

Australian Arts Review

"Isaac Julien's compelling cinematic installation *Once Again... (Statues Never Die)* to open at MCA"

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Isaac Julien, *Once Again... (Statues Never Die)*, 2022, installation view of *Once Again... (Statues Never Die)*, Tate Britain, London 2023, image courtesy Isaac Julien and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, © the artist, photograph Henrik Kam

The Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (MCA Australia) will exhibit Isaac Julien's compelling cinematic installation *Once Again... (Statues Never Die)* (2022) from 27 September 2024 until 16 February 2025.

A trailblazer of multi-screen installation, Sir Isaac Julien is one of Britain's most influential and critically acclaimed artists. He seamlessly fuses film, photography and installation to address issues of race, gender and cultural identity.

Once Again... (Statues Never Die), Julien's latest work, is a mesmerising and immersive five-screen black-and-white film installation which poetically explores the relationship and correspondence between art collector Albert C. Barnes (1872-1951) and renowned philosopher, educator and cultural leader Alain Locke (1885-1954).

Barnes, an early collector of African material culture in the US and founder of the Barnes Collection, and Locke, a key figure of the 1920s-30s cultural movement known as the Harlem Renaissance and the first African-American Rhodes Scholar, animate discussions about African art and its place in global art histories.

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The film stars actor André Holland (*Moonlight* and *Passing*) as Alain Locke, Danny Huston (*Succession* and *Marlowe*) as Dr Barnes, rising star Devon Terrell as sculptor Richmond Barthé and Sharlene Whyte (*Small Axe* and *Lessons of the Hour*) as the curator, with a special appearance by singer and songwriter Alice Smith.

Drawing on Julien's extensive research into the archives of the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia, which also commissioned the work, *Once Again... (Statues Never Die)* is a compelling examination of Black Modernism, historical narratives, social constructs and cultural heritage. The film reflects on the significant and often neglected place of African objects in numerous collections of western art museums.

"This project explores Dr Barnes's and Alain Locke's storied relationship, its mutually formative critical dialogue, and its significant impact on their work as cultural critics, educators, organisers, and activists on behalf of various African American causes," says Julien.

Rebecca Ray, MCA Australia Curator added, "*Once Again... (Statues Never Die)* is a timely commentary on the enduring impact of museum histories and practices, while simultaneously advocating for the restitution of cultural heritage."

Once Again... (Statues Never Die) explores Locke's engagement with the Barnes collection, honouring both Locke's contribution to the arts, while inviting critical conversations about the African material culture that influenced the Black cultural movement. The installation spotlights Dr Barnes's subsequent writings on the meaning and value of African material.

In the film, Julien revisits some of the themes he approached in his landmark 1989 film *Looking for Langston*. He continues his exploration of the queer subculture of the Harlem Renaissance by considering the relationship between Locke and sculptor Richmond Barthé, with a staging of Barthé's sculptures at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

Intercut with archival footage of looted African artworks held by the British Museum, taken from Ghanaian filmmaker Nii Kwate Owoo's film *You Hide Me* (1970) and augmented with quotes from poets Aimé Césaire and Langston Hughes, the film offers a history that contextualises contemporary efforts for reparations.

Displayed alongside Julien's film is a selection of 19th- and early 20th-century African art objects loaned from the Australian Museum. Also included are figurative sculptures by Richmond Barthé (1901-1989) and contemporary artist Matthew Angelo Harrison (b. 1989), who appear throughout the film. The inclusion of their works demonstrates how African American artists in the west continue to develop their own visual languages to reflect the complexities of Black identity.

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