



Isaac Julien: Playtime

May 5 – August 11, 2019

LACMA



Catherine Opie, *Isaac*, 2017; pigment print, 33 × 25 in. (83.8 × 63.5 cm); © Catherine Opie, courtesy of Regen Projects, Los Angeles

Isaac Julien

Isaac Julien CBE RA (United Kingdom, b. 1960) is an internationally acclaimed artist and filmmaker known for his technically complex, politically charged, and visually arresting installations. Born and raised in London's East End to parents from the Caribbean island-nation of St. Lucia, he co-founded Sankofa Film and Video Collective, a group committed to liberating the aesthetics of black independent film, in 1983, and received his Bachelor of Arts in Film from London's Central Saint Martins School of Art in 1984. In 1989 he completed a postdoctoral degree at Les Entrepreneurs de l'Audio-visuel Européen in Brussels and premiered his award-winning art documentary *Looking for Langston* (1989), a poetic exploration of

Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance, which gained him a cult following and international recognition as a pioneer in queer black cinema. His subsequent films, including *Young Soul Rebels* (1991), *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Mask* (1996), *BaadAsssss Cinema* (2002), and *Derek* (2008), integrate aspects of dance, theater, history, painting, and sculpture while also invoking Hollywood and blaxploitation films.

More recently, Julien has explored wider globalized perspectives in moving-image installations with works such as *Stones Against Diamonds* (2015), produced in the remote glacial caves of the Icelandic tundra, and *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010), shot in Shanghai with an entirely Chinese cast and crew. *Ten Thousand Waves* was exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 2013, accompanied by *Riot*, a publication surveying Julien's life and work. Julien featured prominently at the 56th and 57th Venice Biennales, directing a major durational performance, *Das Kapital Oratorio*, in 2015, and participating in the inaugural Diaspora Pavilion in 2017.

Julien's work is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Hirschhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Kramlich Collection, San Francisco; Tate, London; Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris; and Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, Cape Town. He has held multiple academic positions, including Chair of Global Art at University of the Arts London (2014–16) and Professor of Media Art at Staatliche Hochschule für Gestaltung Karlsruhe, Germany (2008–16). Among his numerous honors, Julien was awarded the title Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire in 2017, was named Royal Academician in 2018, and currently holds the title of Distinguished Professor of the Arts at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

The Isaac Julien Lab

Isaac Julien is the newly appointed Distinguished Professor of the Arts at the University of California Santa Cruz and head of the new Isaac Julien Lab with Arts Professor Mark Nash, an established critic and curator and Julien's longtime partner and collaborator.

Designed as a counterpart to Julien's London studio, the Isaac Julien Lab invites students from across disciplines to conceptualize, create, and curate visual and sonic languages. Students spend time in both locations, assisting Julien and Nash with project research, producing moving-image and photographic works, and experimenting with archive sampling, remixing, and reproduction.

Isaac Julien, *Playtime*, 2013; double-projection, edge-blended, single-screen ultra-high definition video installation with 5.1 surround sound; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Sheridan Brown (M.2014.222.1–.4)

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“Since the primitive accumulator of the Middle Ages, the sign of capital has been speed, fluidity, infinite conversion, eternal circulation, and the benefits derived from that flow.” —Amanda de la Garza

In the moving-image installation *Playtime* (2013), British artist and filmmaker Isaac Julien explores the complex subject of capital. A reconsideration of Jacques Tati’s 1967 film of the same name, *Playtime* unfolds across three metropolises—London, Reykjavik, and Dubai—that represent cities and populations extensively reshaped by the 2008 global financial crisis. Julien interrogates the effects of economic volatility on diverse individuals by weaving together the lives of six archetypal characters: the Hedge Fund Manager, the Artist, the Art Dealer, the Auctioneer, the Reporter, and the House Worker. Each narrative illustrates the disparate, dramatic ways that communities and people are affected by the fluctuations of financial markets, whether they are involved in them at a macro or micro level.

In the first vignette, 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. Rows of windows in adjacent buildings, still lit and full of people toiling away, represent the masses he guides with his melody. As the Hedge Fund Manager pompously calls his employees “golden eggs” that have an “almost occult ability to make money,” he represents those who can continue to benefit when financial specula-

tion 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. Drawing on the harrowing stories told following the 2008 financial crisis, he speaks angrily of the process of acquiring a high-risk mortgage to finance his purchase of a dream house. Caught in the economic collapse as a creative and a 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. He identifies the internet as a major catalyst for the exponential growth of the art market, explaining that 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 that 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. She looks out into the dunes and tearfully recounts how she migrated to the Middle East to do domestic work in order to support her young children in the Philippines. The story then cuts to a busy night in downtown Dubai. Shots of a stock market trading room floor filled with men in full-length thobes are intercut with images of the House Worker's commute on an elevated train. She arrives at a soulless penthouse tastefully decorated with modern and contemporary art on every wall, evidence of her employer's wealth.

Conceived in dialogue with two other works by Julien—*Kapital* (2013) and *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010)—*Playtime* offers a late-capitalist revision of Karl Marx's identity-neutral definition of the proletariat. The occupation, aesthetic, dress, speech, and narrative of each character illustrate issues of migration, race, class, and gender, as well as the cardinal question of how such details affect individuals' lives. As curator and art historian Amanda de la Garza writes in

the catalogue for an exhibition of *Playtime* at the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, "In this amalgam of characters and situations, the rhythm is set by voracity, desire and defeat, compounded optimism, the excitement produced by accumulation, speed and risk in capitalism—the animal spirit of which Marx speaks." Furthermore, the film's emphasis on performativity—the dramatic gestures of the Hedge Fund Manager playing the trumpet in a white void; the Art Dealer, with arms widespread, yelling, "It's a game!"; the Artist alternating between expressions of rage and sadness—speaks to a "social choreography" that de la Garza attributes to "the effects [not only] of advanced capitalism... but [also] of its ideological form."

Julien revisits several motifs throughout the film: the verticality of power in urban settings versus the horizontality of impotence in less developed landscapes; the invisibility of capital; the art object as a substantiation of capital; and the questionable morality of wealth. *Playtime's* varied settings, along with the diverse ethnicities and nationalities of the characters, facilitate commentary on the geopolitics of the global economy. Color also serves as a cinematographic device to anchor the composition of

each character's milieu. As they sit on a red sofa that recalls the color of the Chinese flag, the Reporter asks the Auctioneer about his affinity for superstition. "You know, in China we are very superstitious, too," she adds. This allusion to the capricious and often arbitrary reality of financial speculation is visually underscored in *Playtime's* immersive installation, as the red in the scene sharply contrasts with the royal blue of the carpet and walls that surround the viewer. By spatializing the dialectical relationship of red and blue, Julien hints at the tensions between communism and capitalism, or East and West.

Julien achieved *Playtime's* immersive quality by shooting in high resolution on a 4k digital camera. The work is presented here in a wide-screen format achieved by using an edge-blend technique to combine two 16 × 9 screens into a single 3 × 1 Cinerama-type screen. The soundtrack is achieved using 5.1 surround sound. LACMA's presentation of *Playtime* is the work's Southern California debut and exemplifies the museum's engagement with topics such as geopolitics, identity, class, and migration, as well as its mission to contextualize contemporary art and film from the museum's permanent collection, of which *Playtime* is a part.

