

# San Francisco Chronicle

## It's 'Playtime' at Fort Mason and there's video

By Charles Desmarais

December 1, 2017



Chinese actress Maggie Cheung plays the goddess Mazu in British artist Isaac Julien's film "Ten Thousand Waves."

For those of us who were around to see the first video works presented in art museum and gallery exhibitions, our memories are in grainy black and white. Today, no contemporary art venue can ignore video, and the technical quality of such offerings has vastly improved as the distinction between "video" and "film" has dissolved.

It has been nearly five decades since Gene Youngblood described an "expanded cinema" in his seminal book of the same name, positing that such a conflation of media would, paradoxically, lead to radically new forms of cinema. Yet most of the moving images we consume today look merely like crisper versions of the TV and movies Youngblood was ready to leave behind in the 1960s.

Not so with Isaac Julien's most invigorating works. The British artist has evolved since art school in the 1980s from filmmaker to installation artist, making multiple-screen digital works through which one wanders afoot, and that don't rely entirely on story or fixed sequence. They have no fixed point of view, in either the physical or the cinematic sense.



Legendary Chinese actress Maggie Cheung plays the goddess Mazu in British artist Isaac Julien's film "Ten Thousand Waves."

A deep-dive introduction to Julien's art, drawn from the highly significant but under-the-radar Kramlich Collection of media works, opened Friday, Dec. 1, and runs through Feb. 11. "Playtime" is the latest in a series of large-scale exhibitions at the reinvigorated Fort Mason Center for Arts and Culture. Built around the U.S. premiere of the seven-screen installation also called "Playtime" (2014) in Fort Mason's Gallery 308, the show also includes two works in other galleries.

Housed next door is "Kapital" (2013), a half-hour dual-screen Marxist survey of economic issues underlying events in "Playtime" (more visual and more interesting than it sounds). Across campus at the recently opened San Francisco Art Institute graduate center, "Better Life (Ten Thousand Waves)" (2010) inaugurates a new media gallery with a pictorially stunning, narratively poetic look at aspects of Chinese life, history and culture.

"Playtime," in contrast, is presented in a room covered by a sea of blue carpet. We are meant to enter at random, walk through as we wish, sit on the floor if and where we like. To see the entire work will take just over an hour, but the looping story, though broken into three acts with multiple scenes in each, can be entered at any point. Ultra-high-definition video images surround us, weaving together sublime landscapes and brawny city views. They are sumptuous and transfixing; each could be viewed as though it were a distinct work of photographic art.



Isaac Julien's video installation at Fort Mason Center galleries includes "Midnight Sun," part of "Playtime," top, and "Maiden of Silence," part of Better Life (Ten Thousands Waves," above.

Julien is not the only artist to use the multiscreen HD technique, but it suits his atomized storytelling particularly well. According to a wall label, "Playtime" is based on French filmmaker Jacques Tati's 1967 masterwork of comic genius, the original "Playtime."

Both deal, ultimately, with the dislocations and incoherence of modern life, but otherwise the relationship is primarily visual and formal, with nearly plotless interactions among characters. The Julien piece is not meant to be funny all the way through, though there is a witty and surreal engagement between characters played by Colin Salmon and James Franco, and a bit with the pompously entertaining auctioneer Simon de Pury that had me giggling. But Julien's "Playtime" relies on moments of pathos to move things along, like the disjointed stories of an Icelandic man's loss of his dream home after the financial crash in that country, and a Dubai maid's anguished sense of separation from her Philippine homeland.

Like all good stories, "Playtime" has many layers, not all of them visible on the surface. But Julien engineers a minutely intricate structure that, while solid in itself, is disorientingly full of blind turns and unbridged gaps. The exhibition organizers provide more background than any casual visitor will assimilate: an excellent free brochure; a small set of tarot-like cards with discussion prompts, also free; "Kapital," the 31-minute companion work; and a reading table of books on economics, the workings of the art world, the career of the artist.

My advice is to rely first on the work. It is a profoundly visual and intuitive experience that might be enriched by all that support material, but cannot be explained by it.

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