

ARTSY

"Inside Isaac Julien's Soulful, Cinematic Survey at Tate Britain"

By Ayanna Dozier

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Installation view, *Once Again... (Statues Never Die)*, 2022, at the Tate Britain, 2023.

Photo by Jack Hems. © Isaac Julien. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro.

History, for [Isaac Julien](#), is not a fixed story, but one that is open to interpretation through filmmaking. Across his rich oeuvre of compelling media works that include film, photography, installation, and performance, Julien reinvents the past of Black queer individuals.

Now, after nearly 40 years as a practitioner in film and the arts, Julien is the subject of his first major career-spanning survey in the United Kingdom, "What Freedom Means to Me," on view through August 20th at [Tate Britain](#).

The London-born and -based artist's practice emerged from Sankofa, the feminist and queer film and video collective of the 1980s. In this collective, Julien helped produce films for his colleagues, such as *Dreaming Rivers* (1988) by Martina Attille and *The Passion of Remembrance* (1986), co-

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directed with Maureen Blackwood. While a member of Sankofa, Julien directed his most groundbreaking film, *Looking for Langston* (1989), a stunningly beautiful black-and-white 16mm film that reimagines the life of the Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes through the Harlem queer ballroom culture in the 1920s. "What Freedom Means to Me" allows audiences to fully engage with the entirety of Julien's filmography.



[Isaac Julien](#)

Diasporic Dream-Space No. 2 (Once Again... Statues Never Die), 2022
Jessica Silverman



[Isaac Julien](#)

Freedom / Diasporic Dream-Space No. 1 (Once Again... Statues Never Die), 2022
Jessica Silverman

Upon entering "What Freedom Means to Me," audiences are thrust into the large-scale film installation *Once Again ... (Statutes Never Die) I* (2022), which sees Julien return to the Harlem Renaissance to reimagine the life of Black art historian and philosopher Alain Locke (played by André Holland) through a fantastical lens.

The 33-minute film features five floor-to-ceiling projections surrounded by mirrors. The effect is not only immersive, but allows Julien's soulful cinematography to spotlight Locke's life, as well as how museums are intimately connected to legacies of colonialism. The piece is a cinematic exploration into Locke, who is more known for his art criticism on Black art in the 1920s, and his queer life. The protagonist is accompanied by a double (played by Alex Part), who exists in more intimate, sensual environments, while Locke is often affixed to the museum, haunted by colonial relics of stolen African objects.

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Installation View, *Lina Bo Bardi—A Marvelous Entanglement*, 2019, at the Tate Britain, 2023.
Photo by Jack Hems. © Isaac Julien Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro.

With *Once Again ...*, Julien reminds audiences that part of recreating history is not just to represent an underrepresented narrative, but to be enamored with their lives as well, to see these individuals for their humanity. Julien's cinematic style gives room for audiences to feel and understand historical figures for their personal livelihood, not just view them as vessels for political discourse. This is most evidently felt in a stunning black-and-white sequence in the film where Locke stands opposite his double wearing a tuxedo as snow slowly cascades onto their heads. The two are not in the same frame but are projected alongside one another. This scene is repeated on the screens until we are left with only Locke, signaling the departure of his other self, his tenderness.

A new photographic series relating to *Once Again ...* is also being presented in a [current solo show](#) at [Jessica Silverman](#) (which co-represents the artist alongside [Victoria Miro](#), [Nara Roesler](#), [Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery](#), [Ron Mandos Galerie](#), and [Galeria Helga de Alvear](#)) in San Francisco through July 22nd.

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Installation view, *Lessons of the Hour*, 2019, at the Tate Britain, 2023.
Photo by Jack Hems. © Isaac Julien. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro.

Upon exiting *Once Again ...* at Tate Britain, audiences enter a circular hub with several separate passageways to view Julien's other films, including *Looking for Langston*, *Vagabondia* (2000), *Western Union: Small Boats* (2007), *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010), *Lessons of the Hour* (2019), and *Lina Bo Bardi—A Marvelous Entanglement* (2019). Through this presentation, audiences can seamlessly witness the trajectory of Julien's practice.

Lina Bo Bardi is a three-channel fantastical epic that recreates the life of the Italian architect of the same name and her titanic, but overlooked, influence in shaping mid-20th-century Brutalist architecture in Brazil. In this film, an older Bo Bardi confronts her younger past through dance and music, creating a nearly dialogue-free dreamscape as opposed to a linear, narrative biographical film.

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The end of the exhibition, though, is where audiences can fully comprehend Julien's infatuation with media images, through his beginnings with Sankofa and the rise of television programming in the 1970s and '80s. In the earliest video work on view, *Who Killed Colin Roach?* (1983), we see Julien appropriating the visual style of public broadcasting from the 1980s to create a biting commentary on the police killing of Colin Roach.

Visual media, for Julien, is a way to mark time and account for history. We remember events based on how they are presented to us through visual media like film and television. *Who Killed Colin Roach?* is an indictment of the media inasmuch as it demonstrates its potential to change the narrative for how Black lives are represented to a mass audience.

Ultimately, Julien's work is inspired by the impact of mass media in the 20th century. At Tate Britain, we can see the full breadth of his new cinematic vision, one that prioritizes beauty and aesthetics. Julien's film and photographic work seeks to change not just how history is told, but what it looks like, advocating that another world is possible.

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