

# FRIEZE

"Isaac Julien Uses the Archives as a Springboard for Reinvention"

By Deborah Willis

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Asma Belhamar: *Monuments of Alfreej*, 2023, site-specific installation. PHOTO: EMILY WATLINGTON.

**Deborah Willis** When I first met you, in the late 1980s, you were working on the film *Looking for Langston* (1989), in which you explored the story of the African American poet Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and '30s. Can you talk about what inspired you to investigate memory in your practice – to see what was missing or erased or undiscovered in the archives and to develop new narratives around it?

**Isaac Julien** My investigation into the ways in which there were so many absences and erasures in archives led me to view them as a springboard for reinvention. When I started to look at works from the 1920s and '30s, it was a revelation to discover that I had never been taught about the Harlem Renaissance as a Black arts movement in any of my art history classes.

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Isaac Julien, *Pas de Deux with Roses* (Looking for Langston Vintage Series), 1989/2016, Ilford classic silver gelatin fine art paper, mounted on aluminium and framed, 58 × 75 cm. Courtesy: © Isaac Julien and Victoria Miro, London

At that time I was making *Looking for Langston*, you were probably one of the few artists and photography historians who could identify all of the characters in the archival sections of the film. I remember very clearly how you identified several artists, such as the painter Palmer Hayden, as well as the writer and philosopher Alain Locke, who, in 1907, became the first African American Rhodes Scholar at the University of Oxford.

I was trying to reconstruct an interweaving of spaces which literally needed to be archivally excavated. This excavation involved a certain ontology wherein you're haunted by the images. I was reading Roland Barthes at the time and thinking about the notion of reading against the grain, or against authorial intentions, for a semiotic interpretation of the image.

My grandfather lived in Brooklyn, so my association with the Americas as a young man was one in which, from London, from Britain, I was looking particularly to African American culture. There was such a rich cultural history that needed repositioning – an archival project to rewrite the rules of representation. I felt that it was invisible, taken for granted as a set of paradigms which had to be broken and rewritten. Then, I realized the rewriting had begun a long time ago: I wasn't reinventing the wheel. There had been lots of other Black movements, artists and practices: they just hadn't been given any critical attention.

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Isaac Julien, *Mise en Scene No 2 (Looking for Langston Vintage Series)*, 1989/2016, Ilford classic silver gelatin fine art paper, mounted on aluminium and framed, 58 x 75 cm. Courtesy: © Isaac Julien and Victoria Miro, London

**DW** I've had the opportunity to work with you closely over the past three years, and you were central to the discussions Cheryl Finley and I had about the exhibition we recently co-curated at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, 'Free as they want to be: Artists Committed to Memory'. As we considered ways of looking at art and archives, I thought about the enduring legacy you offered us of witnessing history by mirroring it. There is this sense of congregating it all, of pulling it together for a 21st-century viewer, so they can sit back and think: 'Oh, how do we really rethink these stories about Black struggle, Black resistance, Black love, Black justice?' It felt almost like people had collected those images so that you could go back and retell their story. That's why *Looking for Langston* is a project I will love for the rest of my life.

**IJ** Yes, there was something urgent at stake when I was making *Looking for Langston*. I was taught that a particular definition of 'beauty' was intrinsic to certain aesthetics – the notion of beauty has been completely made the domain of certain aesthetics. I felt that, in order to reclaim beauty for the Black gaze, there needed to be a form of re-enactment for reclamation and reparation. I wanted to explore these nuances across and against the dominant perspective.

For artists, critics or philosophers who come from my background, there's an interesting, unfinished dialogue in relation to these debates. Certain conversations about race and representation just don't disappear. This is connected to the ways in which we want to give ourselves, as Black people, an emancipatory agency in terms of how we view and reimagine

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ourselves that is not always within this constellation, which is a violent one. It could be quite intimate. It could be quite introspective. It could be connected to questions around opacity.



Isaac Julien, *What Freedom is to me – Homage*, 2022, Canson Platin Fibre Rag, 2.7 × 1.8 m. Courtesy: © Isaac Julien and Victoria Miro, London

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**DW** You hold onto beauty. You put it right in our faces in many forms and you want us to experience it and embrace it in all its forms.

**IJ** Yes, it is important to me. Attention to decor, to the *mise en scène*, to scenography, are ways to celebrate beauty critically. All of those things – as the placement of objects, for instance – were so alive in my living room where I grew up with, and which was always delicately arranged, by my mother. So when I later did life drawing, I got to understand that the spaces between objects are just as important as the objects themselves.

In the early days of my practice, I was trying to formulate a way of thinking about culture that was both connected to my familial surroundings and that reconstructed something of which I had always been suspicious: which is only the *idea* of representation, whereas I am interested in the spaces and poetics of representation and the lives which need to be pictured so that the previously invisible subjects can reclaim those spaces.

**DW** In April, your work will be the subject of a survey at Tate Britain titled 'What Freedom Is To Me'. How would you like viewers to reflect on your enduring legacy as an artist, as well as the legacies of the histories you have represented?



