

# BROOKLYN RAIL

"Isaac Julien: *What Freedom Is To Me*"

By William Corwin

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Installation view: *Isaac Julien: What Freedom Is To Me*, Tate Britain, 2023.

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

Entering Isaac Julien's forty-year career survey *What Freedom Is To Me* you run an edifying gauntlet, a hallway offering a peremptory review of the artist's vintage and seminal films: *Territories* (1984), *This is Not An AIDS Advertisement* (1987), *Who Killed Colin Roach?* (1983), and *Lost Boundaries* (2003). These works, created with the Sankofa Film and Video Collective, present the roots and fundamental toolkit of Julien's approach to filmmaking and social justice. Julien has always zeroed in on vibrant (and usually activist) personalities and then embroidered their lives with both found and dramatically recreated footage, as well as lyrical interludes of fantasy. In the wider perspective of the exhibition, the early works are sidelined in favor of a selection of his more finished and cinematographic work ranging from 1989 to the present. *What Freedom Is To Me* is a heavily choreographed experience presenting the viewer, one must assume, with the body of work and style of production that the artist and curators want to have make the greatest impact.

JESSICA  
SILVERMAN

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

Architect David Adjaye designed the exhibition layout with the artist. From our initial primer in vintage Julien we are guided to his most recent work, *Once Again...(Statues Never Die)* (2022), and beyond that, the viewer finds themselves at the center of a six-pointed star-shaped layout, composed of film screens. Six paths radiate from a central atrium, and down each of these alleys we find a different story, or stories: that of Frederick Douglass in *Lessons of the Hour* (2019); Langston Hughes in *Looking for Langston* (1989); the Italian-Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi in *Lina Bo Bardi—A Marvellous Entanglement* (2019); the tragedy of the Morecambe Bay cocklepickers in *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010); a ghost story set in Sir John Soane’s Museum in *Vagabondia* (2000), and so on. The exhibition is dense; most of the videos clock in at around 20–40 minutes long, so to truly wrap one’s head around Julien, one must spend most of a day in the exhibition, or return more than once. It is a tribute to the British art-viewing public and the artist that most viewers I witnessed planted themselves on the benches or folding chairs provided, or sat on the floor, and watched the videos all the way through, or at least for long stretches of time. But it was this sense of giving over oneself and one’s most valuable asset—one’s time—that was embodied in the exhibition design. Once in the belly of the show, the possible choices took on an Alice-in-Wonderland surrealism. One could simply perambulate from path to path (with different carpet colors) watching the movies in this space, devoid of any sense of time. In between the passageways are Julien’s large prints, stills, and vignettes from the films, as well as display cases of ephemera—props, costumes, and the like—from Julien’s various productions. The intention of the artist, curators, and designer seems to be that the viewer become completely immersed within Julien’s filmic expression.

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

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



Isaac Julien, *O que é um museu? / What is a Museum?* (Lina Bo Bardi - *A Marvellous Entanglement*), 2019. Endura Ultra photograph facemounted. 70 7/8 x 94 1/2 x 3 inches. © Isaac Julien. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro.

This megaplex presentation of Isaac Julien's oeuvre wonderfully highlights correlations between the filmmaker's mature works, allowing viewers the rare chance to make connections among the full-length films at their disposal. For example, the full-grown glowing and smiling queer cherubs in *Looking for Langston* are avatars of the immortality of subversive gay culture in the face of the constant tragedy of the AIDS epidemic, whose scourge was at its height when Julien made the film in 1989. The cherubs return thirty-three years later in *Once Again... (Statues Never Die)*, this time becoming symbols for the love between the cultural theorist, Alain Locke, and the philosopher and critic, Albert C. Barnes. Felliniesque bursts by actors into spontaneous performance appear in many of Julien's works. In *Lina Bo Bardi—A Marvellous Entanglement*, the movements of a diaphanous twirling dancer in red mimic the curves of a spiral staircase the architect designed for the Museu de Arte Moderna da Bahia in Salvador, Brazil, as if the dancer had channeled the spirit of architecture. In *Ten Thousand Waves*, the similarly ethereal sea goddess Mazu floats over cities and through clouds, eventually alighting on a contemporary skyscraper. Both female entities are mystical beings interrupting or augmenting the biographical and historical narratives that the filmmaker weaves in his elaborate and operatic cinematographic assemblages.

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

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

Julien's experimentation with multiple screens as a means of slowing down or expanding time can also be closely examined from screening space to screening space. While the ten screens of *Lessons of the Hour* seek to imitate the disorienting variety of paintings of different size and genre one sees in a salon-style hang in a pre-Modernist gallery, *Once Again... (Statues Never Die)* uses five large screens, mylar wall mirroring, and the sculptures of Richmond Barthé and Matthew Angelo Harrison to generate a dystopian museum space. It's a spatial arrangement that mirrors the conversations on screen between Locke and Albert C. Barnes (creator of the Barnes Foundation), the struggle for parity between African Art and Western Art, and the need to decolonize collections and repatriate stolen works.



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

It is a lyrical experience to lose oneself in Julien's vision, and to exist outside of time. Sadly, the downside to Julien's atemporality is the realization that things have not changed much, and progress is an illusion. *Who Killed Colin Roach?*, a film Julien created in 1983 to heighten awareness of the murder of a young Black man at the hands of London police officers is, at this moment in time forty years later, mirrored by the murder of Jordan Neely on the New York City subway last month. In *Lessons of the Hour* Julien conjures up the person of Frederick Douglass, played by actor Ray Fearon, lecturing a room of modern day viewers and poignantly reminding us of the potency and necessity of his words 160 years later. In the ten channel film, Douglass philosophizes on the power of the photographic image to enlighten the viewer, a precept that Julien seeks to convey in all of these works.

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