

Isaac Julien: Playtime

The **Hedge Fund Manager** vignette explores the dynamic between three executives with differing levels of power. The Hedge Fund Manager (Colin Salmon) stands in an empty space in London’s central business district at night playing the trumpet—traditionally the “lead” instrument in a jazz ensemble and a symbol of his authority. Endless rows of windows in adjacent office buildings, still lit and full of people toiling away, represent the masses he guides with his melody. As the Hedge Fund Manager speaks to his subordinate pompously about his employees being “golden eggs” that have an “almost occult ability to make money,” he represents those who can continue to benefit when financial speculation leads to dramatic swings in the market.

Playtime’s second story takes the spectator from London to Reykjavik, Iceland, where the **Artist** (Ingvar Eggert Sigurðsson) is shown suffering through a depression brought on by his financial ruin and the subsequent loss of his spouse and home. In a monologue that draws on harrowing stories told following the 2008 financial crisis, he speaks angrily of the process of acquiring a high-risk mortgage loan to finance his purchase of a dream house in the industrial style he coveted as a child. Caught in the economic collapse as a creative and consumer, he is left navigating the labyrinth of his grief.

In the slyly humorous third vignette, the **Art Dealer** (James Franco) struts around a white-cube gallery space that features prohibitively expensive paintings on its walls. He recites a monologue that begins, “For today’s wealthy investor, the acquiring and holding of collectibles is akin to building a store of treasure.” The Art Dealer identifies the internet as a major catalyst for the exponential growth of the art market, as it allows for greater competition among wealthy bidders around the globe, quickly driving up prices into the tens of millions. Whereas the crash of the real estate market resulted in the Artist’s loss of his livelihood, the Art Dealer revels in the tumult, which caused investors to set their sights on the art world.

The penultimate chapter takes place in a bustling, colorful office, where the **Reporter** (Maggie Cheung) interviews real-life celebrity auctioneer Simon de Pury about his intimate insight into the workings of the art market. The **Auctioneer** reveals the enormous responsibility and pressure auction professionals feel to perform for—to “entertain”—art spectators in a way that will maximize sales. He also confidently articulates the pattern whereby market crashes often precede—if not directly

instigate—market spikes, explaining that although the 2008 financial crisis briefly had a negative impact on art sales, the market quickly sprang back stronger than ever.

Playtime's final vignette opens on an expansive desert where the **House Worker** (Mercedes Cabral), a Filipina woman dressed in a modest black-and-white uniform, walks alone. Facing away from the camera, she takes deliberate steps in a single, ominous direction. She stops and looks out into the dunes just before the story cuts to a busy night in downtown Dubai, where she tears up recounting her experience of migrating to the Middle East as a domestic worker in order to support her young children in the Philippines. Shots of the trading floor of an Arab stock market, filled with men in full-length robes, are intercut with images of the House Worker's commute on an elevated train. She eventually arrives at a soulless penthouse tastefully decorated with modern and contemporary art on every wall, evidence of her employer's wealth.