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Isaac Julien Review: "Video artwork captures the sweep of Frederick Douglass's Oratory"

By Mark Jenkins

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A view of "Lessons of the Hour — Frederick Douglass" at the National Portrait Gallery and Smithsonian American Art Museum. (Isaac Julien and Victoria Miro/SCAD)

'Lessons of the Hour — Frederick Douglass' re-creates the abolitionist's rhetoric and life across five screens

When Frederick Douglass traveled to Britain in 1845, he was well known as an abolitionist writer and orator. But his celebrity didn't alter his legal status: escaped slave. So while Douglass was in Britain, some of his supporters there raised the funds to buy his liberty. He returned to the United States in 1847 as a free man.

The anti-slavery activist's manumission is one of several episodes obliquely recounted in "Lessons of the Hour — Frederick Douglass," a five-screen version of a video installation originally designed for 10 screens. The video, which plays in a continuous loop, is itself an act of transatlantic affinity. This tribute to a great American was made by Isaac Julien, a filmmaker and artist born in London to Afro-Caribbean parents.

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Like the building in which it's on exhibit, "Lessons of the Hour" is shared by the National Portrait Gallery and the Smithsonian American Art Museum. The video is the first artwork ever purchased jointly by the two institutions.

Julien's 28-minute treatment of Douglass's life and thought is not a documentary or a docudrama, although the abolitionist is played in reenactments by British actor Ray Fearon, a veteran of the Royal Shakespeare Company. The vignettes, many of which feature women who were significant in Douglass's life, were devised by Julien in consultation with the University of Edinburgh's Celeste-Marie Bernier, a Douglass scholar.

There's no dialogue, but there are words, nearly all of them Douglass's own. The abolitionist is shown delivering a speech to a small seated audience whose clothes span time periods, suggesting the continued relevance of his message. Other writings and orations appear as text, or are excerpted in voice-over.

These passages are mostly defiant, but sometimes reflect the despair of Douglass's early life in enslavement on Maryland's Eastern Shore, where he was born as Frederick Bailey in 1817 or 1818. "I would at times feel that learning to read was a curse rather than a blessing," he muses.

The video's title is from Douglass's final speech, first delivered at a D.C. church in 1894. Among its principal subjects are lynching and Black suffrage. A close-up of a lynching victim's feet is one of the black-and-white historical images that punctuate the new footage, which by contrast is all too sumptuously photographed.

At times, "Lessons of the Hour" plays like a standard National Park Service introductory film that just happens to be divided across five screens. Julien and longtime editor Adam Finch occasionally use the format for Cinerama-like effects, as when a steam train hurtles from monitor to monitor in quick succession. The camera also prowls along the British coast and through Cedar Hill, the Anacostia house where Douglass lived from 1878 to his 1895 death.

The video's biopic-style conventionality is emphasized by Paul Gladstone Reid's score, which deploys sweeping strings and thumping drums in the standard movie-music manner. But the soundtrack is occasionally punctuated by an unsettling sound, the crack of a whip. The cruelty this noise evokes is made palpable by a photo of an enslaved man's scarred back.

In the video's most powerful sequence, the history lesson toggles between the 19th and 21st centuries. Douglass delivers lines from an 1852 speech, asking, "What, to the American slave, is your Fourth of July?" while adjacent screens simultaneously display two sets of aerial images: fireworks over Baltimore's Inner Harbor and crowds in the streets a few miles away after the 2015 death of Freddie Gray in police custody.

For all its geographic reach, chronologically, "Lessons of the Hour — Frederick Douglass" begins and ends in Maryland. And the conflicts it finds there are far from resolved.

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