

"Weaving Time: A Review of Isaac Julien at MASP"

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Isaac Julien, "Revelations (Lina Bo Bardi—A Marvellous Entanglement)," 2019. Courtesy of the artist, Nara Roesler and Victoria Miro, London/Photo: Isaac Julien

One of the most famous phrases by Lina Bo Bardi (1914-1992)—“Linear time is a Western invention; time is not linear, it is a marvelous entanglement where, at any moment, points can be chosen and solutions invented, without beginning or end”—inspired the British artist Sir Isaac Julien to create one of his most complex and thought-provoking film installations titled “A Marvellous Entanglement,” which is both an allusion and a direct homage to the architect who designed icons of Brazilian modern architecture starting in the early 1950s. The work consists of “nine multiple - screen installations and photographic series that traverse a collection of Lina Bo Bardi’s most iconic buildings, offering a meditation on the work and legacy of the visionary modernist architect and designer.”

Actresses Fernanda Torres (Golden Globe winner this year for best actress for the film "I'm Still Here") and her mother, Fernanda Montenegro, portray the various stages of Lina's life, moving through the main buildings she designed over her lifetime, such as MASP, SESC Pompeia, Teatro Oficina, the Museum of Modern Art of Salvador (Bahia), Casa Coaty and Teatro Gregório de Matos, also in Salvador. The film installation also features a dance creation specially performed by the Bahia Folkloric Ballet and performances by the Brazilian art collective Araká. Zé Celso (1937-2023), actor, director, playwright and co-founder of Teatro Oficina—designed in 1984 by Lina Bo Bardi and Edson Elito—also participates in the film. The soundtrack was composed by German Spanish composer Maria de Alvear.

Isaac Julien's connection with Brazil, however, dates back to well before this film. He first encountered Lina's architecture in 1996, when he visited the Solar do Unhão, a network of colonial structures transformed by Bo Bardi in 1963 to house the Museum of Modern Art of Bahia (MAM-BA) in Salvador, where she also designed the Casa do Benin, a center for African culture, and Coaty, a deactivated social and commercial housing complex on Ladeira da Misericórdia, named in honor of the enslaved people who once carried cargo from the port. She conceived the museum as a place for the community, where art and craft intertwined, during her tenure as the first director of MAM-BA from 1960 to 1964.

In 2012, Julien reconnected with Bo Bardi's work when he installed his solo exhibition "Geopoetics" at the SESC Pompéia community center in São Paulo, also designed by Lina and considered her masterpiece. Developed between 1977 and 1986, this industrial complex, composed of open and closed spaces connected by a central cobblestone pathway—a converted riverbed known as "the beach"—hosts exhibitions, performances, concerts, sports events, and a cafeteria open to the public. In 2016, Julien returned to Brazil to present the installation "Ten Thousand Waves" at MAC Niterói (RJ), and more recently, in 2022, he exhibited one of his most poetic works, "Looking for Langston," at Inhotim (Brumadinho, MG), based on the life and work of Langston Hughes and his fellow Black artists responsible for the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s.

Now, finally, the work "A Marvellous Entanglement" can be seen by the Brazilian public for the first time at MASP, curated by Adriano Pedrosa with curatorial assistance from Matheus de Andrade. Curiously, however, it was decided to install it in the museum's new building (Pietro Maria Bardi Building) rather than in the original building designed by Lina. Had it been otherwise, it would have implied an interesting kind of meta-language, as one of the central points of the film is to show the architect's connection with her past and future, in recursive comings and goings, masterfully portrayed by both actresses. The entanglement referred to in the title alludes to the mythical thread of Ariadne (who holds the end of a woolen thread to save Theseus, the Greek hero). The same thread that unites lovers will also separate them, sealing a new destiny for Ariadne, her future, alongside the god Dionysus. But it is also essential to consider the meaning that historical time held for Alois Riegl, an important figure for the curatorial vision of Pietro Maria Bardi and Lina from the beginning of their careers.

We know, for example, that the exhibition model envisioned by both, with artworks displayed on glass easels in a large, wall-less floor, was inspired by Warburg's "Mnemosyne Atlas." The couple wanted the museum to resonate beyond the upper and bourgeois classes. Lina designed these structures to expand sightlines between the artworks, blending the contemporary with the classical, originals with reproductions, industrial design with commercial culture, and the popular with the fine arts.

