

# HYPERALLERGIC

Isaac Julien: "Isaac Julien's Political Memory"

By Nicole Miller

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Isaac Julien, "Western Union Series No. 5 (Ghosts/They Build New Lives in Foreign Lands)" (2007), Duratrans image in lightbox, 48 3/8 x 97 x 21/4 inches

*All Photos: Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York, photo by Isaac Julien*

On Wednesday, April 22, the Neuberger Museum of Art will virtually host filmmaker and installation artist Isaac Julien in conversation with Louise Yelin, co-curator of Julien's exhibition *Western Union: Small Boats* (2007). The three-screen film installation, which opened in February (and is currently closed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic), reflects Julien's longstanding engagement with the legacies of slavery and colonialism and a compositional approach that incorporates narrative collage across large-scale, multi-screen projections. As Yelin told me when I visited the Neuberger in February, Julien wants to "create a style for political remembering."

At the center of *Western Union: Small Boats* is the gilded interior of an 18th-century Italian palazzo. Shot in the ornate ballroom featured in Visconti's 1963 film *The Leopard*, the scene shimmers with Baroque ornamentation and the lush appointments of Sicilian nobility. We watch as a woman – blond, blue-eyed – enters the room and approaches the camera with a wide smile. Other figures appear: a dark-skinned woman wearing a white dress, a man in a keffiyeh carrying a limp male body across his shoulders. Their choreography unfolds in a dreamlike sequence. The room seems to pitch and roll as if built in the hold of a ship. We hear the creaking of masts, a murmuring voice, the distant, repeated sound of a scream. The ominous sequence culminates in the stylized thrashing of one of the figures. Caught in the net of some unseen horror, he writhes on the painted tiles of the floor and, in a neighboring shot, underwater. The scene contains the work's central concerns: the lavish fantasia of imperial conquest; the boat, which nourishes the

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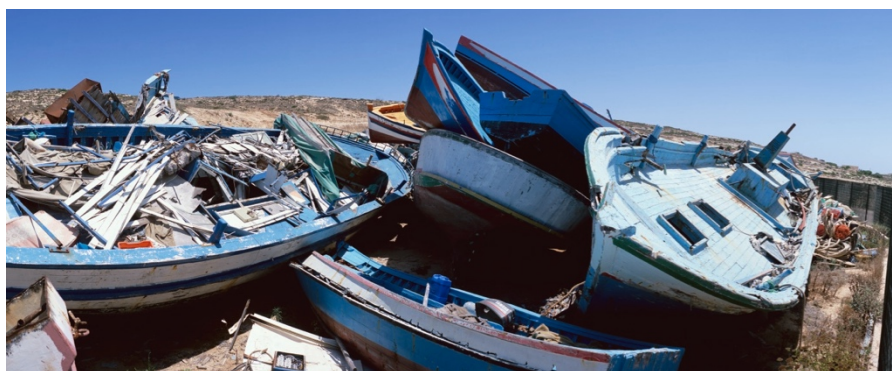
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spatial imaginations of Western Europe; and the intimation of peril or ruin.



Isaac Julien, "Western Union Series No. 12 (Balustrade)" (2007), Duratrans image in light box, 47 1/4 x 47 1/4 inches

Julien made the video in response to Western media accounts of trans-Mediterranean migration and migrant death at sea. Filmed on the island of Lampedusa, a key point of arrival for those who cross the Mediterranean from North Africa, the work reimagines representations of migration in the context of large-scale global displacement, rising nationalism, and violent bordering practices across Europe and the United States. In light of these events, Julien's work invites us to ask, What is *political* remembering? In the US, publicly funded memorials often render the past as a proposition about the collective values of the present. The 9/11 Memorial, for example, commissioned with the mandate to "Remember, Rebuild, Renew," enshrines loss even as it reaffirms life. Julien's memorial for those crossing the Mediterranean — along a route marked in recent years by Italy's efforts to criminalize rescue, empower the Libyan Coast Guard, and restrict access to its ports — resists the neat template of commemoration and regeneration. Instead, *Western Union* appears as a haunting. Here, the past is not lost and loss is not past, but recurs like a chilling litany under the bright Mediterranean sun.



