

Artist Profile – Isaac Julien

b. 1960 London, England; lives and works in London, England

Julien attended Saint Martin's School of Art where he studied painting and fine art film and received his BA in film. Before his graduation in 1985, Julien co-founded the Sankofa Film and Video Collective in 1983 as a response to the social unrest in Britain, it was dedicated to developing independent black film culture. In 1989, Julien completed his postdoctoral studies at Les entrepreneurs de l'audiovisuel européen in Brussels. After his graduation, in 1991, Julien was a founding member of Normal Films.

Julien became known in the art world after creating a drama-documentary film in 1989 that explored Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance. In 2003, Julien won the Grand Jury Prize at the Kunstfilm Biennale in Cologne and in 2017 was appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire for his services to the arts. Currently, Julien teaches digital art at UC Santa Cruz (he previously taught at the Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design)

One of Julien's goals is to break down barriers that exist between different artistic disciplines to construct a powerful visual narrative. He explores film, dance, photography, music, theater, painting, and sculpture to create his works and is focused on the experience of black and gay identities. Along with the themes of black and gay identities, Julien brings up issues of class, sexuality, and cultural history and displacement. Julien uses multiple screens of video art in his installations that create dialogs between the various components present along with showing different mediums presenting the same idea. His installations usually include his videos and photographs together, but he has also been known to create sculptural pieces.

Fantôme Afrique (1) is a video installation Julien created that discusses moments in African history and include footage from early colonial expeditions. He makes architectural references, shows the arid landscapes of rural Burkina Faso, and uses dancers and actors to show the encounters between local and global cultures. This video installation is comprised of multiple screens that each flash back and forth, at different times, between the past and present films to compare the history of Africa to the present day.

"I Dream a World" Looking for Langston (2) is a photo series Julien completed that was accompanied by a film and documented the making of this film as well as exploring 1920s Harlem. Through these photos Julien was looking into African American history as well as the history of queer cultures. The film was created at the height of the AIDS crisis and many of the actors died after filming, these photographs are a way for Julien to memorialize the people who were a part of his film. The images delve into a deep part of contested history and explore the beauty of the subjects while also discussing the issues Julien wanted to address.



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