Isaac Julien on the changing nature of creative wor

June 23, 2017 - Isaac Julien is a British installation artist and filmmaker. Though he's been creating and showing work since the early ’80s, Julien's breakthrough came with the release of his 1989 film, *Looking for Langston*. The film combines authentic archival newsreel footage of Harlem in the 1920s with scripted scenes to produce a non-linear impressionistic storyline celebrating black gay identity and desire during the artistic and cultural period known as the Harlem Renaissance in New York. Though he is happy about the life that the film continues to have out in the world, Julien doesn't spent much time worrying about the lasting legacy of his work: "I couldn’t care less about what people think, to be honest. As long as I've made my statement, people can think whatever they like. My work is to make my art. That's it."

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2950 words.

Tags: Art, Identity, Inspiration, Multi-tasking, Process, Production.

You create work in a variety of different formats. Do you tend to work out of a studio space? How does the process usually work for you when you’re trying to conceptualize something new?

Lately I’ve been trying to work on a couple of new projects and, in a way, your studio is ordinarily designed into *how* to make your projects. At the moment I’d say that my studio might be designed to help me make exhibitions of existing work and I’m trying to get the studio to come back to the space of helping me make actual projects. I’m someone who went to a fairly traditional art school. Although I’ve made films that have been shown in Cannes and in film festivals all around the world, when I’m making a project now, I’m usually trying to get back to the early ways that I used to make work, which is quite organic and, in some ways, simple. It’s always inter-disciplinary in the sense that I’m working and collaborating with lots of different other people to make things. Your studio should reflect the way you work.

The whole thing about my film work is that it very much incorporates standard film production, but within that I’ve created room for flexibility that you wouldn’t ordinarily get when you are making a more traditional film. The work appropriates some of the standard means of production—i.e. you have a photographer, you have an editor, you have a production designer, you have a costume designer—and all of these different things come into concert when you’re shooting a work. When it comes to shooting things, the idea is to try to let go of some of the kind of scriptures which govern the way that you ordinarily make work, so it’s not always known exactly what you’re going to shoot. You allow the space for improvisation. Then the whole production side which in a way has a similar attitude, where the work can move an editor or, say, a sound designer, in ways that become a laboratory for experimentation in terms of the way you might think about making images in telling a story, et cetera.

Isaac Julien, *After George Platt Lynes*, (Looking For Langston Vintage Series), 1989/2017, Kodak Premier print, Diasec mounted on aluminum, 180 x 260cm, Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London © Isaac Julien.

Filmmakers are always thinking about the frame—the rectangular frame of a film screen—but your work tends to defy that kind of viewing. Pieces like *Ten Thousand Waves*, where you’re looking at things on multiple screens from multiple views in the context of a gallery space, is a much different kind of beast.

Well, yeah because you’re kind of having to think about the way that the work is going to be exhibited and that creates a need for really thinking about how you’re going to shoot something and then how the images are going to coexist in relationship to one another and how they’re going to be viewed. Ordinarily the challenge if you’re making a film is about the narration, and how the story is distinctly communicated, but I think the challenge of making installation work, things like *Ten Thousand Waves*, is that you’re also thinking about how the work is going to be exhibited. So you’re having to think about those things in tandem with the actual work itself. That becomes part of the language of the work. The poetics of photography and the poetics of narration are worked out in tandem and don’t get divorced. Some people only think about how the work is going to be exhibited at the end of the process, but I’m usually thinking about those things before the actual filming and photography starts.

You've been making work for nearly three decades now. It's kind of incredible how much technology has evolved since then. The possibilities for how you can show things—and the ways in which the work can be viewed—are increasingly limitless.

It is. I would say that technology was really kind of static until the mid '90s and then there was a kind of revolution in terms of what you could do, what was possible. It really changed the way we were thinking about editing and montage. That is part of the excitement in terms of making multiple screen work for today. It gave another set of possibilities compared to the kind of analog approaches to editing and making work we had when I started. I have to say that I'm very grateful that I had that kind of analog training, i.e. working with 16mm film, learning how to shoot on film, editing work myself and sound editing my own work, because all of that analog training information very much structures the work that I do today. In some ways your creative process evolves, in some ways it doesn't.

