

HYPERALLERGIC

"Isaac Julien Returns to the Cutting Room Floor of History"

By Folasade Ologundudu

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"I want to call attention to how you look," the artist known for his multi-channel film installations says of *I Dream a World*, his first US museum survey to date.



Isaac Julien, "Black Madonna / New Negro Aesthetic (Once Again ... Statues Never Die)" (2022), inkjet print on Canson Platine Fibre Rag (© Isaac Julien; image courtesy the artist, Victoria Miro, London and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco)

SAN FRANCISCO — Time folds unto itself and reflects historical and contemporary moments that have shaped society in Isaac Julien's *I Dream a World*, the British artist's first comprehensive museum survey, and his first retrospective in the United States, at San Francisco's de Young Museum. Light bends around corners and cascades over mirrored walls as time stretches like silk across several galleries in the subterranean expanse of the museum's corridors, beckoning pause and inquiry.

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Julien's influential *Looking for Langston* (1989), which gave definition to the genre of New Queer Cinema, is presented in conversation with films on display for the first time, including "This Is Not an AIDS Advertisement" (1987). His latest work, *Once Again . . . (Statues Never Die)* (2022), returns to a question that has lingered among Black cultural workers and artists for decades: that of the return of stolen objects, looted from Africa during the centuries of European colonialism and dispossession, to their homelands. The film imagines a form of what Julien calls "poetic restitution," alluding to contemporary debates on repatriation and the erasure of African material culture in Western art museums, as told through adapted written debates between preeminent philosopher and Black theorist Alain Locke and collector Dr. Albert C. Barnes, who established the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia in 1922.

Julien and I sat down in the Koret Auditorium at the de Young to discuss his exhibition, some of the early artistic investigations that led to his multi-channel film works, the reverberating influence of African diasporic literary titans like Frantz Fanon and filmmakers such as Ousmane Sembène and Spike Lee, and the role technology has played in his genre-defying visual practice. This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Hyperallergic: *Much of your work deals with the lives of people who are on the margins of power and whose stories haven't been accurately told in popular culture. History is often considered fixed and final. How do you wrestle with that through the visual language of filmmaking and reshape our idea of what is and what has been through moving images?*

Isaac Julien: I started making work because I wanted to be involved in the self-creation of one's image. Growing up as a young black person, there was a scarcity of those types of images. I also wanted to be involved in creating a kind of mirror for oneself which later developed my interest in the question of absence and led to my curiosity about the archive. Later on, I realized that the inquiry into archives was not just an absence, but a place for critical reinvention, because of course, the dominant histories are always about a kind of erasure. But there are always these hidden histories. I knew that because, as an art student, nobody ever spoke to me about the Harlem Renaissance, a modern art movement that had Black artists at the forefront of it. Taking that as a starting point, in making a film like *Looking for Langston* about someone who was a gay icon, I realized that there was a world of a secret identity. How could one explore that world? There were people I was interested in like Frantz Fanon. I made a film called *Black Skin White Mask* in the mid-'90s, and I was really interested in his work because he was a psychiatrist, and his writing provided a psychological reading of Black culture and White racism. It gave another way of looking at history from a Black perspective, and analyzed the neurosis of White racism.

I felt that film encapsulated all art forms. The question of time was also attractive in the making of film, and all those things lead to the question of how you could creatively deal with this notion of erasure and absence and of histories which are pushed to the margins. And it's not that I see them as *in* the margins — it's that they've been constructed to be in the margins, but are actually histories that represent a lot of people's desires and memories and live in the dominant culture, and that is a place from where I had to create pictures.

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

H: *That makes me think about Once Again . . . (Statues Never Die) and the conversation between Dr. Barnes and Alain Locke. In your investigation of ideas, people, and ways of thinking and being on the margins, you clearly understand that's where they've been purposefully placed, which is so poignant and critical to the film and the wider stories you've unearthed over your career. Can you dive deeper into that?*

IJ: Alain Locke was a fascinating historian. He was a polymath and the first African-American Rhodes scholar at Oxford. He spoke several languages. He was immensely smart. I was approached by the Barnes Museum to celebrate their centenary, and I came across a publication in the archive where both Alain Locke and Barnes had written about African art. What I was able to do was create a redux version out of the articles, and here you have the presentation of a historical debate turned into a conversation that was originally a written debate. It gets translated into a gentlemen's disagreement about the role of African art in Modernism. I like these sorts of entanglements and rearranging and appropriating what would be seen to be in the margins, and to say, "No, that is not in the margin, it's the central story" of modern art.

H: *Early in your career, what were some of the things that were happening in the world that drew you to make your first films? How much of that has changed?*

IJ: We're in a very ironic position at this moment in the world. We have leaders who are trying to politically and culturally turn back the clock. When I first started, we were making work because we were trying to make an intervention at a particular moment in history into a culture that we were calling Black independent film culture. There was a debate taking place across the African diaspora with filmmakers like Spike Lee, and Francophone African filmmakers as well.

