

# HYPERALLERGIC

Isaac Julien: "Portrait Photography Through the Lens of Fredrick Douglass"

By Briana Ellis-Gibbs

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Isaac Julien, "North Star" from the installation *Lessons of the Hour* (2019), framed photograph mounted on aluminum (© Isaac Julien; image courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro)

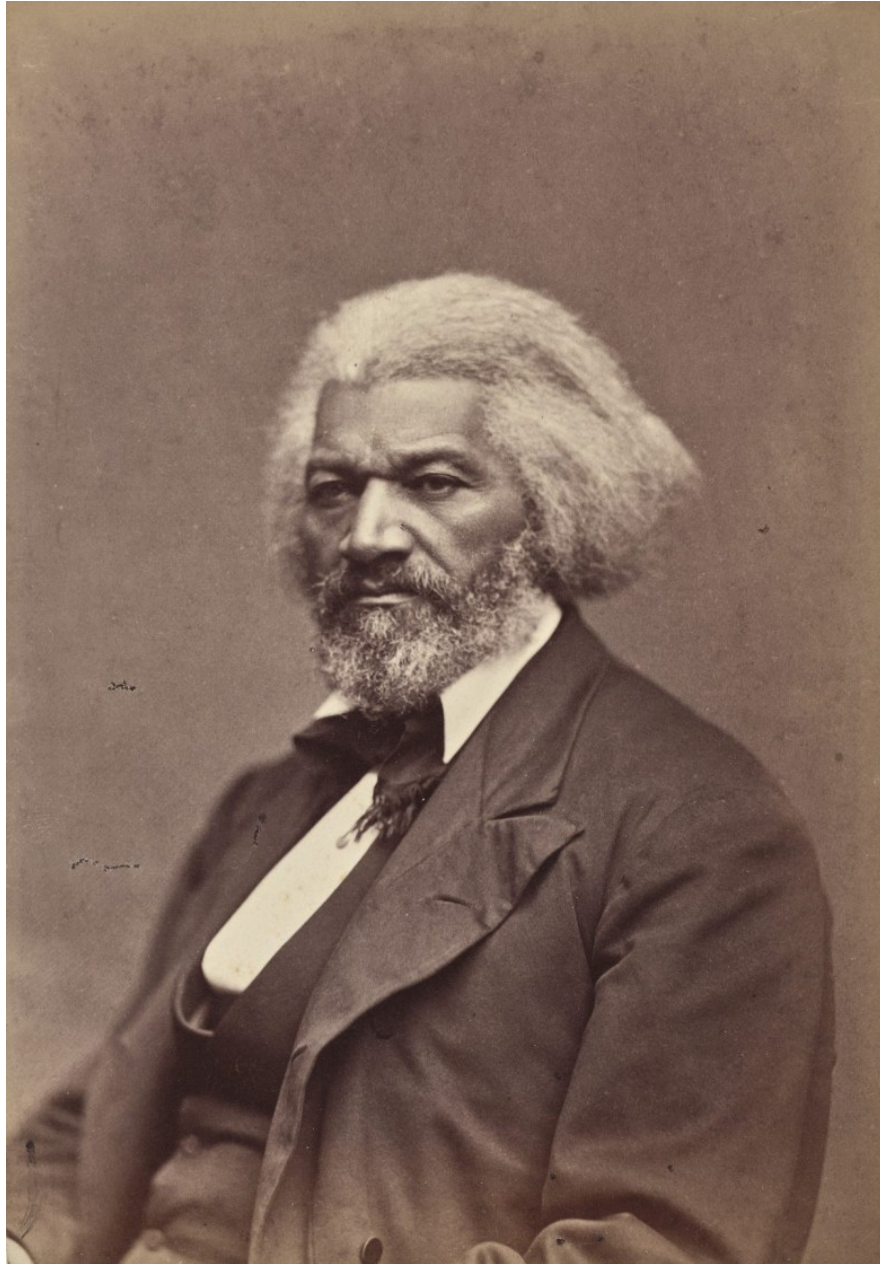
***I Am Seen...Therefore, I Am* at the Wadsworth Atheneum counters the racist images of Black Americans that were presented in mainstream media in the 19th century.**

HARTFORD, Conn. — When you first enter my grandfather's small but lively apartment in Harlem, two black-and-white photographs at the front of his living room illustrate his dreams and legacy. The top one, taken by Russell Lee in 1941, shows five Black boys dressed in suits sitting atop a car on Easter morning on the South Side of Chicago. Below that is a photo of my grandfather with his college Kappa fraternity brothers in New York City, looking dapper in suits. When I asked what the pictures meant to him, my grandfather said, "The young brothers paved the way for those to follow."