Isaac Julien, "Western Union Series No. 9 (Shipwreck—Sculpture for the New Millennium)" (2007), Duratrans image in lightbox 47 1/4 x 118 1/8 inches

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Portentous, urgent scenes ripple across three screens. Julien trains his gaze on Italian fishing boats trawling the water or sitting snug in the harbor. He finds their uneasy double in a wooden vessel carrying sun-dazed migrants at sea. He captures the island's "boat cemetery," where boats abandoned by migrants or seized by the Coast Guard lie splintered and wrecked. Among these broken hulls, we see Arabic script, as well as tattered clothing and an abandoned life jacket. Though they suggest the human form and a point of origin – Libya? Tunisia? – these objects provide vanishing evidence of the thousands of asylum seekers and migrants who have arrived on the island in recent years and countless others, fleeing violence, persecution, and economic insecurity, who have not.

Elsewhere, sun-tanned bathers throng the beach. Within view of their seaside idyll, a tank top washes ashore. Nearby, bodies covered in bright mylar blankets lie on the sand in a line, unmoving.



Isaac Julien, "Western Union Series No. 1 (Cast No Shadow)" (2007), Duratrans image in lightbox, 47 1/4 x 47 1/4 inches

We've grown accustomed to seeing images of these objects, circulated widely by the media as motifs of precarious migration: small, overcrowded boats, life jackets, and emergency blankets indicate the perils of the journey and migrant vulnerability. But in Julien's vision, these objects are not primarily emblems of undefended or lost life. They also serve a subtle strategy of withholding or restraint that conceals the violated body from view.

In *Western Union*, the body is vitally expressive in Julien's multiracial company of dancers. They process with somber poise and grace along Lampedusa's white cliffs or up the stone steps of the palace. Their coordinated movement – at times funereal, at others frenzied – commands rapt attention, rather than pity.

In her catalogue essay, Yelin highlights the historical continuities of what Alessandra Di Maio has termed the Black Mediterranean: the web of geographic proximities and cultural and economic crossings linking Europe and Africa. These transnational exchanges include the histories of colonialism, emigration, and displacement along slave routes and trade networks, which undermine myths of nationality, ethnicity, and cultural autonomy. Julien's witnessing figure – the woman in white, who appears in the video's opening frame – highlights the persistence of these contiguities and suggests an anti-monumental approach to remembering. As she casts a watchful eye over these scenes, she signals a key feature of Julien's grammar for political

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remembering: the work of bearing witness to ongoing events in a continuous historical skein.

"Monuments are complacent," Zadie Smith has written. "They put a seal on the past. They release us from dread." Smith is referring to the work of Julien's contemporary Kara Walker, whose phantasmagorical imbrications of past and present, blackness and whiteness, dread and desire, suggest another style for political remembering. Like Walker, Julien animates our sense of dread, right up to the work's final image: a black garment pulled from the water. But dread for whom or what? "When I made the work," Julien told Yelin in an interview published in the exhibition catalogue, "Africans were the ones crossing the Mediterranean, but in a prophetic sense, I saw that in the future they — migrants — could be anybody."

Julien's observation reflects widespread apprehension about the collapse of ecologies, economies, and forms of governance around the globe. It echoes a sentiment that often invades contemporary art, activism, and popular culture in the Global North: "We are all migrants." But *Western Union* does more than invite culturally-privileged audiences to identify with refugees from the Global South. Through its saturated colors and lavish attention to the body, the work appeals to our empathy as well as our desire.

Discussing the work's seductions, curator and critic Emma Chubb has suggested that *Western Union* exposes a distinctly European (and perhaps American) desire: the fantasy of our own soil as a Promised Land for migrants. "This desire," according to Chubb, "manifests in different ways, whether in the hope for continental unity, in rising nationalism and xenophobia, or, as Julien's film proposes, in fantastical projections onto the psychology or dreamscapes of migrants." Accounts of migration that circulate in Western media often center the desires of migrants for safety, belonging, home. But *Western Union*, exhibited widely in Europe and the United States, addresses its audiences' lusts through the power of suggestion, the logic of foreplay. The body seems to slip through our grasp.