

ARTnews

Isaac Julien: "The 100 Best Artworks About America"

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Isaac Julien, *Lessons of the Hour*, 2019

Photo : Artwork copyright © Isaac Julien, courtesy Jessica Silverman Gallery. Photo: Henrik Kam.

What, exactly, defines America? It's a question that's been asked for more than two centuries, and it's one not likely to be conclusively answered anytime soon. But, with the 250th anniversary of the nation's founding fast approaching, we took the occasion to hash out a response to that query, using art as a guide.

Together, the editors of *ARTnews* and *Art in America* have constructed a list of the 100 best artworks about America. This is not a list of the best artworks *by* Americans, to be clear. **(More here on why we didn't go that route.)** Instead, it's a list of the best artworks responding to American identity and all the issues that attend it.

Spanning the years preceding the founding of the United States in 1776 to our tense present, this list features paintings, sculptures, prints, drawings, videos, films, and even a digital artwork that contend with a spread of issues. These works bear witness to centuries of American history and change, and they point the way forward for artists in the years to come.

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Below, a look at the 100 greatest works about America, as selected by the editors of ARTnews and *Art in America*.

"Poets, prophets, and reformers are all picture-makers—and this ability is the secret of their power and of their achievements," Frederick Douglass said in 1861, during a period when he was the most photographed person in the US. In *Lessons of the Hour*, Isaac Julien pays homage to Douglass's canny ability to circulate his own image by bombarding viewers with a cascade of moving pictures set across 10 screens, some of which feature reenactments of the abolitionist giving his famed lectures. This elegant video installation shows that photography was integral in showing the humanity of Black people in the years before, during, and after the Civil War via a flood of images, just as Douglass so desired. But the work also tests its own thesis with its ending, in which Julien re-presents surveillance footage of Black Lives Matter protests held in 2015 following the police killing of Freddie Gray, suggesting that such visibility has its downside, too. —A.G.

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