



## **Isaac Julien: an act of remembrance**

By Peter Aspden

May 11, 2017



*Isaac Julien, photographed in his London studio in March © Peter Watkins*

Isaac Julien's studio in fast-gentrifying north-east London is a handsome, purpose-built building that seems, on this spring morning at least, to be losing the battle against local property developers. The streets are humming with construction work, and there is a mystifying diversion that makes it hard to find your way around. Blame the pretty canal-side views, which have prompted the sudden proliferation of luxury apartment blocks.

Once inside, the studio's airy spaces, co-designed with the British architect David Adjaye, have a calming effect. Julien, dressed in a smart, dark suit, joins me and pulls a face when I mention the disturbance outside. He knows more than most about London's protean neighbourhoods, having been born and raised in a part of the East End that gave no hint, back in the 1960s, of its impending

transformation of status, from social problem to urban luxury.

We sit in a space that is surrounded by books: difficult, thick books, the type that I remember from student friends who were studying European philosophy. I start counting the number of volumes on Jean-Luc Godard, cinema's master of stylish impenetrability, which crowd one of the higher shelves: there are more than 20.

Julien is in good spirits: he is putting the final touches to an exhibition of works that spring from what he describes as his "pivotal" and certainly best-known piece, *Looking for Langston*, the short film he made nearly 30 years ago on the black American poet Langston Hughes. Around the studio there are giant black-and-white photographic prints from the film, as well as assorted archival material, storyboards and Polaroids, that will shortly be on display at Victoria Miro gallery, and at Photo London.

*Looking for Langston*, made in 1989, five years after Julien's graduation from Saint Martin's art college, was the artist's breakthrough work, acclaimed for its oneiric, poetic qualities (Godard would surely have approved) and going on to become a canonical work in the field of African-American and queer studies in US education.



*A still image from 'Looking for Langston' on display in the studio © Peter Watkins*

Using a visual style described by Glenn Lowry, director of New York's Museum of Modern Art, as "lushly, swimmingly sensual", Julien turned his investigation into Hughes's work into an essay on black desire and sexuality, set during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s.

What, I ask him, prompted the renewal of interest in the film today? It came, he says, when he was writing a chapter on the film in his 2013 autobiographical book *Riot*, which gave him pause for "some self-reflection". The film was made at a time of political and cultural tumult.

"And I feel, and I have felt for some time, that there are certain resonances that apply today. "And it is also an act of remembrance. This was the time of the Aids crisis, and some of the people in the film are no longer with us. It felt like time to bring some of their voices to the fore. It is a portrait of the communities I was part of in London at that time. The arts community, and the queer community. There are a lot of histories mixed up in that work, which are metaphors. When it came out, it was quite controversial, because it tackled this enigma of Hughes's sexuality [the poet was widely thought to be gay, though he never came out]. So it was widely discussed among black intellectuals."

The new prints have been produced using a combination of digital and analogue pre- and post-production techniques, giving them a rich, cinematic sheen. The return to analogue technology was satisfying to work with, says Julien. "Not that I am fetishising that. I am not Tacita Dean! But I've been involved in photography for a long time, and for the last seven years, something has been missing from our culture – that tactile thing, the grain." He remains wary of the polemical positions that surround the digital-versus-analogue divide. "There are so many different camps," he says. Which is he in? "I am probably a bit transgressive. I see myself in lots of different camps."

One of the impacts of *Looking for Langston* was to inspire a refocusing on the Harlem Renaissance, the movement that spawned poets, musicians and artists who have remained criminally under-recognised, I suggest. As if to prove my point, Julien instantly names one: "James Van Der Zee. A great photographer. Those pictures of black subjects in mourning, in funeral parlours. They influenced me very much. They have always haunted me, and still do to some extent."

I ask if he was aware of the movement when he was at college. "I was really looking for this thing that could be called black modernism. The Harlem Renaissance was a mix of different modernisms. But it was a focal point. With [*Looking for Langston*] I was trying to draw together all these things that seemed incoherent, and give them a certain coherence, at least visually."