I would say those practices became crystallized in a work like *Ten Thousand Waves* and in *Playtime*—they kind of, in a way, come to their high point in terms of the and the fact that this work was shot on 4K. In terms of technology, I'm less impressed by the idea that there's a new camera coming out and it's going to be 5K, or that we're going to be able to shoot 8K soon. I think the kind of drive relating to innovation that existed when I was younger compared to how that exists now starts to be questionable. It's not really perfecting the image *that* much. Is it *really* better to be able to see more of somebody's skin in high resolution? Is it really a better image? I think there's a limit. The reason some of that work looks so good to us now is because it's not perfect. Access to all the best technology in the world doesn't really matter if the work itself isn't good. The latest technology won't make your ideas better.

Isaac Julien, *To A Mother's Song* (Looking For Langston Vintage Series), 1989/2017, Ilford classic silver gelatin fine art paper, mounted on aluminum and framed, 58.1 x 74.5cm, Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London © Isaac Julien.

It's impossible to predict how creative work is going to be received or what kind of life it might have when you are making it, but are you surprised by the long life—and profound influence—that *Looking For Langston* continues to have? Even with such a such a diverse and celebrated body of work, how does it feel when people so often come back to that one in particular?

Looking for Langston has indeed had a very long life. It's reaching a point of where it's been shown for almost 30 years, and I would say that my relationship to that work, as it exists now, is coming from an archival impulse. I would say that the archival impulse isn't something new to that project because *Langston* came into existence in connection to those very questions of an archival impulse, and all of that was connected to really foregrounding the art movement that was called the Harlem Renaissance, which was a black art modernist movement. I myself had never heard of it when I was young and I'd never been taught about it when I was art school.

As a young artist, I was in search of black modernism as well as in search for a black queer identity. In a way, I found it in the ambiguous nature that had been constructed biographically on Langston Hughes. You can almost say that his sexual identity became a kind of alibi, or a reason for me to explore these complex nuances of black cultural identity which are connected to questions around what I saw in the middle of this black revolutionary, romantic movement which was called the Harlem Renaissance.

The film is like a call and response to black America and the way that I was viewing that culture from this black British point of view, and very much a homage to the poets and writers of that black arts movement. *Looking for Langston* was about asking how could I make a work that could honor that movement—How can I photograph it? How can we give an image to something like black modernism and romanticism?—before then those things were essentially invisible. Today the work that I do around that film, the additional screenings and presentations, is perhaps to keep some of those conversations moving.

Isaac Julien, *Le Salon*, (Looking For Langston Vintage Series), 1989/2017, Ilford classic silver gelatin fine art paper, mounted on aluminum and framed, 58.1 x 74.5cm, Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London © Isaac Julien.

It's interesting to think about the sort of conversations that piece started, and what it's like to consider that piece now in the context of 2017. Sometimes artists will tell me that when they revisit something they made 20 years ago they often feel as if it could have been made by a different person. When you look at *Looking for Langston*, do you feel like you a wildly different perspective on that material now than you did when you made it?

Not necessarily. If anything I want to get back to making work like *Looking for Langston*. I need to always be thinking about the politics of things as they relate to art and black identity and what that signifies. Most artists might look at a work from 30 years ago and think about how they might have done it differently, but when I look at *Looking for Langston* now there's really nothing in it that I would ever change. It's kind of a perfect work in that it was made in quite an uncompromising manner at the time and it really retains its personality. Given the current discourses around race and censorship and certainly something like the Black Lives Matter movement, the film still feels really vital. The conversation around these ideas changes over time, but these are issues that don't ever go away. It's an examination that's ongoing.

When you make a work that resonates so strongly with people—and that makes such a prescient statement about race and sexuality and identity—does that work become like a lens through which all of your other work inevitably gets viewed?

I couldn't care less about what people think, to be honest. As long as I've made my statement, people can think whatever they like. My work is to make my art. That's it. How people choose to interpret the work is really their own business. I've made work over the years that deals with so many different points of view and the experiences of so many different kinds of people in different places, so to assume that all of my work is specifically going to be about black identity would be wrong. Still, people can take from the work whatever they like. I think if you spend too much time thinking about the various ways in which it might be interpreted while you are in the process of actually making it, you're likely to be in trouble.

