

# TimeOut

"Isaac Julien: 'What Freedom Is to Me'"

By Eddy Frankel

April 26, 2023



Isaac Julien, *The Lady of the Lake (Lessons of the Hour)*, 2019 © Isaac Julien. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro

British artist and filmmaker Julien's work is undeniably serious – his career started in the 1980s with an examination of the Black Atlantic – but he cannot resist making it beautiful. His indulgence of that urge leavens the message; it's an unusual dynamic that has a devastating point. While Julien documents the wholesale pillage of African civilisation, he wreaks subtle revenge by elegantly raiding the iconography of European cinema. Here, a reference to Tarkovsky's snowy birches, there a nod to Bergman profiles or Cocteau's 'Orphée.

On entering 2022's 'Once Again... (Statues Never Die)', Isaac Julien's latest film here in this Tate Britain retrospective, you are plunged into a monochromatic art deco dreamspace: multiple large black-framed screens form a graceful semi-circle against a mirrored backdrop, leggy chrome vitrines housing sculptures punctuate the space. The sculptures by Richmond Barthé and Matthew Angelo-Harrison are a reference and a cultural response to the 'trappings of imperialism' described in the film, an exploration of the role of the museum in the spoils of colonialism. Projected on the screens, the film plays out against the backdrop of the Harlem Renaissance.

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Shot in hypnotic black and white with all the harsh edges smoothed off, we see a series of imagined conversations between cultural theorist Alain Locke, the first Black Rhodes scholar, and the US collector of African art Albert C. Barnes, offset by encounters fraught with erotic longing between Locke and artist Barthé. It snows upwards, pianos play, typewriters tap. It's silver screen-era gorgeous.

Deliberately cinematic, Julien's weaving together of vision and narrative is deftly assured. The other standout room here houses two films: 'Ten Thousand Waves' from 2010 and 'Western Union: Small Boats' from 2007. Utilising a triptych of screens, myth and archive are tied together to create a homage to vulnerable refugees and migrants. Aerial shots of large-scale calligraphy counterpoint to the thermal imaging footage from the rescue services to Morecambe Bay. One solitary figure stands at the edge of the sea, the sole survivor of the Chinese cockle pickers who lost their lives there in 2004. The sound of rotor blades and the pilot's dryly pragmatic commentary are juxtaposed with figures from Chinese myth and history.

Elsewhere, dancers spiral round a staircase of architectural interest in Brazil, someone wanders Sir John Soane's Museum at night, and abolitionist Frederick Douglass encounters the feet of a lynched man hanging from a tree. While earlier films focus on serving the visuals, the work gathers power as we near the present day.

This is not an exhibition to whizz round quickly. It's largely screening spaces radiating from a central lobby which displays photographs. Most films hit a minimum of 20 minutes. But if you commit to sitting with Julien's blend of the cinematic, political and mythical in these spaces, you will experience if not exactly the 'rupture and sublimity' he aims for, then something close to it.

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