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Julien was born in 1960, the eldest of five children of parents who had come to London from St Lucia. He assumed an early carer role to his siblings, as both his parents worked on the night shift, and was labelled "secretary boy" at school, for his willingness to study more seriously than his schoolmates. He was determined to go to art college, and took a pre-foundation course in which he made his first (now lost) video, *How Gays Are Stereotyped in the Media*. The work was well received, but he recalls the words of one of his teachers, who suggested that it would have been more interesting if he had addressed the subject of black gays in particular. "I didn't know they existed!" he says. "But it was a question that stayed in my mind for a very long time. In a way, it took me those nine years to get to *Looking for Langston*."



*Pas de Deux with Roses, Looking for Langston film still, 1989*

The film was notable for its refined and unashamedly beautiful aesthetic, which was not a fashionable trope of the time. “When you go to art school you learn about aesthetics and you begin to have all those kinds of debates,” he wrote in *Riot*. “But when you grow up with an exterior world that is clearly ugly – a world that is degraded, that surrounds you with poverty – all that profoundly impacts your sensibilities. You actively want to involve yourself in appreciating the beautiful.”

He seems to have found his artistic voice relatively easily for a gay, black east Londoner growing up in the muscular post-punk years of Thatcherism. “To some extent, I drew my own path. It is about following your intuitions. The day I released *The Passion of Remembrance* [his 1986 film], I remember going to a gallery in the West End to see Andy Warhol. He was definitely an influence, in terms of embracing the film world and the art world. I used to see him at the Embassy Club in Bond Street. And that is when I began to identify myself as an artist. Going to clubs, being involved in a certain gay coterie – the artists served as a model for what I wanted to do.”

Julien’s path took him towards more commercially mainstream cinema – his 1991 film *Young Soul Rebels* remains his most accessible work, winning a critics’ prize at the Cannes Film Festival – but he has constantly turned back towards using film, and photography, in the context of galleries and installations. “It is so important to make things that resonate,” he says. “I think sometimes as an artist you do feel the ramifications of some things that are happening before other people do.”

He cites the example of his compelling three-screen video essay *Western Union: small boats*, made in 2007, which deals directly with the phenomenon of African migration to Sicily. The work has typically obtuse cinematic references – much of it is set in the Palazzo Valguarnera-Gangi in Palermo, which was a key location for Luchino Visconti’s masterpiece *The Leopard* (1963) – yet the message makes itself felt more strongly than ever today (a single-screen version will be shown this month in the Diaspora Pavilion at this year’s Venice Biennale).

“Ten years on, it has become a huge issue,” says Julien. “It is a Brexit issue, basically. I remember very distinctly talking to colleagues in the early 1980s, discussing how you never really know when certain things – certain regimes – can return. The things that give relationships a certain equilibrium can be suddenly dismantled. I think we are in that moment now.”

