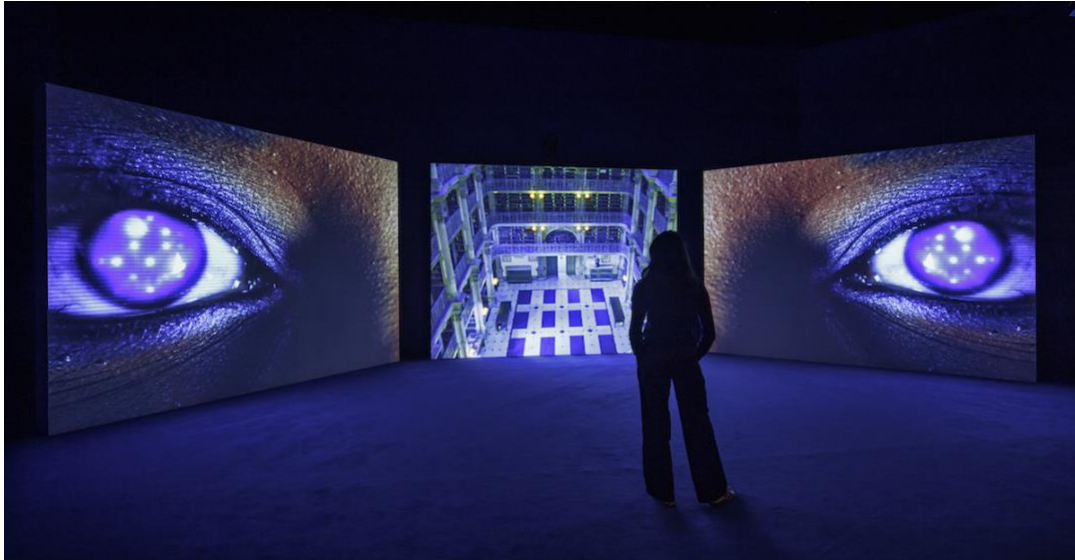


ARTnews

"Isaac Julien Gets an Electrifying US Retrospective at Long Last"

By Alex Greenberger

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Isaac Julien, *Baltimore*, 2003. Photo Henrik Kam

Perhaps you don't associate Blaxploitation filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles with Renaissance painting? I didn't, at least not before last week, but now I'll never be able to unhitch Van Peebles from the image of him admiring *The Ideal City*, a quattrocento painting of an open plaza.

That image figures prominently in Isaac Julien's video installation *Baltimore* (2003), one of 13 transfixing works in Julien's newly opened retrospective at San Francisco's **de Young Museum**. Julien films Van Peebles as he walks through the Italian art galleries of the Walters Art Museum, taking in gold-leafed Madonnas and centuries-old allegories. All the while, Van Peebles is stalked by a woman with a handgun and the ability to perform gravity-defying stunts worthy of *The Matrix*.

Renaissance art, contemporary Black cinema, science fiction, and documentary filmmaking all combine here in a work designed to hypnotize and overwhelm. And, to add to the whirlwind of it all, Julien splits his images across three screens that often portray the same thing from several angles. Whenever Julien's camera moves, the eye is pulled in different directions, inducing vertigo.

That's intentional, since Julien's work is all about image overload. This is an artist who has spent the past four decades using his art to feel his way through a world filled with pictures, people, and overlapping histories that rub up against each other, creating friction. His films and videos, which have frequently been shown as multiscreen installations, mirror this sense of dislocation, forcing viewers to make hard choices about what to focus on before they reach their visual limit.

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Julien's work is somber, but it is rarely gloomy. Take the case of *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010), in which an array of hanging screens display images of the actress Maggie Cheung soaring through the sky in a flowing white robe. The work's subject is ugly: the 2004 drowning of 23 Chinese cockle pickers in England's Morecambe Bay; Cheung plays the Buddhist sea goddess Mazu. There can be no mistaking that *Ten Thousand Waves* is about something dark, especially when Julien's screens display images of hands reaching out from a turbulent sea during the night. But the cinematography of *Ten Thousand Waves* is largely beautiful, with its many screens offering plenty of mesmerizing imagery.



Julien's *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010) is installed in the atrium of the de Young Museum. Photo Henrik Kam

Ten Thousand Waves is intentionally too full of pictures. It's a work that envisions our world as broken beyond repair by both rampant globalism and apathy toward the tragedy of others. It's also a work that suggests that all that fracture can be used to our benefit, with new associations formed from the scattered shards. In that way, Julien uses his many pictures to blaze fresh trails, exposing invisible narratives while also creating new histories.

Julien's de Young show is being billed as his biggest show to date in the US—he currently splits his time between London and Santa Cruz, where he teaches art at the University of California—and indeed, it has a checklist longer than the one for his 2023 Tate Britain retrospective. If every piece at the de Young is watched in full, the exhibition requires around four and a half hours, a significant time investment for any viewer. This may be why video art surveys always feel so intimidating (and perhaps even unenticing) for a large slice of the public.

The de Young show, however, doesn't feel like such a challenge, even when it presents Julien's work as being just as complicated as it really is, and that's why it's among the best large-scale exhibitions of video art I've ever seen. Curator Claudia Schmuckli wisely arranges the show such that most installations are connected to a central room, leaving viewers to wander in and out of the works at will. (Astoundingly, there is minimal sound bleed, a pervasive issue in exhibitions of video art. Equally impressive are the screens outside each installation that display information about how far along each work is in its runtime.) The exhibition design yields a create-your-own-adventure approach to viewing that is in keeping with Julien's art.

