

Isaac Julien: 'It's another watershed moment for history of queer rights'

By Glenn Dunks

February 16, 2018

In Sydney for the 40th Mardi Gras, the pioneering proponent of New Queer Cinema reflects on once radical ideas that have made it to the mainstream



Isaac Julien says the Oscar-winning film *Moonlight* became a 'real catalyst for what could be in independent cinema'.
Photograph: Rodrigo Varela

The significance of this moment in time is not lost on the artist and filmmaker Isaac Julien.

The London-born son of St Lucien parents, Julien, 57, has spent much of his career exploring sexuality, race and the iconography of queer history. Having just watched his home country celebrate 50 years since homosexuality was decriminalised, he has arrived in Sydney to help celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras – the first since Australia legalised marriage equality.

And next year marks three decades since releasing his seminal film *Looking for Langston*, a documentary about Langston Hughes that was at the forefront of a queer film movement, winning the world's most prestigious award for queer cinema, the Teddy award, when it premiered at the Berlin international film festival in 1989.

When we speak over the phone, Julien is at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in Paddington, Sydney, where an exhibition honouring the film's 2017 restoration – featuring screenings and large-scale photographic stills – is being held as a part of Mardi Gras. Julien is delighted to return to *Looking for Langston* amid the celebrations, at a time when mainstream culture appears to be finally catching up with the radicalism of his work and that of his contemporaries.

Julien describes the late 80s and early 90s as "a queer watershed in cinema and aesthetics". Out of it arose New Queer Cinema – an indie film movement that also included Derek Jarman, himself the subject of another of Julien's documentaries, 2008's *Derek*, starring Tilda Swinton.

But *Looking for Langston* was an earlier proponent. Lush and heavily stylised – an inspiration for David Fincher’s music video for Madonna’s *Vogue* – it fused documentary and narrative to interpret the life of the American poet and was one of several films that gave a sudden voice to the historically ignored queer, black experience.

Julien cites Marlon Riggs’ *Tongues Untied*, Jennie Livingston’s *Paris is Burning* and Cheryl Dunye’s *The Watermelon Woman* – the first movie directed by an openly gay black woman – as works that, alongside his, offered a “multi-vocal queer aesthetic”. At the time, Aids and Reagan/Bush-era politics were ravaging both the black and queer communities. “The queer, black aesthetic was really alive,” he says, “and really mixed in with disco culture and house music ... There was a cultural revelation that was very exciting.”



Mise en scène No.1, a still from *Looking for Langston* that is being exhibited in Sydney. Photograph: Isaac Julien

Last year’s best picture win by *Moonlight* at the Academy Awards was, for Julien, something of a vindication: a mainstream acceptance of themes he had explored with *Looking for Langston* and 1991’s *Young Soul Rebels*, his film about black DJs in the time of the Queen’s silver jubilee.

“*Moonlight* was such a wonderful film and it was really interesting to have it become a real catalyst for what could be [in] independent cinema,” he says. “And of course at the centre of it were these two queer, black characters who, in a way, stole the thunder of the Oscars. There’s something really celebratory about that.”

The popularity of Barry Jenkins’s film – particularly with queer, black audiences unfamiliar with seeing their stories on a mainstream screen – showed Julien that the time was right to bring his own film back, for a new generation. In Julien’s student days, queer black artists were not a part of the syllabus; his discovery of Hughes’s poetry and the debate around his sexuality was “serendipitous”, coming just as Julien was eager to find his own place as an artist. Thirty years later, *Looking for Langston* is widely taught in art schools, and he hopes the film’s revival can introduce more young people to the queer, black experience.

"In the art world there's a kind of zeitgeist," Julien says, referring not just to Moonlight but to the surprise hit James Baldwin documentary I Am Not Your Negro, and the Black Lives Matter movement. "It's wonderful that Looking for Langston can be shown at this moment and in a way show this trajectory."

Baldwin, like Hughes, is another name that lingers over Julien's career. Looking for Langston was dedicated to the author and social commentator two years after his death from stomach cancer in 1987; and Julien has worked on adapting Baldwin's classic 1956 novel Giovanni's Room, a project Madonna was once circling. It never got made – but he hints it could be more viable now that Baldwin's words are back in the public consciousness. And with Madonna, too? "Absolutely," Julien says. "Yes, it would be fantastic."

Earlier this month, Julien was appointed a commander of the order of the British empire for his contributions to the arts. He says he will continue to seek new fusions of film, photography, music and art. "It's another watershed moment for history of queer rights," he says. "It all feels like a particular moment ... it's really marking a time of acceptance, which we've wanted for some time".

• Isaac Julien: Looking for Langston 1989/2017 is at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery until 3 March, as part of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras