

Isaac Julien: "Exhibition presents sixteen sculptures by the Harlem Renaissance master Richmond Barthé"

By artdaily.com

April 8, 2024



Richmond Barthé (1901–1989), *Stevedore*, 1937. Bronze on marble base, 27 1/2 x 18 x 16 3/4 inches / 69.8 x 45.7 x 42.5 cm. 29 1/2 x 18 x 16 3/4 inches / 74.9 x 45.7 x 42.5 cm including base, signed.

NEW YORK, NY.—Michael Rosenfeld Gallery is presenting *Richmond Barthé: A New Day Is Coming*, a solo exhibition of sixteen sculptures by the Harlem Renaissance master Richmond Barthé (1901–1989) curated with renowned artist and filmmaker Isaac Julien (b.1960). The exhibition surveys the most productive decades of Barthé’s career, from 1929 to 1966, with an emphasis on the works of the 1930s and 1940s that established him as a foremost sculptor of his era. *A New Day Is Coming* also debuts a new film by Julien, which he describes as an “archival meditation” on Barthé and his work composed of historical documentary footage discovered during research for *Once Again . . . (Statues Never Die)* (2022), an immersive, five-screen film installation commissioned by the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia.

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A quintessential artist of the Harlem Renaissance, Barthé created a pioneering body of sculpture that elevates the Black subject. Much of Barthé's oeuvre reflects his penchant for allegory and an embrace of classical realism that rendered him a stylistic outlier of his generation. He consistently sought to convey a universal sense of heroism reflective of the African diaspora through his sculpture, producing a refined body of bust-length portraits and full-length figures portraying a variety of individuals, including historical luminaries, archetypal, religious, and mythological subjects, and contemporary celebrities from the dance and theater worlds. While the Black male figure was a prevailing focus of Barthé's practice, a consideration of his larger oeuvre reveals a career-long investment in depicting subjects of both genders with authority and empathy. Often working from memory, Barthé used his superior technical ability to imbue his sculptures with a sense of movement and emotional interiority, affectingly capturing the spiritual essence of his subjects. *A New Day Is Coming* features several of the artist's most celebrated sculptures, such as *Feral Benga* (1935), which portrays Parisian cabaret dancer François "Feral" Benga; *Julius* (c.1940), a portrait of Julius Perkins, Jr., a child actor and musician active in Harlem; *Stevedore* (1937) a heroic representation of the working everyman; *Black Madonna* (1961), an iconographic interpretation of the Holy Mother as a Black woman; and *The Negro Looks Ahead* (1944), a symbolic rendition of Black fortitude.

Though Barthé was never open about his sexuality, his frequent portrayals of the male nude were recognized as expressions of homoerotic desire by his friends and peers in the art and literary world. During his years in New York (1929–1948), Barthé became a key figure in an elite milieu of creatives and intellectuals who discretely incorporated gay themes into their work, including poets Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, and Countee Cullen, cabaret performer Jimmie Daniels, playwright Harold Jackman, and photographer Carl Van Vechten. Barthé formed particularly important friendships with the poet Richard Bruce Nugent and Harlem Renaissance philosopher Alain Locke, the latter of whom considered Barthé's sculpture a consummate embodiment of the New Negro Movement's mandate to uplift the collective consciousness of Black America.

Both Locke and Nugent are important figures in Isaac Julien's filmography. His breakthrough film *Looking for Langston* (1989) is a lyrical montage of real and imagined sequences exploring the lives and work of Harlem's gay cultural luminaries of the 1920s and their descendants in the 1980s; the film features excerpts from Nugent's short story "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade" (1926) as well as archival footage of Locke and Barthé. *Once Again . . . (Statues Never Die)* is, in many ways, a sequel to *Looking for Langston*, taking up many of the same themes and subjects. Structured around a conversation between Locke and Albert C. Barnes, an important collector of African sculpture and founder of the Barnes Foundation, the film poetically weaves a thematic exploration of Black queer desire into its timely meditation on the collection and display of African material culture in European and American institutions. Locke and Barthé's relationship is a primary touchpoint in the film's arc, and Barthé's sculptures figure prominently in the film.

A New Day Is Coming features several casts from editions Barthé produced in the 1940s through the 1960s, as well as standout examples of his unique painted plaster sculptures dating from 1935 through 1966. The exhibition also includes several editions cast in the final decade of Barthé's life drawn from the collection of art historian, curator, artist, and Barthé scholar Samella Lewis (1923–

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2022), who was close friends with the sculptor. In 1985–86, Dr. Lewis assisted Barthé in casting new editions of many of his most accomplished sculptures—a project funded by another important friend and patron, the actor James Garner. Reproductions of archival photographs commemorating highlights of Barthé’s life and career are installed throughout the gallery, providing a historical backdrop to the presentation. These photos complement two large-scale Inkjet prints by Julien capturing a moment in *Once Again... Statues Never Die* in which the film’s characters contemplate Barthé’s *Black Madonna* (1961).

Richmond Barthé: *A New Day Is Coming* is mounted in conversation with multiple recent and ongoing museum exhibitions. In 2022, the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia opened *Isaac Julien: Once Again . . . (Statues Never Die)*, an immersive, five-screen installation by Julien commissioned by the Foundation on the occasion of their centennial. Installed among the screens were three of the Barthé sculptures featured in the film, eight works of African art from the Foundation’s collection, and a selection of works by contemporary sculptor Matthew Angelo Harrison. In 2023, the Tate Britain opened the traveling career retrospective *Isaac Julien: What Freedom is to me*, which featured seven of the artist’s major film installations, including *Once Again . . . (Statues Never Die)*; the exhibition is currently on view at its final venue, the Bonnefanten Museum in Maastricht, The Netherlands, through August 17, 2024.

Once Again . . . (Statues Never Die) is also featured in the 2024 Whitney Biennial, *Even Better Than the Real Thing*, open through August 11, 2024. Among the Barthé sculptures augmenting this iteration of the work is a cast of Barthé’s *Stevedore* (1937) on loan from Michael Rosenfeld Gallery. The installation also features two Barthé sculptures owned by the Whitney, *African Dancer* (1933)—which was included in the museum’s *First Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Sculpture, Watercolors, and Prints in 1933*—and *The Blackberry Woman* (1932). Notably, when the museum acquired *The Blackberry Woman* in 1932, Barthé became the first Black artist to enter their collection. Finally, two of Barthé’s most renowned sculptures, *The Boxer* (1942) and *Feral Benga* (1935–36), are currently on view in *The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s* much-anticipated historical survey *The Harlem Renaissance and Transatlantic Modernism*, open through July 28, 2024.

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