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Many will appropriately begin their adventure with Julien's single-channel early films. Born in 1960 to parents who had emigrated from St. Lucia to London, Julien became a star of the British film scene with works such as *This Is Not an AIDS Advertisement* (1987), a woozy evocation of England's queer community at a time when it was being savaged by conservatives. With its pink skies and synthy soundtrack, the work quickly established Julien as an artist not much interested in narrative or conforming to the mainstream.



Looking for Langston (1989) affirmed Julien's place in the film world. ©Isaac Julien/Courtesy the artist, Victoria Miro, London and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco

It wasn't until two years later that he would make his first great work, a film called *Looking for Langston* (1989), which he made under the umbrella of the Sankofa Film and Video Collective, an organization he cofounded. Shot in lush black and white, *Looking for Langston* is ostensibly a portrait of the Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes and the queer community of which he may have been a member. Hughes's estate has disputed that he was gay; Julien has accused his descendants of having "created" a heterosexual identity for Hughes.

Looking for Langston is no biopic: it is non-linear and digressive, filled with images of kissing men, voguing dancers, puffs of smoke, and more. It powerfully suggests that history is as malleable as silly putty, with the ability to be revised, reworked, and reassembled as necessary.

Before being embraced by museums, *Looking for Langston* and Julien's other early works were shown mainly in theaters, with his 1997 feature *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Mask*, about the titular Martinican thinker and starring cultural theorist Stuart Hall, playing at the Cannes Film Festival. (That film is sadly not in the de Young show and still awaits due attention in the US. Likewise for much of Julien's early output, though you can see some rarities in a **nice Criterion Channel survey** devoted to the Sankofa collective.) It can be tough to remember, then, that there was a time when Julien was not a fixture in art institutions and biennials.

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With *The Long Road to Mazatlán* (1999), Julien began using multiple screens. Photo Henrik Kam

For many, his big introduction to the art world was his three-screen installation *The Long Road to Mazatlán* (1999), which gained Julien a Turner Prize nomination. It's a Western unlike any other I've ever seen. You could say its subject is two cowboys—one is Latino, the other is white—who cruise each other, then strip down to their skivvies and have an erotic encounter involving underwater somersaults in a sun-dappled pool. That, however, undersells it: the installation also involves a remade scene from *Taxi Driver*, slithering snakes, and dancers decked out in feathers and sequins. It's a wonderful work whose brilliance is literally clearer than ever—brand-new restorations of this piece and three others are making their debuts in the de Young show.

The conceptual excess is the point, since what Julien does with *The Long Road to Mazatlán* is a lot like shuffling multiple decks of cards together. He takes several genres that interest him and pulls them apart, then solders their elements back together, forming something new and hybrid in the process. Hence why there are so many disparate images here, and why one screen isn't enough for an artist this imaginative.

More recent works have expanded beyond the triptych format. *Ten Thousand Waves*, the installation about the Chinese cockle pickers who died by drowning, unfurls across nine screens. *Lessons of the Hour* (2019), a video installation about the abolitionist Frederick Douglass, is shown across ten, creating a diffusion of moving images that befits its subject, who is said to have been the most photographed man of the 19th century.

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Isaac Julien, *Lessons of the Hour*, 2019. Photo Henrik Kam

And then there are all of Julien's pictures within pictures. He trains his lens on a film strip being run through a projector in *Fantôme Afrique* (2006), his ode to African cinema filled with images of city streets and movie theaters in Burkina Faso; the cascade of frames runs quickly by as the celluloid is pulled onward, becoming a blur. And in *Lina Bo Bardi—A Marvelous Entanglement* (2019), his camera observes all the paintings that hang freestanding in the Museu de Arte de São Paulo, a museum designed by the titular architect. Meanwhile, the architect—brought to life here by two actresses, Fernanda Montenegro and her daughter Fernanda Torres—expounds on what architecture should do, traipsing around the museum she designed. We never get a chance to stare at any one canvas for very long.



Once Again... (Statues Never Die), 2022, features mylar-covered walls that reflect and refract Julien's many images. Photo Henrik Kam

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The most recent work in the show, the ambitious 2022 video installation *Once Again... (Statues Never Die)*, continues the institutional focus. It's set partially within the Barnes Collection, the Philadelphia museum known for its Impressionist paintings and African artworks. Julien sets his titled, freestanding screens within an environment whose walls are partially covered in mylar, causing his images to be reflected back and refracted across each other. Those images are diffuse: there are appropriated clips from the 1953 film *Statues Also Die*, excerpts from *Looking for Langston*, and reenactments of conversations between collector Albert C. Barnes and art historian Alain Locke, who are brought to life by Danny Huston and André Holland, respectively.

A head-spinning amount of terrain is covered here, but you don't need a syllabus to understand this work, whose jumble of images amounts to a major statement about the magic that results when history goes unfixed. "Nothing is more galvanizing than a sense of the cultural past," Locke says. Given that I got chills at that very moment, I'm inclined to agree. The installation, like the de Young show as a whole, is electrifying.

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