

I AM FILM

Isaac Julien: Still a Young Soul Rebel

By Amy Tam

November 30, 2016



Isaac Julien came to prominence in the film world with his 1989 drama-documentary *Looking for Langston*, gaining a cult following with this poetic exploration of Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance. This following was expanded in 1991 when his film, *Young Soul Rebels* won the Semaine de la Critique prize for best film at the Cannes Film Festival. Today, he is considered one of the most prolific multi-disciplinary contemporary artists working in photography, installation, film and video, pioneering a form of multi-screen installations with works such as *Western Union: Small Boats* (2007), *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010) and *Playtime: Kapital* (2014). Isaac is currently exhibiting his multi-screen work, *Stones Against Diamonds (Ice Cave)* (2015) at the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in Sydney, where I AM FILM founder, Amy Tam, spoke with him about his journey as a cross-disciplinary artist, who found his own language and creative freedom beyond the film industry.

Amy: The purpose of this interview is to come from a different angle. We've heard so much about your wonderful work, heart and the theory that's behind it but what I'm interested to know is from the filmmaker's point of view. When you began, what was it that led you to become a filmmaker?

Isaac: Let's just say that the story of me becoming a filmmaker is connected to Narcissus. Because I think that if you're brought up in a culture, where you are looking at a lot of images, that don't reference your own representation and self-image, then in a way, Narcissus is sad. For me, it was really about trying to embolden Narcissus, and the ego, to make work striving for representation, stories and images of oneself.

Amy: Tell me about how you found your own space?

Isaac: There's Narcissus and then there's the body politic. The body politic had to deal with the question of policing and Black Lives Matter movement. In a way, the formation of Sankofa Film and Video Collective, the black film group I worked with when I graduated from Central Saint Martin's School of Art in the mid 80's, was very much connected to Black Lives Matter, police brutality and the violence of the state towards people who were in Britain in the early eighties. It was an issue and unfortunately it's still an issue today. The different debates around crisis policing, which centered around policing methods, was

really at the forefront of the our films at that particular time. And dare I say, they still are of interest to me for that reason.

So, we were making films that were a combination of documentaries and film essays, some were actually agitprop works. But not in the kind of conventional sense because we were at art school, graduates of semiotics. We were basically bringing all these different theories and practices into play. This was also the beginning of Channel 4 television.

When Channel 4 television was inaugurated in Britain, it was about the question of forefront, innovation and giving voice to new audiences, which were excluded from the main bastions of British broadcasting. But I saw television as a platform for making 'Cinema' and making an intervention into film culture, where we could make films that would have a life beyond television, in world cinema and elsewhere. We were really organizing ourselves in that way and very much a part of that generation from the dissidents of Britain, hence the title of my MoMA book, called Riot.

The book sort of takes the idea that riots which take place in Britain in 1981 were structural, or in a way, created the space for us to make work because there was a political demand, which was matched by a political will to have voices, that could actually fulfil a different audience's desire to have wider access to making films.



Amy: How do you feel since then? What progress has been made and if not what do you think the block is?

Isaac: I think when it comes to film culture, there has been a regression. There has not been a significant development in the way that we envisaged, when we first made works in the early 80s – that there would be lots of different filmmakers, with a lot of different works, approaches, storytelling and methods in filmmaking. And that would be part of a kind of a vast array of different approaches to film. That we would have a vibrant film culture. It was utopianistic, perhaps, since independent film culture was killed off in the UK.

What happened was you have moments that get decommissioned. I certainly hit a glass ceiling. So now you have this moment for example with Netflix – because when things are new they usually are at a high point of innovation. But that won't last forever. It will become normalized. It will become disinteresting. And maybe, I'm a bit fatalistic. It's the same with HBO. It's interesting at the moment. But nobody watches regular television for innovation these days. You're not going to get anything innovative on television

except for these long series format programs. Maybe they have surpassed the model of film because film as a mode of a 90-minute feature film, is all hackneyed, genre-based, cliched, protagonist, you know – it's boring as hell.

