

# San Francisco Chronicle

"Exclusive: Isaac Julien to get new major retrospective in San Francisco"

By Tony Bravo

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Artist Isaac Julien, center, speaks with guests before dinner during the Art Bash party at SFMOMA on April 24. The party included a special installation at the dinner portion of the evening by the artist. Carlos Avila Gonzalez/The Chronicle.

Artist Isaac Julien will be the subject of a major retrospective in San Francisco this spring.

"Isaac Julien: I Dream a World" is slated to run April 12–July 13 at the de Young Museum and will feature 10 major video installations by the British artist, a genre he has pioneered. The show will be the first major exhibition at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco dedicated to an artist working with the moving image in the form of multiscreen video installations and also, the largest focusing on Julien's film and video work.

"It's really exciting and a great honor to have my largest scale exhibition in the United States to premiere at the de Young Museum since so many of my works since the 1980s have American themes," Julien said in a statement to the Chronicle. "The Bay Area, and San Francisco especially, has historically been very important for my films ever since I started my work as an artist. For many of the works this is like a special coming home."

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

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

Julien, 64, is acclaimed for his boundary-pushing work with film, video and photography, frequently exploring political and cultural events through the lens of race, class, gender and sexuality. His films often use multilayer visual techniques; interweave different historic and contemporary narratives; and utilize music, movement and tableaux. A graduate of the Saint Martin's School of Art, London, Julien's cultural breakthrough came with his 1989 drama-documentary "Looking for Langston" about gay Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes. Joining that work will be his 2019 10-screen installation "Lessons of the Hour," which is now in the permanent collection of the museum, and works spanning from "Lost Boundaries," made of personal footage from the 1980s, to his 2022 film "Once Again... (Statues Never Die)."

"At once incisive and poetic, Isaac Julien's groundbreaking films and video installations probe the most significant social issues of our time," said FAMSF director and CEO Thomas P. Campbell. "With Julien's close ties to California, it feels especially fitting that the first survey of his work takes place here."



A partial view of the 10-screen installation/film "Lessons of the Hour" by Isaac Julien at the McEvoy Foundation for the Arts.  
Lea Suzuki/The Chronicle

