

# The New York Times

"Looking for Freedom, Isaac Julien Comes Home"

By Elizabeth Fullerton

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"The question of freedom isn't just connected to questions of rights and justice," Isaac Julien said.

Credit: Adama Jalloh for The New York Times

At Tate Britain, the artist known for sumptuous works on fraught subjects like racism and homophobia finally receives a career retrospective in his own country.

JESSICA  
SILVERMAN

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

Freedom ripples as an undercurrent through the works of the British artist and filmmaker Isaac Julien. For four decades, he has produced boundary-stretching works addressing racism, homophobia, migration and colonialism, from experimental documentaries to lavish multiscreen installations; in all of them an activist spirit is counterbalanced with opulent imagery and sound.

Some critics have found Julien's films too beautiful for the fraught subjects they treat, and like the work of many of his Black peers in Britain who came to prominence in the 1980s, his aesthetic innovations were long overlooked by the art establishment there, which preferred to view his work through a reductive lens of identity.

Now, a major exhibition at Tate Britain, in London, is the culmination of a trajectory that began on the margins, with films for television and cinema, and evolved into something more elaborate that belongs in a gallery setting. The show, called "What Freedom Is to Me" and running through Aug. 20, is the largest exhibition of the artist's work ever staged in his home country. The title comes from a quote by the singer Nina Simone in a 1968 interview: "I will tell you what freedom is to me: No fear."



A still from "Ten Thousand Waves" (2010). Julien's films often feature characters surveying sublime vistas like figures in a landscape by the Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich. Credit: Isaac Julien; via Victoria Miro

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SILVERMAN**

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"The question of freedom isn't just connected to questions of rights and justice," Julien said in an interview at his canal-side North London studio. It is also a question of form and aesthetics, he said. "It's connected to what stories you want to tell, and how they're told."

The exhibition takes in the arc of Julien's career, including five single-screen films from the 1980s and six sumptuous installations, exhibited within a hexagonal structure designed by the architect David Adjaye. Showcasing the breadth of Julien's subject matter, activist documentaries like "Who Killed Colin Roach?" (1983), about the death of a Black man at a London police station, are displayed near spectacular works such as "Once Again ... Statues Never Die" (2022), a film tapestry interweaving themes of queer desire, Black Modernism and cultural restitution, that incorporates multiple screens and mirrors.

Besides their sonic and visual inventiveness, the works' multidisciplinary content demonstrates Julien's profound engagement with musicians, dancers, writers and thinkers, including the poet Derek Walcott, the writer bell hooks and the cultural theorist Stuart Hall.

"Isaac's been absolutely at the forefront of challenging our ideas around both race and gender and sexuality and queer history," Maria Balshaw, the director of the Tate museum group, said in an interview. "But he's also been hugely experimental; he's expanded the language of moving image and cinema enormously."



"Looking for Langston" (1989) is a celebration of Black gay sexuality in luscious black-and-white tableaux vivants, inspired by the drag balls of the 1920s. Credit: Isaac Julien; via Victoria Miro

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SILVERMAN**

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One of Julien's most audacious early works is "Looking for Langston," a sultry, phantasmagorical film montage inspired by the closeted gay poet Langston Hughes that shines a light on the queer Black creative voices of the Harlem Renaissance. It brought Julien to public attention when it was shown at the Berlin International Film Festival in 1989. Until then, Julien said, a Black gay voice "didn't really exist" in cinema.

Made at the height of the AIDS epidemic in the United States, "Looking for Langston" is a celebration of Black gay sexuality in luscious black-and-white tableaux vivants, showing men dancing and kissing in sequences inspired by the drag balls of the 1920s.

The film's lyrical blending of archival footage and photographs with acted sequences to fill in absences from the historical record has since become Julien's signature, employed in subsequent works memorializing other cultural and political figures including the Martinique-born post-colonial thinker Frantz Fanon and the African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass.

"Isaac became a role model for a new way to mine the archive," said the American artist Glenn Ligon. "Isaac's work is dealing with what can be represented through the archive and what has to be imagined, and the confluence between those two things — which was a revolution when 'Looking for Langston' came out."



"Presenting things in a novel way," Julien said of his multiscreen installations, "can create a space for new identifications and possibilities." Credit: Adama Jalloh for The New York Times

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SILVERMAN**

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jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



A strong sense of social justice underpinned Julien's practice from the start. Born in East London in 1960 to parents who had migrated to Britain from the Caribbean island of St. Lucia, Julien grew up with four siblings in a rough inner-city housing project against a backdrop of police brutality, anti-immigration marches and the rise of Margaret Thatcher's tough brand of conservatism.

At St. Martin's School of Art in the early 1980s, he encountered a heady cross-pollination of fashion, art and club culture and switched from studying painting to film, a medium Julien described as "encapsulating all of the arts: sculpture, photography, dance and theater." While still at college, he founded the Sankofa Film and Video Collective with four collaborators, with the aim to develop an independent Black film culture, in dialogue with global cinema.