These two images evoke Frederick Douglass's use of the photographic image to "erase the astonishingly large storehouse of racist stereotypes that had been accumulated in the American archive of anti-Black imagery," as Henry Louis Gates Jr. wrote in his 2015 essay titled "Fredrick Douglass's Camera Obscura: Representing the Anti-Slave 'Clothed and In Their Own Form.'" Gates, also the host of *Finding Your Roots* on PBS, co-curated the exhibition *I Am Seen ... Therefore, I Am: Isaac Julien and Frederick Douglass* together with fellow Harvard University professor Sarah Elizabeth Lewis. On view at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut, the exhibition builds upon Douglass's argument in his 1861-to-1864 lectures on the power of images.

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

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



George Kendall Warren, "Frederick Douglass" (1879), albumen print on Cabinet Card at The Amistad Center for Art & Culture, Hartford, Connecticut (image courtesy the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art)

The show incorporates daguerreotypes from the collection of Greg French, a dealer of antique photographs, as well as quotes from Douglass's speeches and art by British installation artist Isaac Julien. Douglass's portraits and other daguerreotypes on view counter the racist images of Black Americans that were presented in mainstream media in the 19th century. Douglass sat for 160 portraits, arguably becoming one of the most photographed Black American men of his time. In Douglass's portraits, nothing distracts the audience from looking at him and engaging with him. In each photo, he appears well-appointed, in a suit. He directly stares at the viewers to capture their attention, questioning their ideas and stereotypes of Black individuals.

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

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

Julien's 2019 film *Lessons of the Hour* is a 10-screen video installation inspired by three of Douglass's speeches, "Lessons of the Hour" (1894), "What to the Slave Is the 4th of July?" (1852), and "Lecture on Pictures" (1861). The film takes the audience on a journey with Douglass to Washington, London, and Scotland, where he spent six months trying to escape those who wanted to enslave him again after he published his memoir, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). Julien combined clips of contemporary protest footage and images to bring the present-day audience into Douglass's world.

With more access to images through technology and screens comes an opportunity for Black people to control their narrative through the photograph. Images provide indisputable evidence of Black people's power to tell our truth and fight systemic oppression.

"Douglass was called the 'representative colored man' in the United States, and that definition of representation was taken from Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote about 'representative Ben,' meaning that the best that a people or a culture can produce and how they are the exemplars, the epitome of human possibility and excellence," Gates said in an interview with *Hyperallergic*. "Douglass certainly did not mind being called the representative colored man; he had a healthy ego," he continued. "So this notion of representation is a pun. It starts off as a literary concept with Emerson, but then Douglass transports it over into the realm of the visual explicitly."

Co-curator Sarah Elizabeth Lewis added in an interview that she aimed to bring the audience into Douglass's visual realm with "over 100 daguerreotypes of Black Americans before the abolition of slavery dressed beautifully, understanding that they were presenting themselves in history as a way into Douglass's speech."

The photographs, she noted, are deliberately presented without captions, as though saying: "Look at all that we don't know about our past."



Unknown, "Mother and Children" (c. 1850), daguerreotype, collection of Greg French (image courtesy the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art)

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

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



Unknown, "Man with Bugle" (c. 1846), daguerreotype, sixth plate, collection of Greg French (image courtesy the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art)

However, the camera could not capture dark skin correctly until the 1980s, when an improved version of Kodak film, Kodak Gold, became available on the market.

"I would come to learn later on that Kodak Gold was created after Kodak had received complaints, not from Black and Brown families, but from wood and furniture manufacturers in the 1970s that were frustrated that they couldn't sell their woods. So they developed a film emulsion technology that could capture all of these skin tones," Lewis said.

"I've always been interested in representation, but that was one of the earliest moments I can remember in which I understood that technology wasn't serving us," she concluded.

Lewis's initiative Vision and Justice is even more critical today as racism becomes more pervasive in this country. Some schools have banned African-American studies curricula and taught students that Black people benefited from slavery. Recently, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) issued a travel warning urging Black people not to travel to Florida, stating that it is "openly hostile toward African Americans, people of color, and LGBTQ+ individuals."

In an 1862 lecture titled "Age of Pictures," Douglass said, "Pictorial representations are to the eye and to the imagination what music, the concord of sweet sounds, is to the ear and heart. They

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SILVERMAN**

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ennoble our taste and elevate our affections and inspire the mind with prophecies of beauty and excellence, which may be hidden from us by the rubbish of common life.”

Douglass found this beauty and excellence in photography. So did Julien, and my grandfather. During my childhood, my mother would make my siblings and me put on our Sunday best and drive us to the closest store with a photo studio to take a family photo. As Douglass argued, these photos show our individuality.



Isaac Julien, *Serenade (Lessons of the Hour)* (2019), framed photograph mounted on aluminum (© Isaac Julien; image courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro)

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

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jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



Isaac Julien, "The Lady of the Lake," still from (*Lessons of the Hour*) (2019), framed photograph mounted on aluminum (© Isaac Julien; image courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro)

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

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