?

In terms of black & white cinema, noir is a genre I'm very interested in, was then and still am. When I was making *Langston* in particular, it was a suspenseful time. We didn't know how long we would live – I'm referring to AIDS – and quite a few of the people in it are no longer with us. I think this question of mortality is a subtheme of the work. Precariousness is something we're all living with. Life is charged if you think it's not going to last.

As an artist who's black and gay, is it more difficult to make your way in the art and film worlds?

No, not really. It's nothing unique or special.

What's the relationship between your photography and your films?

The exhibition takes *Langston* as a starting point because that work, though cinematic, was very much grounded in photography. From the beginning of making my films, photography has been quite central. Though recently I've shifted my practice into a museum and art context, the language and aesthetics are still very connected to cinema.

Your work has been described by *The New York Times* as "at once visually captivating and conceptually tough." How does that sit with you?

Oh, I like that.