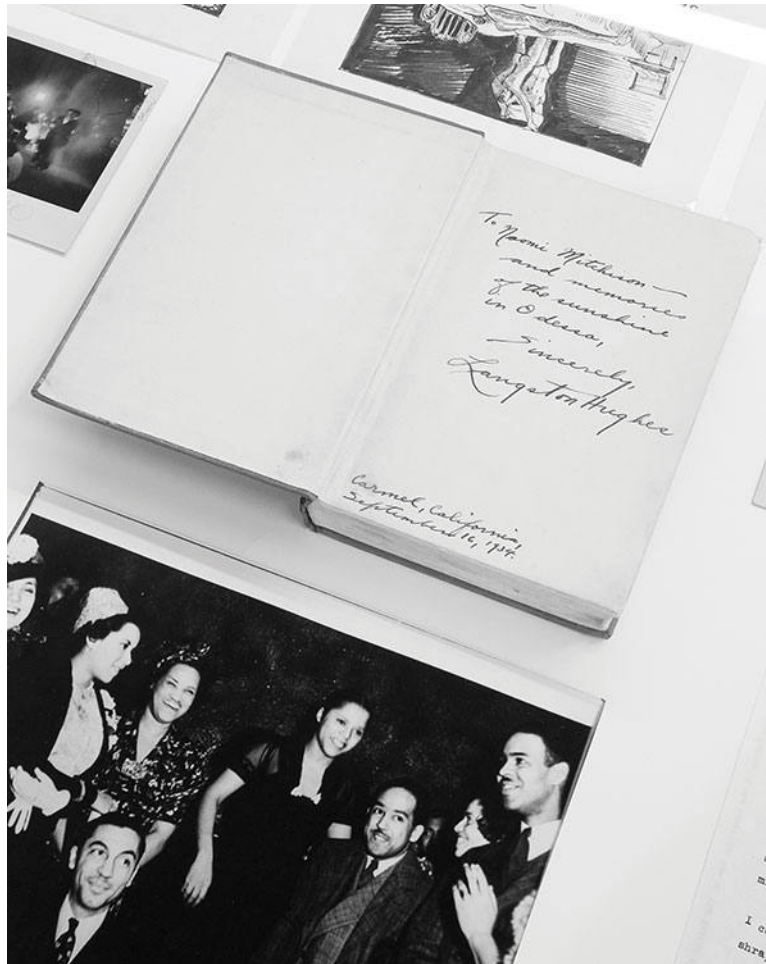
More recently, Julien has tackled the subject of money. In the seven-screen installation *Playtime*, his most formally complex work to date, six protagonists (including an art adviser played by the ubiquitous James Franco) connect with each other in the three cities of London, Reykjavik and Dubai. Julien says that the movement of capital and the effects of the 2008 crash in particular are the “big subject” of the decade. “And we are living with the ramifications now – the severe cuts that affect various communities, the idea that there is not enough to go around and that we have to put up the shutters.”



*Playtime', seven-screen installation, at Platform-L, Seoul, South Korea, March 2017 © Isaac Julien*

I ask if he feels any responsibility as an artist to step up to the plate, in what might be called the Trump-Brexit era. He is ambivalent. “We tend to be constantly responding to things, rather than thinking about setting our own cultural agendas. The problem with political imperatives is that they can trap you. We spend a lot of time thinking about how to respond – but part of it is to build your own language. That is so important, and that is what we are losing.” Because of social media, I ask? “It is not necessarily a progressive place,” he says plainly.

Finally, in the wake of revisiting *Looking for Langston*, I wonder if he feels that there is another black cultural “moment” happening today: the success of *Moonlight*, surely the most artful Oscar-winner for many a year, of Paul Beatty’s crackling Man Booker prizewinner *The Sellout*, and comedian Jordan Peele’s *Get Out*, a playful essay on race disguised as a horror movie, seem to be establishing an exciting new tone in black culture. “I think you can feel it,” he says. “There is this introspection that is taking place. But it is reverberating.



*One of the objects currently on display in Julien's studio is this book, which Langston Hughes signed for the Scottish poet and novelist Naomi Mitchison in 1934 © Peter Watkins*

By way of farewell, Julien takes me on a small tour of the studio, and shows me the opening scenes of *Western Union: small boats*, enthusiastically shutting all the blinds and curtains himself so that it is shown properly. The powerful images play across three screens, and the din outside is temporarily forgotten.

I ask him what he has planned for the future, and he tells me that he is working on a story set in the 18th century, based on the relationship between a suffragette and an abolitionist. He is going even further back in time to find new subjects, I say, and he laughs loudly, because he knows that no subject is ever so far removed that it cannot come back to plague us.

'I dream a world Looking for Langston' is at Victoria Miro, Wharf Road, London N1, May 18-July 29, with a special presentation at Somerset House during Photo London, May 18-21; [victoria-miro.com](http://victoria-miro.com); [photolondon.org](http://photolondon.org). 'Western Union: small boats' is showing at the Diaspora Pavilion during the 57th Venice Biennale, May 13-November 26; [internationalcuratorsforum.org](http://internationalcuratorsforum.org)

Portraits by Peter Watkins

Installation photographed by Jinho Kim © Isaac Julien