

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Gazing at Photographs that Look At and Past Us

By Abby Margulies

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Isaac Julien, "The Last Angel of History" (1989/2016) from 'Looking for Langston (Vintage series)'
(all images courtesy Jessica Silverman Gallery)

SAN FRANCISCO – “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me [...] It is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass,” Ralph Ellison’s narrator declares in *Invisible Man*. “When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves or figments of their imagination, indeed, everything and anything except me.”

Published in the early 1950s but set during the Harlem Renaissance, *Invisible Man* unfolds as a cascading exploration of what it means to be looked at and looked through; ‘hidden’ in plain sight, the narrator explains what it means to be caught in the gaze of a society that refuses to see you. In the exhibition *Isaac Julien: Vintage*, on view at Jessica Silverman Gallery in San Francisco, filmmaker and photographer Isaac Julien explores the power and complexity of the way in which we look at one another through a series of imaginative photographs of homoerotic encounters between black men that capture fleeting moments in time. Featuring three bodies of Julien’s early work, *Trussed* (1996), *The Long Road to Mazatlán* (1999–2000), and what is by far the most captivating part of the exhibition, *Looking for Langston* (1989), *Vintage* uses narrative photography to complicate the way in which we understand the relationship between the seer and the seen.

Jessica Silverman Gallery
488 Ellis Street, San Francisco, CA 94102
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Installation view of Isaac Julien: *Vintage* at Jessica Silverman Gallery

Looking for Langston, an homage to Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes, includes stills from Julien's 1980 film of the same title, shot in London but set in the heady New York of the 1920s when black culture was burgeoning in Harlem and the Jazz age was in full swing. The film centers around a group of gay men from the upper echelons of society who are gathered at a wake, interspersed with one of the guest's fantastical dream sequence. "Film Noir Staircase" (1989/2016) depicts a well-dressed man ascending a staircase, his gaze cast upwards, looking to something or someone beyond the frame, highlighting Julien's mastery of composition. The central focus of the photograph is not the man's figure, but his face, contrasted against the shadow of his pants leg. The notion of the traditional portrait is subverted, and instead our eyes are drawn upward, mirroring the man's movement and leading us to the unknown subject. A searching quality permeates Julien's work that we are here invited to experience a nostalgia for something long gone, muddled with an air of mystery as to what's to come.

This careful framing is evident in "Masquerade No. 3" (1989/2016) as well, a photograph foregrounded by the backside of a naked man, who is being looked upon by a man in a suit passing by. The unexpectedness of this *mise-en-scène* is compounded by our relationship to the image. Here again we are secondary, passive bystanders encountering a scene that we cannot grasp. The subject is not a person or a place, but an encounter, a pregnant moment in time in which we wait for what is next.



Isaac Julien "Film Noir Staircase" (1989/2016), from 'Looking for Langston (Vintage series)'

Julien further guides our perception through a breathtaking interplay between light and shadow, which directs his scenes and creates movement in the frame, a feat accomplished with the narrative grace one might find only in a Hitchcock film. Perhaps no better work illustrates this than "The Last Angel of History" (1989/2016), in which the visual touchstones of the work are the very contrast between light and shadow itself. The photo depicts a man gripping a portraits of Langston Hughes. Neither the entire portrait of Hughes nor the young man is fully lit; instead the image radiates light at the connecting point between the two subjects: the hand gripping the frame. This is the crux of the matter, we are made to understand, as we, the viewer, remain just outside the subject's focal point, looked past into the next moment in which we are not invited to take part.

In the other bodies of work on view, Julien further explores the themes he draws out in *Looking for Langston*. With *Trussed* we see the gaze evaluated through the more contemporary lens of performance, with portraits of a young man seemingly dancing, arms raised. We look at him and, as in Julien's earlier works, the subject looks beyond us; but here the more straightforward composition diminishes the electricity of the exchange found in *Looking for Langston*, the subtle brilliance of that series eroded here by the more overt composition. *The Long Road to Mazatlán* returns to the intrigue of narrative though is visually quite different, with close-cropped portraits of men's faces, many of which are color photogravures. Here we encounter scenes in fragments, enough to intrigue us, but not enough to impose ourselves on their narrative. Deprived of the subject's surroundings we are encouraged to truly engage with the subjects themselves. Ellison's narrator is as if addressed directly; we have no choice but to embrace the subject's gaze.



Isaac Julien "Film Noir Angels" (1989/2016), from 'Looking for Langston (Vintage series)'

Isaac Julien: Vintage continues at Jessica Silverman Gallery (488 Ellis Street, San Francisco) through June 18.

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