

# frieze

## Review: Isaac Julien

By Caille Millner

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*Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco, USA*

Isaac Julien's well-known films *Looking for Langston* (1989) and *The Long Road to Mazatlán* (1999–2000) marry desire for the body to desire for a righteous body politic. 'Vintage', a show of Julien's images at Jessica Silverman Gallery, presents the British artist as a connoisseur of beauty and a master of technique. To fully comprehend the political engagement that's fuelled the past three decades of Julien's career, though, visitors will also have to watch his films.

Most of the images in the show were shot on the set of *Looking for Langston*, Julien's atmospheric homage to the Harlem Renaissance and the closeted poet Langston Hughes. There are silver gelatin prints and larger photographs that evoke the great scale of a movie screen. They're lush with texture and tonality. The smoke gets in your eyes. The skin looks warm and inviting.



Isaac Julien, *Film Noir Angels*, 1989/2016, silver gelatin fine art paper mounted on aluminum and framed, 40 x 57 cm.

All images courtesy: the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco

Julien drew on the rich visual history of the Harlem Renaissance, in particular on photographers like James VanDerZee and Carl van Vechten, to achieve *Langston's* melancholic look. One group of photographs, from one of the film's early scenes, shows members of the all-male cast dressed in tuxedos, dancing together in a jazz club. The soft lighting on the actors' facial features recalls Van Vechten's tendency to glorify his subjects. (Though Julien's lighting, carefully calibrated to burnish black skin, is far better than Van Vechten's.) Frozen for Julien's photographic camera, the actors are magnificently stiff, like many of the sitters in VanDerZee's studio portraits; but they also look a little trapped, just as VanDerZee's subjects were confined by bourgeois aspirations and the social constrictions of their race.

The magic of *Langston* lies in watching these same actors break out of such constraints as they dance and laugh and stroke each other, hungry with desire, abandoning the safety of the era's closeted world in search of joy. The film's central project – to bring a specific kind of desire (black, male and gay) into the open – is in equal parts blues for and a celebration of its titular hero. Like so many of VanDerZee's subjects, Langston had to live in dignified discretion. By proposing an alternative story of the Harlem Renaissance, *Langston* mourns lives that never had a chance to be fully lived.



Isaac Julien, *The Last Angel of History*, 1989/2016, Kodak Premier print, Diasec mounted on aluminium, 1.8 x 2.6 m

The dangers of life outside the closet are very clearly rendered in the film, which ends with a violent raid on the dance club. With their boots and leather jackets, the police in the raid scene are resolutely of the 1980s, lifting the film out of the dangers of the 1930s and into the dangers of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. No images of this scene are included in the exhibition, however. This is indeed a loss: Julien's finest works have all matched exquisite visual narratives with a generous vision of social possibility. Yet, if the still frames here seem to lack the political efficacy of Julien's films, their content still carries a charge. The eroticized, sexualized and politicized black body on display reverberates between eras: the Harlem Renaissance, the HIV/AIDS epidemic and current struggles against institutional violence and racism. The result is a wistful longing for bodies now absent.

Vastly different in form and subject matter, saturated photogravures from the set of *The Long Road to Mazatlán*, also on display, demonstrate the breadth of Julien's practice as well as the scope of his ambition. The short film – an extended, occasionally literal, dance between two cowboys near the US-Mexico border – plays with the mythology of the American West. These images are less a story in themselves than the story of how an artist puts an idea together. With Julien, even process is pleasing to the eye.