

VOGUE

"At the Barnes Foundation, Isaac Julien Stages a Soaring Ode to Black Creativity"

By Robert Sullivan

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An installation view of "Isaac Julien: Once Again ... (Statues Never Die)" at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia.

Photo: Henrik Kam

Entering Isaac Julien's newest installation, [Once Again ... \(Statues Never Die\)](#), is like entering into a series of questions, each composed in sumptuous, film-like black-and-white video, each projected on five wall-sized screens. The visitor to the exhibition—which runs through September 4, at the Barnes Foundation, in Philadelphia—stands in the half-circle of views, a panorama of five characters, each moving through museums and art studios, through mansions and nightclubs and landscapes of time. Altogether, it's a dream that makes a point to not make a point at all, but instead foreground old (but still charged) debates about art and objects, about how people see things or don't, about the resonances of violence and the power of questions to reposition us. It's a summer must-see.

What there is of a plot surrounds the aesthetic and intellectual travels of Alain Locke, the theorist and critic often referred to as a founder of the Harlem Renaissance, here played by André Holland, the star of *Moonlight* and *Passing*. If you think of Julien's film as an artwork negotiating with your

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senses, then the sonic throughline is the song that opens and underlines the film. Sung by Alice Smith, she puts her [four-octave range](#) to work here on a track commissioned by Julien's studio and co-written with Syience (also known as Reginald Perry). Smith's opening notes announce Julien's goal, to break through our frozen sympathies: "Once again," she sings, "I defend my open heart..."



Alice Smith in *Once Again . . . (Statues Never Die)*, 2022.

Photo: Courtesy of the artist & Victoria Miro, London/Venice. © 2022 Isaac Julien

As Locke revisits his alma mater in England (he was [the first-ever Black Rhodes scholar](#)), we follow several characters at once. In Oxford's anthropology museum, established by Augustus Pitt Rivers, he contemplates the busts of philosophers and an encyclopedic arrangement of guns, weapons of colonial attack. On another screen, [Sharlene Whyte](#) (*Small Axe, Lessons of the Hour*) simultaneously tours the same museum, playing an African curator in a time closer to now. "The contemporaneous question is brought to us not by Locke, not by Barnes, but by the Black female African curator, who has an altogether different view," Julien told me on the phone the other day. "The point of view is from the West. The gaze is not a Western gaze."

Interspaced between scenes of Whyte as the curator are scenes from *You Hide Me*, made in 1970 by Ghanaian filmmaker Nii Kwate Owoo, who, in a rented three-piece suit, walked from Cinema Active, a film collective in London, to film the African artifacts in the British Museum, making an

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early case for [the return of plundered Benin Bronzes](#). The dialogue in *Once Again ...* is a collage of the reverberations of violence: lines of essays, pieces of poems—and in this explicitly museum-centered moment, the African curator quotes Aimé Césaire, the Martinican poet: "Everything that was ever torn apart/ has been torn apart in me/ everything that was ever mutilated/ has been mutilated in me."



An installation view of "Isaac Julien: Once Again . . . (Statues Never Die)" at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia.
Photo: Henrik Kam

At the center of the many-films-in-one is a debate, staged by Julien, that recasts two articles written by Locke and Albert Barnes, founder of the Barnes, for the Black literary journal *Opportunity* in 1924 as an in-person conversation, filmed in the Barnes Foundation. The historical precedent for such an encounter is Barnes and Locke's collaboration in promotion of African Art in the early 1900s. "Its chief need is to be allowed to speak for itself, to be studied and interpreted not to be praised or exploited," says Locke. "It is high time that it was understood, and not taken as a matter of oddness and curiosity, or of quaint primitiveness and fantastic charm."

"[A]t this moment, the veil is torn, the heavy veil of prejudices amassed by the centuries," Barnes says, though in his role as Barnes, Danny Huston (*Succession* and *Marlowe*) offers the intensity of the visionary collector and self-made educator, whose enthusiasm feels tainted with, if not paternalism, then what retrospect shows as a short-sightedness—a view compromised, perhaps, by a well-meaning overzealousness. It's this clash that gives the viewer of *Once Again...* insight into

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the museum's dark complications, like the Benin Bronze that is at the front of this exhibit, a piece bought by Barnes himself. Julien then returns to Aimé Césaire, as the African curator reads from 1950's *Discourse on Colonialism*: "So the real problem, you say, is to return them. No, I repeat. We are not men for whom it is a question of 'either or.' For us, the problem is not to make a utopian and sterile attempt to repeat the past, but to go beyond."



André Holland and Devon Terrell in *Once Again . . . (Statues Never Die)*, 2022.
Photo: Courtesy of the artist & Victoria Miro, London/Venice. © 2022 Isaac Julien

Locke's complexity allows for a kind of coda to Julien's *Looking for Langston*, from 1989. As we follow Locke's eye, we land eventually on the work of Richmond Barthé, a gay man Locke was attracted to both romantically and as a sculptor whose work represented, for Locke, a new artistic horizon. Born in New Orleans, Barthé attended art school in Chicago, and, while living in Greenwich Village, became a renowned Black artist, despite being forgotten in some ways today. For *Once Again*, Julien staged a studio visit in which Barthé is played by Devon Terrell (*Barry*), and lines from *Looking for Langston* make an encore performance, linking Locke to the gay subcultures of inter-war Europe. "Barthé," says Thom Collins, the director of the Barnes, "was one of the visual artists to realize what, for Locke, became an idealized expression that wedded European modernist aesthetics and an African diaspora aesthetic with the consideration of African material culture."

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The work ends with time collapsing, or maybe expanding, with scenes of falling snow and lines from bell hooks, read by Locke, in an exploratory conflation: "As we mature as artists in the mystical diasporic dream-space, a culture of infinite possibility is ready to receive us. This is artistic freedom as pure and unsullied as falling snow." And then Alice Smith sings, moving along steep stairs in a cavernous lobby. "I've spent so many days and nights, tried in so many ways to change my situation," she says, finally belting out notes that make you shiver. "Oh, I go beyond everything that I've ever seen, beyond everywhere that I've ever been. And I won't apologize 'cause I'm making a new way for us once again."

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