Amy: What moved you out of film and into the art world?

Isaac: I think the death of experimental cinema. I recently did an interview for London's Evening Standard newspaper, on the 25th anniversary of Young Soul Rebels. I basically said, "Look, I hit a glass ceiling in 1991."

Another way of looking at it is also to say that film culture wasn't interesting anymore – so I feel lucky. Innovation took place more in the art context, so that's why I gravitated towards art, apart from the fact that I went to art school and studied painting and fine art film at Central St Martins School of Art.

Amy: Do you have any desire to go back to that classic feature film format?

Isaac: Well Playtime has a feature film format and it's a 90 minutes long movie. I think you create different platforms in terms of what you are interested in making and in film, we're just so caught up in making works that adhere to this kind of network: film, MGM, film distribution, etc. So, in a way, I think there's a nostalgia when people say, "Would you like to make a feature film?" I never stopped making films. They're not shown in the multiplexes, does that mean that it's not really a film? I think it just means that not everybody gets to see it, but I still make films. I've been making films since 1983. So maybe the question is; "Would you like to make a conventional film that can be shown in a cinematic mainstream context?" Not particularly, no.



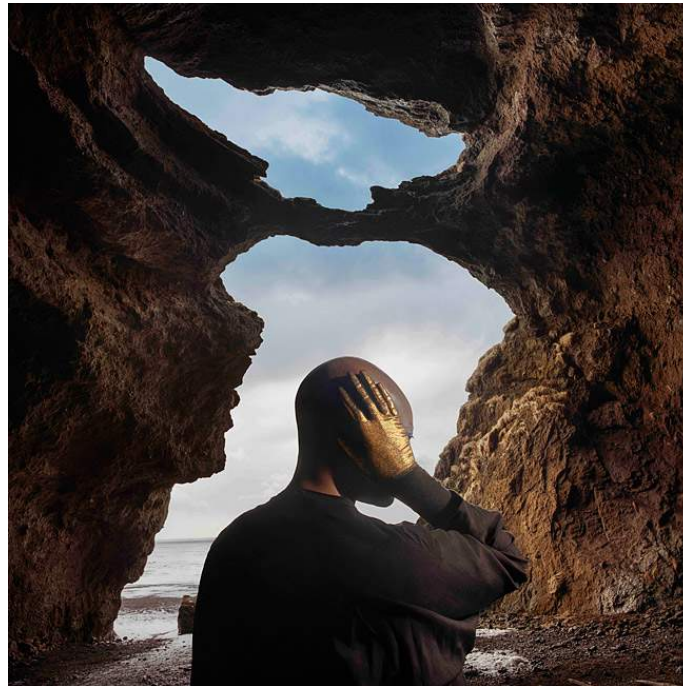
Would I like the capital to make a film that could be shown in the context of my own visual grammar? Sure, but I want to make what I make and not normalised, conventional films, the kind that is part of the status quo, which is a redundant format at this point in time. I have no interest in redundant formats. Some artists, such as Steve McQueen, have been able to make amazing interventions that I herald, but the problem is of the exception, rather than the rule. For example the British Film Institute have recently tried to recognise this issue by having a season fully dedicated to black cinema, called 'Black Stars'.

However, that doesn't solve the problem around the structure – that one can only have the exception. That it couldn't be a part of the rule. Because that would be a revolution. And that just reflects the kind of conservatism, the vial conservatism that exists in the film industry. Which is just vial. The repetition of white authority of white people basically making these boring films about themselves and having the same boring story repeated over and over again. It's just about power, that's really what it's about – in a nutshell, white-narcissism.

Amy: In terms of financing, how do you currently raise finance or do you self-finance?

Isaac: In all films it's always about being able to find patrons so basically, when you're making work, you've got to find the capital. You can't make film without it.

