

# BROOKLYN RAIL

"Isaac Julien: All That Changes You. Metamorphosis"

By Sabo Kpade

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Installation view: *Isaac Julien: All That Changes You. Metamorphosis*, Victoria Miro, London, 2026. © Isaac Julien. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro.

*All That Changes You. Metamorphosis*—Isaac Julien’s UK premiere at Victoria Miro—consists of a five-screen installation—compressed from a larger configuration at Palazzo Te—that runs twenty-three minutes and thirty-seven seconds in 4K with 5.1 surround sound, accompanied by seven photographic works in the ground floor gallery. Upstairs, five double-sided screens form a near-complete circle, leaving a deliberate gap where the ring might have closed. Suspended from ceiling supports like stalactites, they hover within mirrored walls that run from near the ceiling to the floor. A raised stage occupies the center, its sides mirrored, its grey rug blending into the surrounding carpet. As the action unfolds on screen, there is the choreography Julien designs, and then there is what the mirrored environment permits: reflections doubling and redoubling, images multiplying beyond the frame’s edge. It becomes less a viewing space than a system—an ecology of screens. A double ekphrasis runs through the film: played by Sheila Atim, the character Lilit studies mythological frescoes (horned figures, hybrid bodies) from the Palazzo Te, and we watch her watching. The frescoes are rendered through a drone-assisted crash zoom that brings the viewer impossibly close to the painted surface.

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Two controlling visual devices organize the installation—and it takes a moment to identify them. The first is the spiral staircase of London’s Cosmic House, shot from below so it reads as concentric circles coiling inward. The second is the drone: visible within the film itself, hovering, its blinking light recalling spacecraft telemetry. Its inclusion functions almost as a fourth-wall break—the recording apparatus folded into the spectacle, bringing the frescoes into orbit with contemporary technology. The drone sequence is pivotal. The camera moves slowly inward toward the blinking device, then withdraws to reveal mirror, fresco, and two actors standing beside the reflective surface, hands extended toward it. When fully drawn back, both actors appear next to the surface on separate screens. This spiraling motion briefly gathers sound, image, and reflection into a single center of gravity before releasing them outward once more. Extended into the gallery, the logic holds. The semicircular arrangement of screens, mirrored walls, and the viewer’s own turning body repeat the film’s circular structure.



Isaac Julien, *Metamorphosis I (All That Changes You. Metamorphosis)*, 2025. Inkjet Print on Ilford Gold Fibre Gloss mounted on aluminium. 59 x 78 3/4 inches. © Isaac Julien. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro.

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Sheila Atim's character draws on Octavia E. Butler's speculative fiction, particularly *Parable of the Sower* and *Dawn*. In *Parable*, Lauren Olamina possesses hyperempathy—an involuntary capacity to feel the pain of others—a heightened sensitivity that becomes both burden and resource amid climate collapse. In *Dawn*, Lilith Iyapo survives planetary catastrophe only to confront coercive hybridity. Butler imagines survival not as purity but as transformation under pressure. Atim's presence carries both tenor—empathy as exposure and hybridity as necessity. The second lead character, Naomi, is played by Gwendoline Christie and draws on Naomi Mitchison's *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* (1962), invoking relationality rather than mastery. Feminist scholar Donna Haraway appears in person in a talking-head interview, a conventional anchoring device that stabilizes what the film elsewhere works hard to unsettle. It is not incidental that a Black woman, Atim, is used to interpret Butler's futurism and to illuminate frescoes that stand among the summits of Western art. I cannot decide why two protagonists are necessary—one white and middle-aged, the other Black and younger. Whether the pairing equalizes or leaves the racial dynamic unresolved, the question remains suspended.

The chorus of complaints and compliments about Julien's work often center on its beauty. Some have praised its lyricism while others have criticized it for being over-beautiful. What is not scrutinized are the primary moves Julien makes, and why they are perceived as beauty in the first place. In one sequence, Atim stands in a luminescent dress glowing blue and turquoise. On an adjacent screen, bioluminescent tentacles radiate similar colors. Depending on where you sit, you can see these two images at once. Yes, it appears beautiful. But said beauty has come about through structural harmony rather than the qualities of what is being shown. In another sequence, Atim enters a cream-colored edifice, her silver garment forming wing-like folds. On the adjacent screen, frescoed bodies in flowing robes echo those same shapes and tones. Long flowing robes, smooth skin, cloud-like forms: visual symmetries that extend the logic of the frescos into the film itself. Harmony precedes beauty; beauty is the after-effect. Here Julien echoes the Mannerism of the frescos that appear in his film—through the creation of that *terribilità*, or awe in the beholder, that was so commonly attributed to Michelangelo's work. *Terribilità* is not the destination but the medium through which the work's arguments reach the viewer. When people refer to beauty, what they are responding to is the harmonizing of incongruent elements—what the curator Lorenzo Giusti calls "improbable kinship." That is what grips one's attention.

Julien does not create spectacle for its own sake, nor harmony as a kind of prettiness. He creates a system that proliferates, disperses, and destabilizes, and then, momentarily, returns to center. In this installation, the drone and spiral sequence is the point at which the centrifugal and centripetal forces align, and the entire installation coheres. That coherence is not permanent. It gathers and releases. What the work argues is that incongruent elements can be held in relation without collapse. Ecology, here, is not metaphor but method: multiplicity discernible as meaning rather than chaos.

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