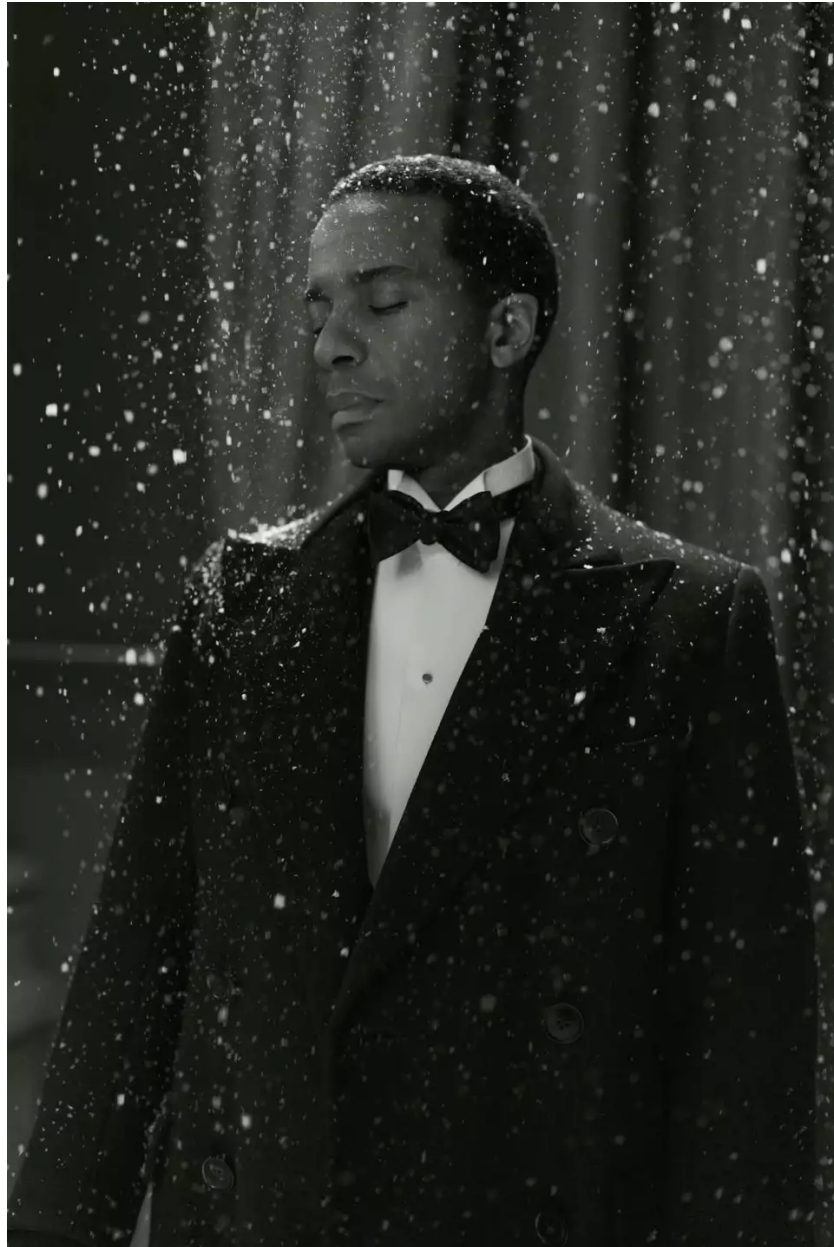
Julien has been a faculty member at UC Santa Cruz — where he is a distinguished professor of the arts and leads the Moving Image Lab together with his partner, arts Professor Mark Nash — since 2018. In 2022 Julien was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II, and the following year, he was the subject of the retrospective "Isaac Julien What Freedom Is to Me" at the Tate Museum in London.

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Claudia Schmuckli, the chief curator of modern and contemporary art for the FAMSF said that conversations about the exhibition have been happening for more than five years but that she's wanted to develop one of this scale around Julien's film and video work since she first became familiar with it in the early 2000s.

"I've known and felt the importance of his work for many, many years," said Schmuckli. "This is really meant to be a comprehensive survey of this multi-channel moving image work in a way that the Tate exhibition was not and also, an exhibition that puts the focus on what he calls 'transnational reflexivity'" – the practice of examining one's own assumptions, values and perspectives in relation to other cultures and the world.



Isaac Julien, "Diasporic Dream (Once Again Statues Never Die)," 2022. Isaac Julien

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"What we can do at the de Young is articulate a global perspective that has been present from the outset of his career," said Schmuckli. "His work has always engaged with ideas and concepts of a diasporic condition, but also historical events that have shaped lives globally."

Julien has seen several exhibitions of his work locally in recent years. In 2020, the now-closed McEvoy Foundation for the Arts presented "Lessons of the Hour" and Jessica Silverman exhibited photography related to "Once Again ... (Statues Never Die)." The 2024 Art Bash at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art featured blown-up images from the same series as a scene-setting installation for the patron dinner.

In the de Young's Wilsey Court, Julien's 2010 film "Ten Thousand Waves" will be installed where it will be on view for free. The film commemorates the Morecambe Bay tragedy in 2004, in which more than 20 Chinese cockle pickers drowned on a flooded sandbank off the coast in northwest England with Julien interweaving narratives of ancient Chinese deities.

"The power and potential of Isaac's work resides in his insistence on complex formulations of selfhood," noted Schmuckli. "I think it's so important in this particular historical moment to look at art that opens up to many possibilities to understand and navigate the world."



An installation view of Isaac Julien's "Lessons of the Hour" from 2019. William Jaeger

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