Rooted in feminist and post-colonial approaches, Sankofa made charged, essayistic films dealing with homosexuality, class and racial discrimination, including "Territories," a 1984 documentary that spliced footage from an Afro-Caribbean street carnival — including clashes between revelers and the police — with images of staged gay sexual encounters and a reggae soundtrack.



"Territories," a 1984 documentary, spliced footage from an Afro-Caribbean street carnival with images of staged gay sexual encounters and a reggae soundtrack. Credit: Isaac Julien

The 1980s and early 1990s were a golden age for experimental film in Britain, with the emergence of ateliers such as Sankofa and the Black Audio Film Collective that found an outlet on Channel 4, a new public broadcaster created in 1982 to support diverse voices in cinema and television.

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Mark Nash, a British curator who is Julien's life partner and who has collaborated on his films since they met in the 1980s, recalled the period as an "exciting cultural moment" — both in Britain and abroad. In 1991, Julien won an award at the Cannes Film Festival for his feature "Young Soul Rebels," a gay love story between a white punk rocker and a Black pirate radio D.J. "Madonna was photographed running on the beach wearing a "Young Soul Rebels" T-shirt; the designer Jean Paul Gaultier did a party for us," Nash added. "There was a sense that a lot of things could open up in the film world — but they didn't."

Around the mid-1990s, creative opportunities tailed off as British film and television commissioning became more conservative, Nash said. The couple both took teaching jobs at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in 1995, and Julien later taught a course in Blaxploitation cinema at Harvard; both returned in 2018 to the University of California, where they are still employed as professors.

The mid-90s was also the moment of a pivot in Julien's practice, away from films for broadcast or the theater and toward work for the gallery. He began making pieces that played out across two, three and five screens, attracted, he said, by the greater artistic autonomy the art world afforded. Julien's kaleidoscopic multiscreen installations encourage viewers to move around to accommodate fragmented and multiple viewpoints at once: sometimes a synchronized narrative across the screens, other times disrupting the flow with blank screens or repeated images.



An installation view of "Lessons of the Hour — Frederick Douglass" at the University of Rochester's Memorial Art Gallery in 2019. Credit: Isaac Julien; via Victoria Miro; Andy Olenick/Fotowerks

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SILVERMAN

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"What Is a Museum?," a photograph that forms part of "Lina Bo Bardi — A Marvellous Entanglement," a 2019 film installation and photo series by Julien honoring the Brazilian architect of the title. Credit: Isaac Julien; via Victoria Miro

"I'm hoping it might be a way to unlearn how we look," he said, adding that film spectatorship tends to be dictated by the conventions of mainstream cinema. "There's no space for people to think differently or visualize themselves differently from the dominant culture," he said. "Presenting things in a novel way," he added, "can create a space for new identifications and possibilities."

The practice of what Julien calls "mobile spectatorship" — making the viewer move around to make sense of what is happening — is exemplified in his nine-screen extravaganza "Ten Thousand Waves" (2010). Taking as its starting point the 2004 drowning of more than 20 Chinese immigrants off the coast of northern England, the installation engulfs the viewer in the sight and sound of waves. Footage of the tragedy is entwined with re-enactments of a 1934 Chinese silent film, "The Goddess," about a woman who sells sex to provide for her son, and references to an ancient Chinese goddess believed to protect fishermen.

Glenn Lowry, the director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which exhibited "Ten Thousand Waves" in 2013, described the work as "a giant leap forward" in Julien's practice. In a

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phone interview, he said the artist had worked like "a master conductor of a symphony" to combine "all these very subtle effects that you never see, but you feel: the sound, the placement of the screens, the movement of your body, the flickering of an image, the pace at which imagery unfolds before you, the moments that things coalesce and break apart."

As well as showing at MoMA, Julien has presented work at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Maxxi museum in Rome and in prestigious international exhibitions like the 2002 edition of Documenta in Germany and the 2015 Venice Biennale. Balshaw, the Tate director, said a career retrospective in Julien's hometown was "long overdue."



Julien outside Tate Britain in April. "Presenting things in a novel way," he said, "can create a space for new identifications and possibilities." Credit: Adama Jalloh for The New York Times

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In a further sign of his embrace by the British establishment, last year Julien was made a Knight of the British Empire, one of Britain's top honors. Julien said the award's name was "really problematic," but added that he was gratified by the recognition. The knighthood came on the heels of Julien's election to the prestigious Royal Academy of Arts, which had exhibited one of his student paintings back in 1980. (The sale of that canvas had allowed him to buy one of his first Super 8 video cameras.)

Yet Julien said he never abandoned painting. His films have a certain painterly quality and often show figures surveying sublime natural or architectural vistas, like figures in a landscape by the Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich.

What are they searching for?

Julien laughed and said in a theatrical whisper: "Freedom."

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