

"Isaac Julien: I Dream a World' - de Young Museum's Black queer visionary exhibition"

By Brian Bromberger

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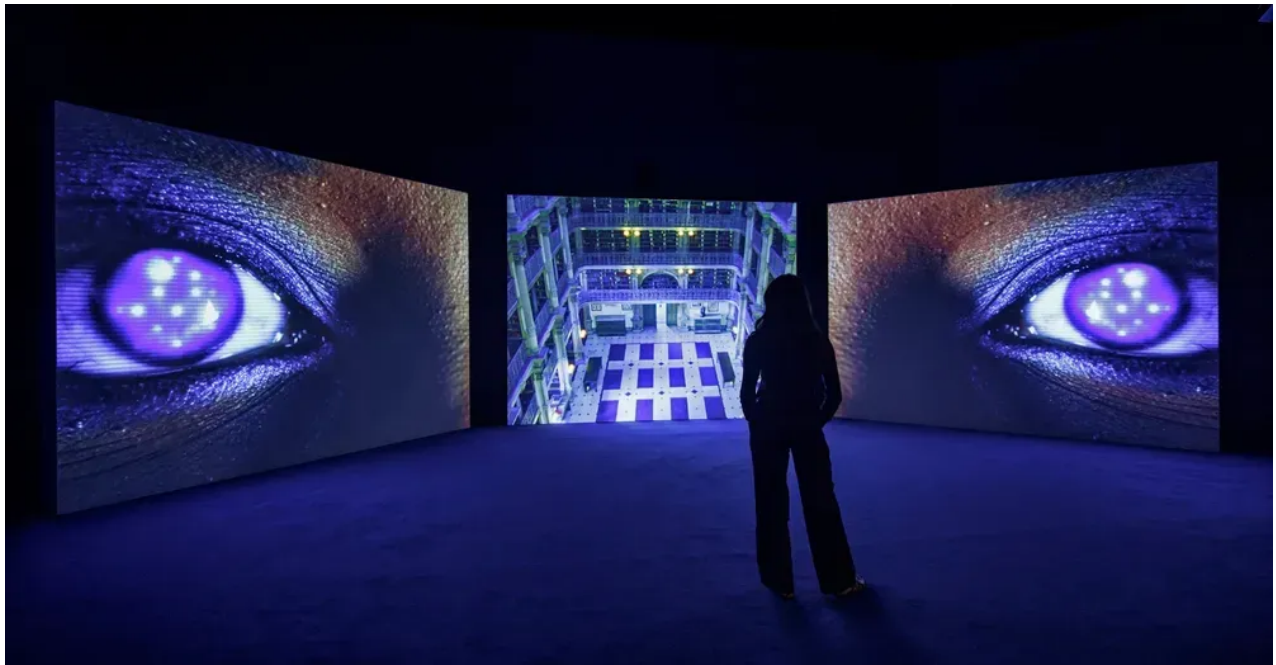
Installation view of Isaac Julien, 'Baltimore' (2003) in 'Isaac Julien: I Dream a World' at the de Young Museum (photo: Henrik Kam)

For older LGBTQ folk, the name Isaac Julien will stir up memories of his 1989 film, "Looking for Langston," a lyrical exploration of the private world of novelist, poet, and social activist Langston Hughes celebrating Black gay identity and desire during the artistic and cultural Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, of which he was an integral player.

The film discussed in intimate details Hughes's queer sexuality and the role it played in his writings. It was one of the very first examples of what lesbian critic B. Ruby Rich termed New Queer Cinema of the 1990s.

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Installation view of Isaac Julien, 'Baltimore' (2003) in 'Isaac Julien: I Dream a World' at the de Young Museum (photo: Henrik Kam)

Sir Isaac Julien, who's gay and British, is now the subject of the first comprehensive retrospective survey in a U.S. museum setting, the largest exhibition focusing on his film, video, and photographic work, "Isaac Julien: I Dream a World," at the de Young Museum, screening through July 13.

Thomas Campbell, Director and CEO of the Fine Arts Museum, describes Julien as "one of the most influential voices in visual culture, Black cultural studies, and queer independent working today. In groundbreaking works such as *Lessons of the Hour* (2019), which we were privileged to acquire in 2023, Julien engages with the urgent social issues of our time and invites viewers to rethink the dominant historical narratives of the global north."

Julien has done pioneer work in developing multichannel film installations, a unique blend of visual poetry, deep research, and social critique. The exhibit encompasses ten immersive video installations with moving image choreography, multilayer visual techniques, music, and tableaux created between 1999 and 2024, five newly restored for this exhibit.

