

"Artist Isaac Julien: 'You have to change the top brass'"

By Rachel Spence

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© Photographed the FT by Antonia Adomako

Ahead of a Tate survey of his work, the Londoner explains what is wrong with British film and what he prefers about the US

Two men – one black, one white – discuss art and identity. "Nothing is more galvanising than the sense of a cultural past," observes the black man as the scene cuts to a black woman walking through a museum, its shelves packed with African art and artefacts.

"*Juju* houses to be blown up. Walls and houses to be knocked down," she intones, reading from the diary of the British army captain who oversaw the looting of the Kingdom of Benin in 1897 during which the Benin Bronzes were taken, to be sold and distributed to western museums.

The scene shifts to a mansion in a snowbound garden. Snowflakes fall on the tuxedo-clad shoulders of the two black men: "Within the dreamworld of art, I am all that I want to be," declares the narrator.

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



A screening of Isaac Julien's film 'Once Again (Statues Never Die)'. Julien's exhibition 'What Freedom is to Me' will be at Tate Britain until August 20 © Barnes Foundation | Courtesy of Isaac Julien and Victoria Miro Gallery

Weaving together the neglected art of black Modernism and the issue of restitution through the retelling of a real-life conversation between black cultural theorist Alain Locke and white businessman Albert Barnes, who collected African objects, the film *Once Again... (Statues Never Die)* (2022) by artist Isaac Julien defies its weighty ingredients to become a lyrical, fleet-footed odyssey through time, space and culture. As such, with its texts from Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes, American writer bell hooks and footage from other films, it typifies the montage technique pioneered by Julien since the 1980s.

Julien and I meet in the same canalside studio in east London as we did six years ago; on that day, however, sun bounced off the barges, whereas today their decks are sprinkled with rain. Then, too, he refused to showboat, spoke in elaborate sentences and often tailed off before a conclusion. A man who reflects as he talks, he's less concerned with being interesting than interested.

Today our interview is occasioned by Julien's solo show *What Freedom Is To Me*, which opens next week at Tate Britain, where *Once Again* will make its European debut. It's a measure of his stature that the film has a stellar cast including André Holland (of *Moonlight* fame), while poet and Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka contributes a beautiful text to the catalogue.

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SILVERMAN**

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jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



A scene from Isaac Julien's film 'Once Again (Statues Never Die)' with André Holland as Alain Locke
© Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro Gallery

The fact that it is Julien's first-ever survey in a British museum is shocking. His films have been a touchstone for image-lovers — black, queer and beyond — since his 1989 homage to Hughes, *Looking for Langston*. With work in museum collections worldwide, Julien won an award in 1991 at the Cannes Film Festival for *Young Soul Rebels*, a thriller set in 1970s London. In 2001 he was shortlisted for the Turner Prize for works including the delicate, complex video *Vagabondia*, about the colonial ghosts lurking in museums, but lost out to the single lightbulb proffered by Martin Creed.

"Of course there could have been exhibitions before now," Julien replies, when I ask if he is frustrated at the "belatedness" — his word — of recognition from the British art world. Then his eyes widen as if he's having his own lightbulb moment. "But lots of things could have happened before now. Having exhibitions is just one of them!" He giggles.

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SILVERMAN**

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jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



'O que é um museu?/What is a Museum?' (2019) © Courtesy of Isaac Julien and Victoria Miro gallery

Julien is accustomed to challenge. Born in 1960 in east London, one of five children to a father who did various jobs including welding and a mother who worked as a nurse, his drive to succeed was intense. Early work included, in 1983, setting up the Sankofa Film and Video Collective, which gathered artists from the African and Caribbean diasporas. Meaning "to retrieve" in an Akan language from Ghana, the collective's name testifies to Julien's awareness that memory, as he puts it — in particular the work of the archive — is a "springboard for people for reinvention".

Restituting objects such as the Benin Bronzes or the Parthenon marbles to their countries of origin is part of that process. Julien is entirely supportive of "physical return", but also speaks movingly of its "impossibility". "Things can be returned but what are you going to do with the history, the memories, those experiences that have shaped so many?"

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SILVERMAN**

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'Silence (Ten Thousand Waves)' (2010) by Isaac Julien © Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro Gallery

An artist who describes his works as "sonnets to contemporary life", he views *Once Again* as "poetic restitution", which will hopefully inspire what he has called a "space for reflection that influences... arts and the culture of museums generally".

Even as he looks back, Julien has a gift for prescience. Two earlier films — *Western Union Small Boats* (2007), about refugees trying to get to Sicily and *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010), a homage to the migrant Chinese cockle-pickers who drowned in Morecambe Bay — are relevant today. How does he feel about the current UK government's attitude to migrants? "They have agreed to the most atrocious of laws," he says with unusual crispness.

Julien's parents arrived in the UK from Saint Lucia in the 1950s, believing that "the streets were paved with gold", as he says with irony. Does he think much has changed since then? "We've got two leaders of colour, in Scotland and Britain, and that has made a difference to what are the possibilities. But the level of inequality — the age-old issues — are still stubbornly part of our fabric." He taps his finger, adorned with a flamboyant jewel, on the table — as didactic as he ever gets. (The gem turns out to be the Goslar Kaiserring, a major German art award that he won last year.)

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SILVERMAN**

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jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



Isaac Julien, photographed for the FT by Antonia Adomako

Since 2018, Julien has spent several months a year in California, where both he and his partner Mark Nash are professors at the University of California Santa Cruz. The decision to move, he says, "had a lot to do with Brexit" and the realisation that "I didn't have to be hemmed in". (Julien has a quietly fervent need for freedom, as the title of Tate's exhibition implies).

Also, he says, "you go where the support is. No one in Britain is going to produce a catalogue like this." He passes me a sumptuous volume — hardback, full-colour, packed with fascinating texts — dedicated to *Lessons of the Hour* (2019), his 10-screen installation inspired by the 19th-century

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black social reformer Frederick Douglass. Julien's harshest words are reserved for the British film industry. "Something really terrible has happened to innovation in British film... The people who decide what should be greenlit [choose] a reflection of themselves." What needs to happen? "You have to change the top brass."



Isaac Julien's 'The Lady of the Lake (Lessons of the Hour)' (2019) © Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro Gallery

As for the visual arts sector, he believes it is finally "growing" into a more equitable space. Furthermore, a little friction can be fruitful. "Perhaps because of my upbringing, the idea of comfort has been my anxiety. I like being on the west coast [of the US]. I could retire there. It would be very nice. But I might produce work that is not that interesting!... One of the reasons I like London is that I like the rough with the smooth."

Let's hope the city's bittersweet allure keeps him a little longer.

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SILVERMAN**

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