H: *Like Sembène?*

IJ: Precisely. And so, there are all our different influences that we were looking at and taking that as a point of departure for creating new routes and avenues, and making "film works" that would have the role of making a cultural intervention. But that was the '80s and the early '90s. I would say in comparison to now, it's almost déjà vu, because all those political themes, and the urgency in addressing certain questions, are now being laid on the younger generation's shores at this very moment. This is very telling in *Lessons of the Hour* on Frederick Douglass, which I made in 2019. In making that work, it forced me to go back to an early work that I had made, *Who Killed Colin Roach?* from 1983, which was one of my first ones. It's a film about a young Black man who's found dead in the police station, and about the response from the community. All those initial questions are still relevant today, and they don't have any resolution. I'm sure Douglass would've thought we'd come much further than we have.

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Isaac Julien in 2023 (photo by Judith Burrows, courtesy the artist and the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco)

H: *Your career is marked by an expansion of the genre of film through multichannel installations. What in your artistic practice early on made you want to expand the visual language of film?*

IJ: It became very important to me to make films how I wanted to make them, and luckily, I was able to do that. Then, later on, some friends and colleagues were making work in a gallery context. There was a moment when technology was changing, video art left a TV screen and started being projected, and if I was going to do a work in a museum context, it would have to be a bit different from making a film in a cinema context. Showing works in the museum or gallery context, and thinking how they could be different, led me to the use of multiple screens. The technology developed so that I could begin to work and collaborate with different editors and sound designers in a more elaborate way. There's certain works that you make where there's paradigm shifts, like with *Ten Thousand Waves*.

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H: As we see more calls for restitution of stolen objects from museums, what are your considerations of how these calls are significant within the contemporary moment? How have your films addressed this return of objects, but also the return of knowledge of the self and one's own history and lineage?

IJ: The restitution debate is a really important one, and it's over a century old. If objects have been taken under very violent conditions, then their return is important. I think one really has to recognize that, but that doesn't change Western art history. I hope that a work like *Once Again . . . (Statues Never Die)* is a contribution toward those debates. I see the work as a form of "poetic restitution" in the sense that I think there's also another debate, which is about the way in which those objects, which became part of a Modernist debate around art history, are still left intact in terms of a grand narrative, which has to be deconstructed and dismantled. We still have a debate surrounding the British Museum's Benin bronzes, and this sort of stubbornness to not acknowledge that stolen objects need to be returned is extremely problematic. This ongoing debate highlights the imperial position of the museum in the West and the underpinning violence that is part of a lot of museums' artistic practices.



Installation view of Isaac Julien, "Once Again . . . (Statues Never Die)" (2022) in *Isaac Julien: I Dream a World* at the de Young Museum, San Francisco (photo by Henrik Kam, courtesy the de Young Museum)

Also entangled in this debate is the Black, post-slavery, African-American perspective and how those movements interpreted their own practices. This is why the work of Alain Locke becomes very important because he's in that modernist debate, looking at these questions in a philosophical manner. You also have the work of sculptors who are working in that particular time, and the question of Black authorship is not given the same sort of attention. It's not exactly erasure, but there's a kind of blurring out of art history that includes Black artists and authors.

H: A dismissal?

IJ: Yes. That's why we have the Black Madonna statue by Richmond Barthé in *Once Again . . .*, in the vitrine, that's looking out.

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H: Like a witness.

IJ: Yes, like a witness of history. Precisely. And so, it's really an intervention in the work. There's also an archival film in the work called *You Hide Me* by Nii Kwate Owoo, where you see Black protagonists who are looking at African sculptures in the basement of the British Museum. That was made half a century ago, before arguments calling for the return of the Benin bronzes.

H: A retrospective is a moment to look back at all one has accomplished, but we don't often look at it as an opportunity to understand the present. As you showcase your biggest survey to date in a US institution, what do you feel is most important about presenting your works in this capacity and in this time?



Installation view of Isaac Julien, *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010) in *Isaac Julien: I Dream a World* at the de Young Museum, San Francisco (photo by Henrik Kam, courtesy the de Young Museum)

IJ: The exhibition more or less begins in the mid-to-late '80s with *Looking for Langston* from 1989. There's also a short film, which I've never shown in the US, called *This Is Not an AIDS Advertisement*, from 1987. Depending how you enter the exhibition, you can enter it through the '80s and '90s space with the inclusion of my film *Looking for Langston* from 1989 into *Baltimore* from 2003, which has a more chronological kind of feel and you would end at *Once Again . . .*, which is where you get that meeting of the past and the present in the work. One is, of course, looking at the past in a survey exhibition, but there's an uncanny part because of the contemporary debate, which is haunted by the past. It's looking at these questions of restitution, which has been a debate for quite a long time.

With this exhibition, I want to emphasize the poetics of attention, to call attention to how you look. The use of multiple screens is already calling attention to a different way of looking and paying attention, and perhaps commenting on how we look today and how we see versus another period. That's the most unique thing about the exhibition.

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