Also included are select early works, including *Looking for Langston*, *Lost Boundaries* (about Black artists and actors), and *This is Not an AIDS Advertisement* ("a radical rejection of fear during the HIV epidemic, focusing on love, desire, and romance"). The exhibit's title derives from the same-titled poem by Hughes.

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Installation view of Isaac Julien's 'Isaac Julien: I Dream a World' at the de Young Museum (photo: Henrik Kam)

Nonlinear narrative

Claudia Schmuckli, the organizing curator, characterizes Julien's work, which journeys across historical boundaries and interdisciplinary lines, as "favoring nonlinear narrative techniques such as reiteration, reflection, and transposition in his orchestration of images and sounds across multiple screens. Julien folds the past onto the present and the present onto the past. In each work, Julien weaves different temporalities, ideas, and imaginations in which history and memory merge into intimate reformulations of a multi-dimensional selfhood that is not merely in, but of this world."

Much of Julien's opuses are based on sexual identity, race (especially Black history and culture), migration, and particularly empathy, all now under attack by the current administration, so this exhibit is both timely and urgent. Julien juxtaposes historical fact, speculative fiction, social commentary, and immersive aesthetics, often reflecting on political and cultural events that have shaped the lives of individuals globally.

Shot across Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, and the Caribbean, Julien's compositions firmly establishes him as a global artist "concerned with contemporary and historical forces impacting the formation of communities and societies around the world."

Julien refers to his multi-screen video installations as parallel montage, experimental filmmaking that embraces the aesthetics strategy mostly associated with the Russian director/theorist Sergei Eisenstein. Using unexpected sequencing of frames, his videos produce meaning and feeling from the juxtaposition of singular unrelated shots.

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'Isaac Julien: I Dream a World' at the de Young Museum (photo: Henrik Kam)

Reformulation

Julien's editing, according to Schmuckli, is not just "a technical stitching together of different takes, but a profound tool of reformulating the art of visual iteration and embracing montage as his core technique as a means to express reflection and desire. The virtual folds onto the actual. His subjects are never locked in time or space."

Julian says he's configuring a new paradigm of visual poetics, a means to reimagine the world, constructing a repertoire of images that are self-sustaining, not confined to reaction, but nurture resistance and revising the present. He utilizes what he terms transnatural reflexivity, examining his own assumptions, values, and perspectives in relation to other world cultures.

The installations on view include *Baltimore* (2003), *A Marvelous Entanglement* (2019), *Western Union: Small Boats* (2007), *The Long Road to Mazatlan* (1999), *Paradise Omeros* (2002), *True North* (2004), *Fantome Afrique* (2005), concluding with Julien's most recent work *Once Again...(Statues Never Die)* (2022). Helpfully, video run times are posted at the entry of each exhibition hall.

For those unsure if you'd enjoy this sometimes esoteric exhibit, as a teaser, one of the installations, *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010), commemorating the Morecambe Bay tragedy of 2004, in which more than 20 Chinese cockle pickers drowned on a flooded sandbank off the coast in northwest England, will be on display for free in the Wilsey Court, accessible to all. Julien interweaves contemporary Chinese culture alongside its ancient myths.

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'North Star (Lessons of the Hour),' 2019 Framed photograph on gloss inkjet paper mounted on aluminum, 63 x 84 in. (160 x 213.3 cm) © Isaac Julien Courtesy the artist, Victoria Miro, London and Jessica Silverman

Explorations

The installations are an assault of images that has an almost hypnotic effect on the viewer, even if you aren't sure exactly what you are seeing or are unfamiliar with the subject matter. *True North* is inspired by the story of Matthew Henson, a Black explorer who accompanied Robert Peary on a 1909 expedition led by two Indigenous guides to find the North Pole. Henson had been written out of history, but Julien reexamines polar exploration in terms of race and gender.

The 10-screen film installation *Lessons of the Hour* presents a poetic portrait of the orator, philosopher, and self-liberated freedom fighter Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) born into slavery and who campaigned against it. *A Marvelous Entanglement* is a meditation on the work and legacy of the visionary Brazilian architect and designer Lina Bo Bardi (1914-1992). I was transfixed by these three frequently thrilling and beautiful video programs.

People who suffer from vertigo or epilepsy might need to exercise caution, as there is much movement and strobe lighting throughout the exhibition. These large-scale video programs are often complex and intellectual. It can be hard to absorb all the sounds, images, and words, which at times can be overwhelming.

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Also, the acoustic insulation varies, so sometimes you can hear the noise from other installations which can be distracting. You also will need to move around the screening space and decide where to stand to get differing vantage points.

The total running time of all the videos is 4.5 hours, so either prepare to visit more than once or select a few that intrigue you. The exhibit will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue featuring newly commissioned essays and archival materials, many previously unpublished, that relate to his oeuvre and give insight into the artist's working process.

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