Looking for Langston is a work about black gay identity. On one level, so what? It's not really better because it was about black gay identity. It can only be of interest if it's a really well-made work. What is important are the levels of excellence that you want to pursue in the making of your art, how you want it to be communicated and the sense of rigor and aesthetic precision or political content that you want it to be informed with, and how its made. In my mind these are the things that are important to talk about in a work. How they signify the content of it is neither here nor there, or the content is *everything* about the work. Identity-based questions can be tiresome if posed in a tiresome manner. If posed an interesting manner, then they can be really quite fascinating. I take responsibility of the subject matter of my work, 100%, and how it gets discussed and taken up is not really something you can control… but if it can be an interesting conversation, that's great.

Isaac Julien, *Pas de Deux No.2*, (Looking For Langston Vintage Series), 1989/2016, Kodak Premier print, Diasec mounted on aluminum, 180 x 260cm, Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London © Isaac Julien.

For a lot of successful working artists, time becomes the most valuable currency. When you are constantly traveling and there are all of these demands put on you, does carving out time and space to focus on making new work become increasingly difficult?

Oh yes. I think there is this kind of genie in the bottle scenario when it comes to creating the space for making your work. Some people are very strict about that stuff. I know people what literally run away and seclude themselves in order to get things done. Who can blame them? That could be the smartest move you could make. In relationship to my work, it is always a dialogue involving many people, so I think in a way I perhaps thrive on the idea of that human encounter in making art. At the end of the day, all of the arts have their different demands and their different needs and inevitably it always demands a certain concentration. At some point, you almost always need to lock yourself away and throw the key away.

I think it also all depends on how you make work. One of the reasons I kind of gave up being a painter a really long time ago—I think when I was around 20—was because I just knew that I was going to get bored by always being in a studio. It's just not my idea of fun. For some people that works perfectly and I think that's fantastic, but I'd be bored in a second if I wasn't talking to somebody about something. Obviously there are all kinds of different ways of working. I worked as part of a collective when I was younger and working on my projects and perhaps I've gotten into a bad habit of repeating that. I like having lots of conversations and bouncing about a lot of ideas, but at some point you always have to focus. That process of solitary focus probably isn't going to be too long for me. I need to have all the conversations to regurgitate and to develop the different concepts which I'm going to need to develop my work. I think the idea of isolationism would be a kind of red herring, especially for someone like me, or for any filmmaker for that matter. Most of the time you aren't really in it alone.

Isaac Julien - "I Dream a World" *Looking for Langston* is currently on view at London's Victoria Miro Gallery through July 29, 2017.

Isaac Julien recommends:

There are certain films that I love seeing again and again, that always give me a thrill. I think Jacques Tati's *Playtime* is a masterful work. One of my last multiple screen installations is called *Playtime*, so that's a direct homage to him. Otherwise, I've been looking at a lot books of photography lately, particularly people likeGeorge Platt Lynes and their visual relationship to someone like Langston Hughes. It has been a kind of pure enjoyment to go back to those early works and to think about this modernist moment in photography, and how that reverberates into the present.

Of course there is a certain kind of nostalgia right now, and rightly so, for James Baldwin. It seems a good time to go back and examine his work and his life in a fuller manner. I really admired the recent film about him, *I am Not Your Negro*, but I thought was really odd that the whole sexual identity of Baldwin had to be subsumed aegis under the aegis of the question of civil rights as it were, which of course Baldwin was all for, but at the heart of the film we never understand the sexuality of Baldwin. Nor has it been given any kind of air in the montage through his archives in that film. Why is that? Why is it that you can have a film like *I am Not Your Negro* on the one end, and then you can have *Moonlight* seemingly at the other end of that discussion. I find that quite extraordinary.

I think often think of Baldwin and how he resonates today. I'm thinking about my friends who are artists. Why the hell do they keep reading Baldwin? Why do they keep quoting Baldwin in their work? Why is that? Then I realized that actually they're still in Baldwin's America, that's why. It wasn't just the question of race it's also to do with the antagonism that he experienced as a gay man, a black gay artist in his community at the time. I think these are questions which have not gone away. As much as I love *I am Not Your Negro*, I think with Baldwin it would be great if the other aspects of his life could be given the same kind of consideration. Now seems as good a time as any to dive back into his body of work.

Name
Isaac Julien

Vocation
Artist

Fact

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Graeme Robertson