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Isaac Julien on Frederick Douglass: 'It's an extraordinary story'

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Davina Semo's "Precarious Hardware," on view at Jessica Silverman Gallery, includes "Threshold" (left), "Vibrator," "Exotica," "Muse," "Heart," "Glow" and "Homegrown." Photo: Jessica Silverman Gallery

Standing in the heart of Highland Park in Rochester, New York, the British artist and film-maker Isaac Julien found himself looking up at the Frederick Douglass monument – the first statue in the country to memorialize an African American. It led to an epiphany.

"I thought, my God, this man, who was born in 1818, is extraordinary," said Julien. "A lightbulb went off."

Douglass, the trailblazing 19th-century abolitionist, orator and activist who escaped from slavery in Maryland, is the focus of Julien's latest exhibition at Metro Pictures gallery in New York, *Lessons of the Hour – Frederick Douglass*, which runs until 13 April. The artwork was commissioned and acquired by the Memorial Art Gallery in Rochester, where it will concurrently be on view until 12 May.

"There is a certain timeliness to the piece," said Julien, seated at the head of a long, white table in the back room of Metro Pictures. Sporting a black and grey suit and clear-rimmed spectacles, he explains: "One reason for making the work is reviewing what America is today, where it comes from."

Featuring a 10-screen video installation, tintype portraits and photos, the exhibition is centered around three profound speeches Douglass gave throughout his life, including *Lecture on Pictures*, where he talked about the power of photography to not only reveal truth, but empower. Douglass once said: "The soul that is within me no man can degrade."

"Douglass was the most photographed man of the 19th century, more so than President Lincoln, in fact," said Julien. "He was interested in photography because of the role of autonomy it gave him over his own self-representation, as opposed to the ones that were being captured and stereotyped; black men and women were being presented in derogatory imagery. He saw photography as a savior of representing a regime of truth or person."



Isaac Julien - Rapture 1846 (Lessons of The Hour). Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

There are poetic film clips that re-enact the lectures of Douglass, much of which were shot at the Royal Academy of Art in London, but act as more than just a period drama history lesson. They are shown alongside video clips of the Baltimore riots of 2015 following the killing of Freddie Gray.

"I'm juxtaposing what's happening in modern-day Baltimore, the recent riots there," said Julien. "The FBI footage we use in the piece is looking at the way in which crowds congregate in situations of unrest. From the late 19th century to the 21st century, I'm looking at civil unrest in a situation where an African American man was killed."

The film also explores *Lessons of the Hour*, the speech where Douglass addressed lynching in the south, as well as *What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?*, a speech he gave in Rochester which criticized the slave trade.

For the artworks, Julien worked alongside the scholar Celeste-Marie Bernier, a Douglass expert at the University of Edinburgh, to compose what the artist calls "*tableaux vivants*" that detail his relationship to the women in his life.

Highlighted are Douglass's first wife Anna Murray, a black woman who died in 1882, and his second wife, the white suffragist Helen Pitts. It also features his relationship with the British abolitionists Anna and Ellen Richardson, who raised the funds to free Douglass when he escaped slavery in 1846 and his longtime friend, Susan B Anthony.



Isaac Julien - The North Star (Lessons of The Hour). Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

"He was very charming, a slave philosopher, or an ex-slave philosopher. He was incredibly handsome," said Julien. "He is someone who was an incredibly strong character."

Douglass also lived in Scotland for 21 months and traveled through England giving hundreds of lectures. "He left America a slave and returned a free man. It's an extraordinary story," said Julien.

The exhibit also features black-and-white photographs related to Julien's film *Who Killed Colin Roach?* from 1983, which looks at the death of a 23-year-old black man who was shot dead at a police station in London's East End.

It continues the "quest for equality that was Douglass's lifelong ambition, while also evoking the current Black Lives Matter movement", states Julien.

Julien, a queer black artist who was born in London to parents from St Lucia, is widely recognized for creating works that reflect upon black queer visibility and black identity. As Julien has said previously, he considers himself a poet, which probably led him to making his previous film on the Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes, *Looking for Langston*.

Douglass came into the limelight yet again last year, as the city of Rochester recently celebrated the 200th anniversary of Douglass's birth (Douglass is buried at Mount Hope cemetery in Rochester).

"He's someone who is an incredibly important figure in American culture, a global icon," said Julien. "His work in abolitionism is so crucial in understanding where we are today; it helped me look at America differently and also, British history – Britain was deeply implicated in the slave trade, in a way, uncovering his work is something we need to be doing today."

"There's more work to be done on him."