

Isaac Julien: "New film explores the relationship between Barnes and Harlem Renaissance founder"

By Rita Charleston

June 14, 2022



Isaac Julien at the Barnes Foundation, 2022. Ryan Collerd/The Barnes Foundation

In celebration of its Centennial, the Barnes Foundation will debut a newly commissioned film installation by artist and filmmaker Isaac Julien.

On view in the Roberts Gallery from June 19 through September 4, "Isaac Julien: Once Again...(Statues Never Die)" features a five-screen installation that explores the close relationship of Dr. Albert C. Barnes, among the most significant collectors of African material culture in the first half of the twentieth century, and famed philosopher and cultural critic Alain Locke.

Barnes, a man born in a South Philadelphia slum, went on to become a successful man of many interests, including what came to be called the Harlem Renaissance, as he followed its many artists and writers.

In 1925 Barnes wrote an essay titled "Negro Art and America," published in the Survey Graphic magazine of Harlem, which was edited by Alain Locke, a man Julien describes as "the first African-

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American Rhodes Fellow at Oxford University," and a man Julien often refers to as the "Father" of the Harlem Renaissance.

André Holland as Alain Locke on the set of the film *Isaac Julien: Once Again... (Statues Never Die)*, 2022, at The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia. Isaac Julien.

Julien's film focuses on a time when the Western colonial gaze was fascinated by African and diasporic aesthetics. And since it was Locke who edited the magazine that published Barnes' essay on "Negro Art," it was also this magazine that first identified Harlem as the "Mecca" of a new African American culture.

"Barnes had a particularly strong connection to African American culture," Julien says, and points out an "original scene when Barnes' strict Methodist mother took him as a child to African American spiritual meetings."

And interestingly, Julien notes, "Though both men appear to come from different worlds, their storied relationship proves they actually had a lot in common."

Imagining the installation as a form of what he calls "poetic reparation," Julien alludes to contemporary debates around the status of objects of African origin now in museums around the world. The film, created and directed by Julien, and co-written with Martina Klich, engages with the current critical debates on African art collecting and reparation of the sculptures - many of which were taken during the Benin Expedition in 1897 as souvenirs by British troops.

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Born in London, and today a Distinguished Professor of the Arts at the University of California Santa Cruz, Julien remembers that "growing up I wanted to become an artist. But early on I was also taught about photography and filmmaking. It was a wonderful experience, and about the age of 20 I knew I wanted to make films."



Danny Huston as Albert Barnes on the set of the film *Once Again (Statues Never Die)*, 2022, at The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia. Isaac Julien.

And so he has. His 1989 documentary drama exploring author Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance titled "Looking for Langston" garnered him a cult following, while his 1991 debut feature "Young Soul Rebels" won the Semaine de la Critique prize at the Cannes Film Festival.

And there have been many more, making him the perfect partner for the Barnes in bringing this lesser-known chapter of the Foundation's history to light. Julien says, "I think some very surprising, even unique facts will be shared during this 100th anniversary presentation. And I can't wait for it to be open to the public."

The exhibit features works by sculptors Richmond Barthé and Matthew Angelo Harrison, in addition to selected African objects from the Barnes collection.

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