

# FRIEZE

"Isaac Julien Leads Us Into the Looking Glass"

By Sam Moore

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Main image: Isaac Julien, *Metamorphosis I (All That Changes You: Metamorphosis)* (detail), 2025, waxed inkjet print on Ilford Gold Fibre Gloss mounted on aluminium, 1.5 x 2 m. Courtesy: © the artist and Victoria Miro

It is tempting to think of a mirror as something that reflects the world back to us exactly as it is. But in Isaac Julien's new exhibition at Victoria Miro, the artist distorts this image through a film and photographs inspired by female science fiction writers, including Octavia Butler and Naomi Mitchison. At the heart of the show is its eponymous film, *All That Changes You: Metamorphosis* (all works 2025), which unfolds across five screens amid an installation of mirrored surfaces. The work addresses environmental catastrophe and speculates on possible futures, opening with philosopher Donna Haraway reading from her book *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), whose argument for a reconfigured world of relations sets the tone: 'Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet spaces.'

Two women, Lilith and Naomi (played by Sheila Atim and Gwendoline Christie, respectively), reflect on what has been and what might come next for humankind, discussing the possibility of extinction and the need to rethink how humans relate to the world. As Naomi announces in one scene: 'It was from the difference between us, not affinities and likeness, that love came.'

In this film so animated by reflections and echoes, the only way to catch a glimpse of the entirety of the image is to sit directly in front of a mirror, its surface capturing Julien's fragmented scenes. The choice to install the film in this disjointed way fractures its images and elaborate narrative, which moves through space and time, from centuries-old paintings to speculative futures. Much of the work takes place amid the 16th-century frescoes and marbles of the Palazzo Te in Mantua, a location that allows Julien to place his characters in material dialogue with history. In the inkjet print *Metamorphosis I (All That Changes You: Metamorphosis)*, for example, Lilith reclines on a mosaic floor, glancing down into what appears to be a circular pool – only it is, in fact, a vast mirror reflecting the elaborate painted ceiling above. The photographs here face an uphill climb in taking the film's ideas of transformation and change and rendering them into still images.

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Isaac Julien, *All That Changes You: Metamorphosis*, 2025, installation view. Courtesy: © the artist and Victoria Miro



Isaac Julien, *After Eros (All That Changes You: Metamorphosis)*, 2025, waxed inkjet print on Ilford Gold Fibre Gloss mounted on aluminium, 2.4 × 1.8 m. Courtesy: © the artist and Victoria Miro

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*All That Changes You* frequently returns to images of forests – verdant and untouched or engulfed in flames – which serve as a shorthand for the planet’s fragility. In one striking moment, a burning forest occupies progressively more screens until only one offers sanctuary from the oncoming disaster; Lilith emerges from the shadows of a vast Brutalist corridor, the world ablaze around her. Julien’s foregrounding of ecological concerns turns the film into a kind of ticking clock. In another instance, a countdown begins for the launch of a spaceship; with each number, one of the screens cuts to black, as if each were a door slamming on a harmonious future.



Isaac Julien, *All That Changes You: Metamorphosis*, 2025, installation view. Courtesy: © the artist and Victoria Miro

The film is at its most impactful, however, when it relies on visual imagery or conjures more explicitly speculative moments, the heavy use of reflection suggesting that its characters exist outside linear time. Transformation – and, importantly, a kind of cohabiting with the nonhuman world – is, Julien seems to suggest, the only way to remain on earth. Towards the close of the film, the camera lingers on a moss-covered statue, a ladybird flitting across its frozen face as it returns to nature. What is, what was and what might be seem captured in this single moment, suspended within an eternal rhythm. With each repetition of the film, the cycle returns, daring us to think differently about how we arrived here and what we might become.

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