Isaac Julien, *Masquerade No 3 (Looking for Langston Vintage Series)*, 1989/2016, Ilford classic silver gelatin fine art paper, mounted on aluminium and framed, 58 x 75 cm. Courtesy: © Isaac Julien and Victoria Miro, London

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13 The notion of time is so important here, isn't it? There has been a very rich dialogue across the diaspora that continues today with more joined-up thinking, which is really great. Music was also important to me in thinking about the exhibition. The title of the show is a quote from a 1968 interview with the singer Nina Simone, where she says: 'I'll tell you what freedom is to me... No fear.' I thought about that because I have felt the fear that Black subjects experience in having to negotiate spaces both culturally and bodily.

The show is also a reflection on being an artist, on having to reposition oneself to repudiate the restrictions and the barriers, socially and aesthetically. What, ultimately, is the role of the artist? Is it to contest the ways in which fear can be both catalyzing yet restrictive? I aim to transgress those boundaries. At the end of *Looking for Langston*, an angry mob – comprised not only of police but a gang of men, both Black and white – are intent on punishing the queer communities they believe to be assembled in a dance hall. They find when they arrive, however, that the scenario is merely a figment of their imagination. That fiction – a fear which haunts our politics and our culture generally – is something I sought to reposition.

In terms of aesthetic and political choices, I want to explore difficult topics, such as the question of migration. A contested debate in British politics, migration has produced terrible consequences, like Brexit. It's also led to us having a prime minister of colour, Rishi Sunak, whose position is more retrograde around these debates for the sake of assimilation. If we really look at society and the way things are at the moment, we should be making works in order to arm and protect ourselves. But we also need to create a space where those dissident voices can be brought into dialogue.

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Isaac Julien, *Baltimore Series (Angela in Orange)*, 2003, framed digital print on Epsom Premium Photo Glossy paper, 1.1 x 1.4 m. Courtesy: © Isaac Julien and Victoria Miro, London

**DW** You are redefining why I love that Simone quote. We never open up about our fears. What does it feel like to have no fear? We know Simone had many qualities: from fashion to hairstyles; from her voice to her way of walking into a room. We also know that she experienced moments of fear, rejection and uncertainty in her musical career. But the aspect you're introducing is how we can figure out ways to explore that.

When I look at the scope of your work, it spans from the 19th century in *Lessons of the Hour – Frederick Douglass* (2019) to the 21st century. You've tackled capitalism in *Kapital* (2013) and *Playtime* (2014), where you examine how money impacts the production of art. In *Baltimore* (2003), you address the city's relationship to Black filmmaking. You've taken us to China in *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010). In *Once Again ... (Statues Never Die)* (2022), your five-screen film installation at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia last year, you examined the relationship between Locke and Dr. Albert C. Barnes, a collector of art from across the African continent in the 1920s, as well as the ethics and legacies of African art in western museums. You've shown us multiple ways of reimagining our own lives – and of imagining lives that we have not experienced.

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Isaac Julien, 'Ten Thousand Waves', 2013, installation view.

Courtesy: the artist, Metro Pictures Gallery, New York and Victoria Miro Gallery, London; photograph: Jonathan Muzikar

✎ Drawing on Wang Ping's poem 'Small Boats' as a metaphor for migration and travel, *Ten Thousand Waves* was inspired by the Morecambe Bay tragedy of 2004, in which 23 Chinese cockle-pickers, all illegal immigrants, drowned late at night off the northwest coast of England. Many people across the world have been punished for travelling. Certain bodies are penalized for wanting to move across space, despite the fact that, in the current technological era, we celebrate how telecommunications transgress space and data. The question of capital came up in this film, too. London, where I live, is a city that has this deep history of exploitation embedded within its architectural structures.

I often think about how you can make a work at a certain moment in time that may resonate differently – and even surprise you – in the future. My first work, *Who Killed Colin Roach* (1983), was one that, to a certain extent, I used as an examination of form. I used to think: 'Well, this is a work that's not made in the same way, in terms of its craft, as later works.' But then, on reflection, I got to see that it is a really important piece, and it contains ideas and methodologies present in all my later works.

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DW Those are the dynamics of your practice. I hold onto *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Mask* (1995) as the images guide us through trauma, through beauty, through solitude but, also, prompt reflection.



Isaac Julien, *Sandy Star (In Sculptured Worship)*, 2022, Hahnemühle Photo Rag Ultrasmooth, 1.5 x 2 m.  
Courtesy: © Isaac Julien and Victoria Miro, London

The sensitivity that you've given to your work is something I have had the privilege to share in my teaching for the past 20 years. I'm amazed when I show your work and I think to myself: 'Okay, I'm showing this again.' And the students say: 'We've never seen this before.' The work is cyclical, in terms of its message of justice. It makes a difference to every generation of students.

It's such an honour to have this conversation with you, Deborah, because I think the fact of our work enduring, in a generational sense, is one of the things that I think about a lot. Of course, it's important, as an artist, for my work to be in collections and in museums. But I also think the question of teaching – which we both do – is vital. How my works exist in these spaces and how they will continue to reverberate with future generations is of the utmost importance to me and it has been crucial in making art – that is what matters to me most. Of course, only time will tell what makes the difference.

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