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But more than that, Lina's motivating phrase about time as an entanglement that can be unraveled from any place or point, where past, future and present are always layered upon one another, also refers to Riegl's concept of "unintentional monuments," that is, those endowed with exceptional values beyond the meanings conferred upon them in their own historical present. These values, according to Riegl, were established starting in the fifteenth century in Italy, applied to works of Greek and Roman antiquity, making them part of modern imaginaries. In other words, the works of yesteryear, regardless of the original values they held for the cultures that produced them, are important to us insofar as they embody other, modern values, dear to our time, thus capable of challenging reflections and thoughts about our own present. This is how the experimentation with MASP's historical collection was envisioned, rather than simply displaying it in the form of an encyclopedia, illustrating various chapters of Western art history with a few works.



Isaac Julien, "Entanglements (Lina Bo Bardi—A Marvellous Entanglement)," 2019. Courtesy of the artist, Nara Roesler and Victoria Miro, London/Photo: Isaac Julien

Lina Bo Bardi's architectural conception was also largely due to the cross-referencing of diverse cultural manifestations, some ancestral and far from erudite, others considered tributaries of modernist rationality, without the collections derived from such processes becoming obstacles to the transformation of space, while always maintaining the seminal references of her past. She once said: "I believe in an international solidarity, in a concert of all particular voices. Now, it is a contradiction to think of a common language for peoples if each one does not deepen its roots, which are different."

For example, at SESC Pompéia, Lina started from an old drum factory, instruments used for collective celebration, simultaneously preserving or recreating the idea of social interaction brought by the use of such instruments. The concrete tower added to the site with the old warehouses (whose structures were preserved), with its amoeboid-shaped windows cut into the concrete and its large wooden shutters, assimilates and comments on that past, enhancing the celebration of joy in the present, as if safeguarding it in a fortress.

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Isaac Julien directed the actresses walking through the interior of the tower, looking outward through a tropical light that bursts into the space. Lina (Fernanda Montenegro) sometimes appears with a melancholic, distant gaze, in contrast to her younger self (Fernanda Torres), and it is moving to sense, even without a linear narrative, how the relationship with space differs across ages, across the times in which we experience it. More than illustrating the architecture by having characters walk through or dance within it, what Isaac Julien seeks to demonstrate is how the sensation of inhabiting it varies, even for its creator, who becomes in the film a connective presence across multiple times. According to Julien, "animating Bo Bardi, making her personality tangible in what she left behind, is a current that energizes 'A Marvellous Entanglement.'"

Architecture may be merely a portal (a sensation heightened by the nine large projection screens) through which time is redrawn, allowing the entanglement to be unraveled, not without some roughness or a sense of loss, always. The past is no longer the same past if we look at it anew in the present, and the story of ourselves sometimes unfolds before our own eyes as if it were someone else's. The spatial poetics of Bo Bardi is invoked in a network of well-staged scenes, with excerpts from Lina's texts (she was also a critic and editor, having directed the magazine "Domus"), documents from the archive of French ethnographer Pierre Verger (whose collection is housed in the Casa do Benin), and performative interventions, such as those carried out around Coaty by Bahian dancer Diego Pinheiro and the art collective Araká, as well as a dance performance by Zebrinha for the Bahia Folkloric Ballet on the spiral staircase of Solar do Unhão. Throughout the film, the initial quote about entangled time is incessantly repeated like a mantra.

Like Julien's evocative studies on the giant of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes, and the revolutionary psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon, "A Marvellous Entanglement" is a rich saturation of echoes and audiovisual projections that allow a deep dive into the creative and poetic universe of Lina Bo Bardi, evoking her desire to find in the simplicity of the Brazilian people a form of utopian openness for architecture (perhaps the melancholy expressed in Fernanda Montenegro's gaze is related to this desire). As the camera flies over the cobblestone pathway of SESC Pompéia in the film, we hear Lina's words recalling her first encounters with that space, before its transformation into what it is today. After observing European rational design, she remembers the laughter of boys playing soccer in the rain, and everything she wanted to preserve in her project—"All of this must continue, exactly like this," she thought, "all this joy."

"Isaac Julien: A Marvellous Entanglement" is on view at Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand, Avenida Paulista, 1510, Bela Vista, São Paulo, through August 3.

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