

Art in America

"Statues Never Die: Isaac Julien at the Barnes Foundation"

By Alexander R. Bigman

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Isaac Julien: *Once Again ... (Statues Never Die)*, 2022, from his five-channel video installation, 32 minutes.

COURTESY BARNES FOUNDATION, PHILADELPHIA

Thirty-three years have passed since the release of *Looking for Langston*, [Isaac Julien's](#) breakthrough film about the life and desires of writer [Langston Hughes](#). In the interim, Julien has produced a number of similarly lyrical works commemorating cultural figures from eras past, among them Frantz Fanon, Matthew Henson, Derek Jarman, Frederick Douglass, and Lina Bo Bardi. The artist's latest project, a five-screen installation titled *Once Again ... (Statues Never Die)*, 2022, returns him to the Harlem Renaissance. Its central personage is [Alain Locke](#), the pioneering Rhodes scholar, cultural theorist, and admirer (amorous as well as intellectual) of Hughes, whose work he championed in his landmark 1925 anthology *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. Julien has suggested that *Once Again* might be understood as a kind of "prequel" to *Langston*. The [Barnes Foundation](#) in Philadelphia, which commissioned and exhibited the work on the occasion of its centennial, alternatively presents it as a "coda" to the earlier film. Though seemingly incompatible, both descriptors work; together, they capture the simultaneously anticipatory and retrospective character of the project, which sets up several of the Harlem Renaissance's key intellectual currents—chief among them the imagination of a self-consciously diasporic identity and culture—

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while also reflecting on a related set of postcolonial ideas that the artist has been engaging since the 1980s. On a formal level the work is replete with doublings and reversals, effectively embodying its titular dynamics of recurrence ("once again") and persistence ("never die"). The result is illuminating, poignant, and supremely beautiful, if also in certain ways constricted.

Locke's relationship with Hughes remains mostly outside of *Once Again's* purview. The work centers instead on the philosopher's thoughts regarding African art: its energizing effect on Black as well as White modernists, its subjection to primitivizing distinctions between African "artifacts" and European "art," its risk of reduction to just another "exotic fad." Locke arrived at some of these ideas through his correspondence with Alfred Barnes, founder of the eponymous museum and an avid collector of West African statuary. Julien dramatizes these epistolary exchanges in the form of a politely disputative conversation between the two men (played by André Holland and Danny Huston) that was filmed in the museum's galleries—spaces where, to this day, Christian carved-wood triptychs and paintings by Pablo Picasso hang side-by-side with Baule masks and Kota reliquary figures. For Barnes, it seems, the latter objects were a testament to the genius of cultures fundamentally different from his own, and an answer to the racism he condemned in the United States. For Locke, they represented something different: a trove of common ancestral heritage (a dubiously generalizing proposition, though one that held a certain currency within Pan-Africanist discourses at the time) and, more important, a key to diasporic cultural renewal in the present. "Nothing is more galvanizing," we hear him declare in voiceover, "than the sense of a cultural past."



View of Isaac Julien's video installation *Once Again ... (Statues Never Die)*, 2022, at the Barnes Foundation.
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Around this central encounter between Black philosopher and White collector, Julien weaves an elliptical text of both archival and original material that effectively reframes their discussion and its underlying power dynamics—which issue largely from the fact that Barnes, a millionaire, could acquire the objects of his enthusiasm in a way that Locke could not—with respect to larger conversations about cultural heritage, ownership, creativity, and desire. Footage from the Ghanaian filmmaker Nii Kwate Owoo’s 1970 documentary *You Hide Me*, set in the British Museum’s storage rooms, anticipates a call for the repatriation of looted African objects by a fictional Black curator (Sharlene Whyte) at the University of Oxford’s Pitt Rivers Museum. An imagined sequence of erotic encounters between Locke and the sculptor Richmond Barthé (Devon Terrell), whose work Locke also championed, intertwines with an oneiric performance on the grand, dimly lit staircase of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts by songwriter Alice Smith, who sings a soulful if wounded refrain: “once again, I defend my open heart.” Locke’s attraction to Barthé’s art, Julien suggests, was inextricable from his enthusiasm for West African sculpture: both affinities were bound up with a larger yearning, at once personal and political, for novel forms of Black community and culture.

