

Film maker Isaac Julien: 'It can be quite a Rear Window experience here'

By Mark C O'Flaherty

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Isaac Julien has a fondness for transparency. The second floor flat close to Russell Square, which the filmmaker and visual artist shares with his partner Mark Nash, has had most of its internal walls removed and replaced with glass, creating clear rooms within rooms. "Mark says he often feels like he's in a film set here," says Julien. He's sitting on a recently acquired grey Ligne Roset Prado sofa, wearing a black Issey Miyake plissé jacket and punctuating our conversation with his charismatic belly laugh. Nash, who co-founded the couple's Moving-Image Lab at the University of Santa Cruz, pauses work on his computer to interject: "Living here is like being part of a secular religion — Isaac is the director who can see everything, and everything is ready to be filmed."

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

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

What you can see here, or more specifically what you might be able to see, creates a certain excitement. Julien had a glass panel put between the dressing room and the bathroom, which he describes as “queering the space”.

The couple have lived in this flat since the start of the early 2000s, although Julien has had a foot in the area since the 1980s when he was a student at Central Saint Martins. He now splits his time between here and California. He rose to fame with his luminescent 1989 docudrama *Looking for Langston*, about queer Harlem author and jazz poet Langston Hughes, who died in 1967. After his feature debut, *Young Soul Rebels* in 1991, he began working with multi-screen video installations, which were the subject of a Tate Britain retrospective in 2023. He was awarded a CBE in 2017.



In the largely monochrome space hangs a giant photograph from the set of Julien's latest project 'All That Changes You. Metamorphosis'

"I was in a huge Georgian house before here," he says. "It was a kind of art commune, and I'd known everyone there since I was at college — all very bohemian, but I'd had enough of untidiness." This building was designed in the mid 1970s by architect Brenda Davison of Dinerman, Davison & Hillman. She worked on numerous modernist apartment buildings in north London that used glass in innovative ways, as well as the renovation of what would become Terence Conran's first home in London at the start of the 1950s (she was also married to him for six months).

"Finding this place was wonderful — I've always been interested in architecture, and it has such great light," Julien says. The blue glass panels in the shared stairway of the building, which the filmmaker petitioned to preserve when it was renovated, are a striking accent for Davison's

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

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jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

otherwise minimalist lines. They also look like something Julien would have chosen to install himself.



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The interior of the apartment was designed by architect Layton Reid in 2001, but Julien commissioned Ibrahim Muasher, of interior design studio Tomato, to open up the kitchen and bathroom and refresh some of the interiors earlier this year. Currently there is a giant photograph on the wall from the set of Julien's latest project, *All That Changes You. Metamorphosis*. It portrays British Ugandan actress Sheila Atim looking down into a circular mirror that reflects the ceiling of Palazzo Te in Mantua, Italy, with its 16th-century murals by Giulio Romano.

The film is inspired by the work of science-fiction author Octavia E Butler, as well as Donna Haraway, a professor at Santa Cruz who works on human-machine relationships. "Sheila and Gwendoline Christie play goddesses who time travel through space to comment on human beings," says Julien. "There's a lot of risqué things going on in that mural, and I used the mirror as a

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

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

device for us to see the fresco. We have also used the image upside down for the poster. It has a mercurial quality."



Left: Most of the walls have been replaced with glass in the sparse, second-floor space  
Right: A row of acrylic storage units sit stacked next to the window, casting a vibrant glow

The print is a temporary fixture ahead of the film being shown at the palazzo in October. Julien says he likes to "live with work to see how it reverberates at different scales." He explored how it looked in a classic wooden frame, but partially supporting it on a plinth is an experiment inspired by the work of Italian architect Lina Bo Bardi, who was the subject of his nine-screen installation *A Marvellous Entanglement* in 2019. There's a notable lack of other art on the walls here, apart from a male nude by painter Boscoe Holder (a present from Julien's gallerist Victoria Miro); a photographic cell in a lightbox, shot on the set of Julien's 2007 film *Western Union: Small Boats*, which hangs above the bed; and a painting by Glenn Ligon, gifted by the artist in the 1990s, featuring quotes from writer James Baldwin. "I like how the typography becomes somewhat illegible, giving it a modernist echo," says Julien.

Mementos from his films are everywhere: under a coffee table are wooden antique stools that have appeared in his work, while artefacts in the African folk vernacular, including a fertility symbol he bought while at the Ouagadougou film festival in Burkina Faso, were used in the 2005 work *Fantôme Afrique*.

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

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jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508





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However, collecting and displaying the video art itself is a complicated business; in a gallery setting there are meticulous specifics on how screens are placed. "Because of all the apparatus and logistics, I now create single screen versions of work for collectors, but space and light are important for me," he says. "What I really enjoy about making installations is the ability to construct an environment where the spaces between the frames you are looking at are as important as what is in the frames of the film themselves."

However, these two cineaste professors ("I'm a regular professor, but he's technically a 'distinguished' professor," jokes Nash) have, of course, crafted their ultimate screening room. While the home is a series of see-through spaces, all the windows are fitted with electric blackout blinds. The couple have most recently been watching the Japanese Netflix thriller *Tokyo Swindlers* on their giant Bang & Olufsen Beovision Theatre TV. "I love having a big screen," says Julien. "I'm really enjoying this show. The mise-en-scène is incredible. The Japanese have a way with lighting, locations and performances."

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

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"I tend to summarise the plot, because Isaac is so lost in studying technique," laughs Nash.



Left: One of the few artworks Julien displays in the flat is a male nude by painter Boscoe Holder, gifted by his gallerist Victoria Miro

Right: Dieter Rams 606 shelving is left open in the corridor

Overall, though, it's a strikingly simple apartment: white cupboards and drawers lack visible handles, and there is subtlety in the textured clay colour of the ceiling, which also runs down one wall ("a little bit Roman," says Julien). Most of the lighting is hidden or streamlined: there are strips in the floor, panels in desks, and minimal globe-shaped Artemide Castore lamps hanging at different heights.

In a largely monochrome space, certain pieces — including a bright purple Verner Panton Cone Chair, designed in 1958 — stand out. "I used to collect vintage design before moving here," says Julien.

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

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jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



"I'd had enough of untidiness": Julien's apartment maxes on clever storage

Colour is used sparingly but effectively. A row of red and orange acrylic storage units stacked next to the window cast a vibrant glow during the day. Beside them are a bottle of Gaultier perfume with blue matelot stripes, the fluid waves of an Alvar Aalto littala vase in cranberry coloured glass, and a fluorescent pink acrylic block with a glass test tube in it — a vase for a single flower by the late designer Shiro Kuramata.

While I'm talking to Julien about the dining table that he designed himself, covered in decorative tiles that remind him of his familial roots in St Lucia, and the Dieter Rams 606 shelving that he hangs his clothing on as if at a Tokyo concept store, I look out and my gaze is captured by the residents opposite. It's impossible not to have your focus pulled by the scenes from the £16.75-a-night hostel. Julien laughs: "It can be quite a Rear Window experience here. Very Hitchcock. We found it annoying at first, but it adds to the atmosphere of living in the middle of the city." Here, everything adds to the mise-en-scène.

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