

Don't Let its Title Confuse You, 'Playtime' Isn't All Fun and Games

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Install view of Isaac Julien, 'Playtime,' 2014 in Gallery 308.  
(Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture / JKA Photography)

Isaac Julien's *Playtime*, an exhibition of the British video artist's work at Fort Mason Center for Arts and Culture, is deceptively dense.

The installations are minimal enough — three sites scattered across the campus consisting of varying types of screens. But the images, dialogue, references and ideas projected upon those screens make *Playtime* far more sobering than its lighthearted title suggests.

Let me begin with a few suggestions for visiting *Playtime*. If you're a completist, plan for two-and-a-half hours of solid video viewing time. Pack a few snacks (to be consumed between installations) and some tissues, if you're quick to tear up. Bring a buddy — someone who might enjoy a post-viewing discussion of wide-ranging and big-picture concepts like capitalism, labor and the global art market. I'll take the liberty of suggesting a particular viewing sequence, which also happens to be the order in which the works were made: *Better Life (Ten Thousand Waves)*, *KAPITAL* and finally, the titular *Playtime*.

Ready? We begin in the San Francisco Art Institute's Gray Box Gallery on Pier 2, part of the school's newly opened Fort Mason expansion. The single-screen, 55-minute video mixes found footage with reenactments to tell a heartbreaking story of cultural dislocation and loss, all spurred by a timeless search for a better life.

The contemporary example of this quest (and its accompanying danger) comes from the 2004 Morecombe Bay disaster, in which 23 Chinese men and women, hired to pick cockles (edible clams) off the northwest coast of England, died in the rising tide, unable to understand warnings from English-speaking locals.



Installation view of Isaac Julien, 'Better Life,' 2010 in Gray Box Gallery, San Francisco Art Institute – Fort Mason Campus. (Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture / JKA Photography)

Additional historical and fictional references in *Better Life* make Morecombe Bay one in a long line of tragedies, but without lessening the contemporary event's emotional impact. In one sequence, actress Maggie Cheung floats over 15th-century fishermen in the Fujian Province (home to the 23 Chinese cockle-pickers) as the goddess Mazu, mythical protector of seafarers. In another, actress Zhao Tao reenacts the making of *The Goddess*, a 1934 silent film starring Ruan Lingyu as a Shanghai prostitute struggling to support her child. (A not-insignificant side note: Cheung played Ruan in Stanley Kwan's 1992 film *Centre Stage*, reigniting interest in the silent film actress' career and death by suicide at age 24.)



Installation view of Isaac Julien, 'KAPITAL,' 2013 in SFMOMA Artists Gallery. (Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture / JKA Photography)

Julien loves to expose the inner workings of his video pieces, making visible both the mechanisms of their production and the people operating those mechanisms. Zhao's scenes clearly take place on a set of old Shanghai; the camera crew tracking her trolley rides is included in some of the shots. After she floats over the stunning Fujian landscape, we see Cheung suspended before a green screen, wires, fans and

backstage workers all laboring within the frame.

If *Better Life* leaves you feeling bereft, the view from Fort Mason across the Bay will help a bit, though it may also remind you of the cockle-pickers. Restored? The short walk between Pier 2 and the SFMOMA Artists Gallery is a great time to nosh on a snack.

Here, instead of a dark screening room, a white-walled gallery sports circular photographic prints (a nod to Renaissance tondos) featuring props and people from *Playtime*. The 31-minute *KAPITAL* plays on two monitors, laying bare (once again) Julien's deep engagement with the topics explored visually and narratively in the exhibition's pièce de résistance. Interspersed with clips from *Wall Street* and *Dealers*, Marx scholar David Harvey weighs in on capital and the (timely) fallacy of tax cuts for the rich. There's a belief, he says, that when the rich have more money they invest and create jobs. "They don't!" Harvey says. "They invest in art."



Isaac Julien, 'Eclipse (Playtime),' 2013. (Copyright the artist)

This provides a wonderful moment in our tour to consider how *Playtime* (the exhibition) arrived at Fort Mason Center. Loaned to the campus by the Kramlich Collection (previously responsible for the joy that was Janet Cardiff's *Forty Part Motet*, a collaboration with SFMOMA), *Playtime* (the video) was also made with financial support from the Kramlichs. In one scene in the seven-channel, 67-minute result of that support, James Franco directly addresses the camera with a smirk: "Who knows, maybe even video art will bring in a healthy sum to the next eagle-eyed investor of today."

After Harvey's sobering take on the speeding-up and ever-more-disparate global economy ("capitalism cannot function without debt," he says), the five scenes within Julien's *Playtime* perform the tricky task of seducing the viewer while simultaneously making her skin crawl. Be it through scenes of a London hedge fund, Franco's art-collecting advice, a post-collapse Reykjavik, Maggie Cheung interviewing art auctioneer Simon de Pury, or a Filipina house worker in Dubai, Julien beautifully illustrates the global, often bewildering movement of money, people and information.

The most playful aspect of *Playtime* (the video) may be its lack of seating options, leaving those with a desire to watch the entire loop the options of strolling through a maze of gigantic screens, or splaying out on the plush, ultramarine blue carpet covering Gallery 308 (imported from France!).

It's a lot – to take in, to sit through, to mull over afterwards. But you have snacks and a friend, right?