Julien’s film unfolds in carefully choreographed counterpoint across the work’s five double-sided screens, which are angled to form, along with a set of distorting mirrors, a loose enclosure. Completing the installation are two groupings of thematically relevant statuary, assembled on either side of the central viewing area. Baule, Dogon, and Edo objects from the Barnes collection appear alongside a statuette and bust by Barthé. So do several West African sculptures encased in tomb-like bricks of transparent polyurethane resin, works by the contemporary artist Matthew Angelo Harrison. One of Harrison’s creations also appears onscreen in a luminous, slowly rotating shot, one of several dazzlingly beautiful moments that punctuate the film.



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While Locke's tone remains guardedly optimistic, Julien's is predominantly elegiac. His film, among the few he has shot in black-and-white since *Langston*, is unified by imagery of autumn passing into winter. In one sequence, desiccated leaves blow through Pitt Rivers's African galleries; a later shot frames Barnes's neoclassical mansion within a snowy landscape. Though the seasonal conceit would seem to imply a progression with spring and summer on the horizon, the film itself and its mirrored installation adhere instead to a logic of doubling, repetition, and return. In the film's penultimate tableau, for instance, flakes of snow slowly flutter over the figures of Locke and Barthé, posed in formal wear on separate screens. Then, in an almost imperceptible shift, the footage begins to play backward, sending the precipitation on an uncanny upward trajectory. Watching the particles' otherworldly ascent through one of Harrison's polyurethane prisms, I wondered: was this reversal an emblem of liberation, or of stasis? The redirection of time resonates with Julien's larger project: a repositioning of several distinct historical and discursive moments to form a novel, politically charged constellation. It could also intimate a closed circuit, however: a hall of mirrors from which there is no escape.

Such questions bear obliquely on the sociopolitical issues that the work evokes, many of which have endured across generations and thus occasioned what can feel like cyclical discursive patterns. As viewers of Julien's generation will likely recall, the question of modernism's relation to the "primitive," the issue with which we hear Locke critically engaging in the 1920s, controversially resurfaced in the mid-1980s. Nii Kwate Owoo's 50-year-old argument for repatriation is today resurgent. Julien's own gesture of reflexivity—his return to the 1989 work that in many ways launched his career—thus takes its place within a larger history of African diasporic identity formation in which the past is always present, "statues never die," and elegy and creativity are inextricably entwined.

Earlier this year, I watched a remarkable film called *Territories* (1984) that Julien directed when he was still a student at Central Saint Martins, well before beginning *Langston*. (Both works were products of Sankofa Film and Video Collective, of which Julien was a founding member.) Billed as an experimental documentary about London's Afro-Caribbean carnival tradition, the work layers commentary over clips of the event—including scenes of revelry and intimacy, as well as violent clashes with police officers—that form an increasingly fragmentary montage, ultimately condensing into a dense, hypnotic flow of recorded sounds and imagery, structurally akin to the engrossing dub mix that forms its sonic backbone. Several salient themes of Julien's mature oeuvre are evident here: diasporic culture, queerness, power. Yet the result also stands apart from the artist's work of more recent decades, not only in its comparatively unvarnished feel, but also in its sustained attunement to the practices of a specific, present-day community and the textures of a particular place. Watching *Once Again*, I marveled at how the artist's scope of inquiry has expanded over the years (along with his budgets and his cinematographic prowess). I also wondered what a cross between the two approaches might look like: one that addressed the Barnes's originary moment circa 1922 and its intersection with the advent of a diasporic modernism while being alive to, say, the everyday realities of contemporary Philadelphia, where the museum relocated in 2012, in the way that *Territories* was alive to the sights and sounds of London in the 1980s. After all, it is the constellation of voices past and present that gives Julien's crystalline work its cutting edge.

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