In the pieces that I make, I have been fortunate to have patrons, collectors who support my work and to some extent, it's always been about patrons. Whether you're commissioned by someone at Channel 4, a commissioning editor, who basically was the patron who said, "Okay, we believe in this person, let's give them the money."



It's that question of finding the patrons then. The art world, in a way, provided that context, but it was a world that when I entered into it, I had to relearn things. I had to de-familiarize myself with some of the film conventions that I, perhaps, had taken for granted in the film industry sense and start again. Sometimes, when you have failures, it's good. You've basically learned to start again. It humbles you, and you back up. It was a slow process but it built back up so that's why I was able to get the cowry of supporters, that support making my works today.

But funding is still an issue. It's still a problem to this very day, it always will be.

Amy: What is the joy for you, because it's not an easy medium to work in, why was it film for you?

Isaac: It's not just film for me; it never has been. I think that you can be involved in film but I've always been interested in photography. I've always been interested in works that can exist in the context where it's interdisciplinary. The idea with just fetishising film is like a dead-end, but I think that film is an important language and it's given me a kind of grammar to express myself and that the joy of making film is that it's difficult to make but it has a certain autonomy and a form that is really quite exhilarating and quite exciting. But it's expensive and a form that you have to have capital to make.

Amy: If you had any advice for upcoming filmmakers, what would it be?

Isaac: If an artist makes interesting works, they will usually find patrons.

At the moment there is a really interesting development. I was in Los Angeles and I came to Sydney and I spoke to somebody who's involved in fundraising and they said to me, "I've been talking to the studios and the studios have been saying that they are very interested in virtual reality." It makes one think that sometimes there are interesting new things at the edge of new technologies.

If you're going to do something with virtual reality, now is the time to do it because it's still a point of innovation and it hasn't gotten fixated and hardened. So virtual reality could be a new arena, recognising that time recuperates the modes of production and technology normalises very quickly.



Isaac Julien recently exhibited his latest show, *Refuge*, at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, featuring the Australian debut of his new multi-screen installation *Stones Against Diamonds* (2015) juxtaposed with one of the artist's most prophetic works *WESTERN UNION: Small Boats* (2007), shot in Sicily, (which pre-dates the current global crisis on migration by a nearly a decade). Thus the exhibition surveys Julien's complex, poetic film and photographic installations, across three continents, spanning eight years. Together, the works explore cartographies of displacement, from the baroque to modernist architecture, from Italy, to Iceland and Brazil.

Isaac Julien, *Stones Against Diamonds*, 2015. Duratrans in lightbox, 120 x 120 cm. Edition of 4 plus 1 AP. Courtesy the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.

Isaac Julien | Biography courtesy of Isaac Julien Studio

Isaac Julien is a Turner prize nominated artist and filmmaker. Earlier works include *Young Soul Rebels* (1991), which was awarded the Semaine de la Critique Prize at the Cannes Film Festival, the acclaimed poetic documentary *Looking for Langston* (1989) and *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Mask* (1996). Julien has pioneered a form of multi-screen installations with works such as *Western Union: Small Boats* (2007), *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010) and *Playtime: Kapital* (2014).

Julien was participant in the 56th Biennale di Venezia curated by Okwui Enwezor (2015). He has exhibited his work in major museums and institutions across the world including the nine screen of *Ten Thousand*

Waves at Museum of Modern Art, New York in 2013–2014, currently on show at Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris, and more recently Playtime and Kapital at El Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo in Mexico City (both 2016). Julien's work is included in the collections of institutions around the globe. In 2013, a monographic survey of his career to date, Riot, was published by MoMA, NY.

Julien is currently producing a new work that is a poetic meditation on aspects of the life and architecture of Lina Bo Bardi, entitled The Seven Faces of Lina Bo Bardi. The first chapter of this work, Stones Against Diamonds, was shown during 2015's La Biennale di Venezia, Art Basel and Art Basel Miami Beach. Julien is Chair of Global Art at University of Arts London.