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Martina Kudláček, "Isaac Julien," **Bomb**, Fall 2007, Number 101, pp. 72-79

INTERVIEWS BETWEEN ARTISTS, WRITERS, MUSICIANS, DIRECTORS, AND FILMMAKERS

BOMB

IMMIGRATION AND
THE COLONIAL EXPERIENCE

**JUNOT DÍAZ
& EDWIGE DANTICAT**

ISAAC JULIEN'S
Small Boats

**DAVID MALOUF
& COLM TÓIBÍN**

WINTER MILLER
In Darfur

**BIG DANCE THEATER
& JOHN HASKELL**
The Other Here

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ISAAC JULIEN

by MARTINA KUDLÁČEK

Isaac Julien and I first got in touch by email in the spring, when he was preparing to go on location in Sicily with his film crew. By the time we did the interview, in the summer, he had returned to London to edit the footage. We spoke at the end of a long working day for Julien—at 11 PM his time, 6 PM in New York, where I was—and during our long phone conversation he relaxed into our “meeting.” I was aware that we passed midnight in London as I sat in the glowing sunny light of the evening in New York.

*The film Julien was shooting in Sicily is *Small Boats*, a reflection on migration and the hope for a better life. It is the third film in a trilogy about journeying across continents and cultures that includes *True North*, a tale set against a spectacular background of ice and snow, based on the story of the explorer Matthew Henson, believed to be the first person to reach the North Pole in 1909; and *Fantôme Afrique*, which weaves cinematic and architectural elements through the rich urban environment of Ouagadougou and*

*the arid spaces of rural Burkina Faso. All three films are included in a multimedia staged work titled *Cast No Shadow*, in which performers and dancers (choreographed by Russell Maliphant) will interact with the projections. The world premiere of *Cast No Shadow* will take place in October at Sadler's Wells in London, and it will travel to the US as part of PERFORMA 07 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. *Small Boats* will also be on view in installation form at Metro Pictures Gallery in New York this fall.*



MARTINA KUDLÁČEK

I have the diary notes you made during the *Small Boats* shoot, as well as a few still photographs from the set. There is one mesmerizing image of a woman in the ballroom in the magnificent Palazzo Gangi: your main character, Adriana, played by the actress Vanessa Myrie. You have worked with Vanessa for years: She's the protagonist in all three films in the *Cast No Shadow* trilogy, and she was in *Baltimore*.

ISAAC JULIEN

I'm very interested in the idea of working with characters as models, characters taken from life. Robert Bresson, the French filmmaker and writer, spoke about the idea of using non-actors, and I've been utilizing Vanessa as a character who *builds*

over the series of films. When we see *Cast No Shadow* at BAM this fall, it will be quite interesting to see how that character, being in all three films, will get read. I'm attracted to the idea of a certain intertextuality, the way in which a character from one film gets quoted into another.

MK

She's almost transcending space; she's the key, this model, in the Bressonian sense of the word, who goes from one filmic space to another.

IJ

That's right, and when it comes to the theatrical version of *Cast No Shadow*, she'll actually be on the stage as well. She will break through the fourth wall, escaping the boundaries of the filmic space to enter an actual performance space. That idea was developed out of a conversation in the jour-



UNTITLED FROM THE SMALL BOATS SERIES, 2007.
LIGHTBOX PHOTOGRAPH, 47 x 96".
ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, METRO PICTURES,
NEW YORK, AND VICTORIA MIRO, LONDON.

nal *October* between Silvia Kolbowski and Manthia Diawara, who talked about the ways in which characters get quoted from one film to another. Diawara was talking about characters embodying a certain trans-textual quality: "the movement of cultural styles from character to character in film: hybridity, multiple subject positions. As opposed to this, immanence is the trapping of a cultural role in a character." I was very interested in appropriating that quality that stars might bring from one movie into another, and seeing how that works in an art space. It was an experiment, if you like. Another filmmaker, Derek Jarman, has worked with Tilda Swinton across several films in this sense. In fact I am working with Tilda Swinton on a film about

Derek Jarman, a strange kind of biopic about his life. So the influence of both Jarman and Bresson has had a clear impact on my thinking about performance. That's why I dislike the fact that the Vanessa Myrie character has been cited as just my muse. She's a character that embodies many signs. For instance, in *Small Boats* her character is Adriana, whose name comes from the mythical character (the Adriatic Sea is named after her), but she is also a stand-in for a particular survivor of what is referred to as the "Sicilian holocaust," a woman we interviewed while researching the piece. She was one of the sole survivors of a boat tragedy in which more than 90 people were lost to the sea trying to get into Sicily from Libya. I see Vanessa's



character as an amalgam of sorts, in a cinematic sense. There is an indexical aspect to her character for me. She is of course very beautiful in a “queer” sense. Perhaps a more “natural” or rougher-looking character might better suit some folks. But then they might be looking for a more documentary approach to the subject, and they should be looking at a TV program for that sort of realism. But in terms of realism, there are some very tough things happening along the Mediterranean coast that have instigated the making of *Small Boats*. Dead bodies washing up on the coast, interrupting holiday suntanning on the beach . . . It’s the clash of the two activities that forms a disturbing geography of this space. Historically, though, the Mediterranean is a space of transition between Europe and Africa.

MK I didn’t want to say *muse*, but you said it.

I J I try to circumnavigate that reading because it trivializes the ways in which I might be working with her in the trilogy. A muse is, to my mind, a vehicle; a certain expediency would be in use, or fascination or obsession, or something not terribly *serious*. But there’s something quite serious about Vanessa’s usage in the trilogy. She is always a sort of witness. She’s “miming” a character like Matthew Henson from *True North*, but in modern day; or she is a cyborg in *Baltimore*; or she is a sort of Walter Benjamin-like character, an angel of history, in *Fantôme Afrique*. There is this transcendental aspect that I’m interested in exploring in relation to her characters. Trespassing from one location or film into another, she represents the cosmopolitan subject transversing different locations like a nomad. I have spoken elsewhere about how we might think of a “migratory aesthetic” representing the flow of capital or the movement of bodies. . . .

MK I wonder, in the context you were just talking about, using models, what is Vanessa Myrie’s background? Is she a non-actress, innocent in the Bresson sense? He writes in his “Notes on the Cinematographer”: “No actors. (No directing of actors.) No parts. (No learning of parts.) No staging. But the use of working models, taken from life, *being* (models) instead of *seeming* (actors).”

I J Bresson is referring to the idea of the performance as something that could be accessed from the everyday, that there’s a certain capacity for anyone to be in a film and to be directed. He’s using the idea of non-acting as a way of critiquing that aura of performance. This is something that I’ve been really interested in developing for some time, and that extends to *Small Boats*. We worked with a group of clandestines, immigrants, in Palermo for scenes in which we were filming their journey in the sea, and some people refer to Vanessa’s being kind of model-like, as in a *Vogue*-type model, but I’m very interested in the idea of querying that. With her there’s a definite idea of gender perfor-

maturity or queering of gender, which are codes to be tampered with as well.

MK There's a certain hybridity to her.

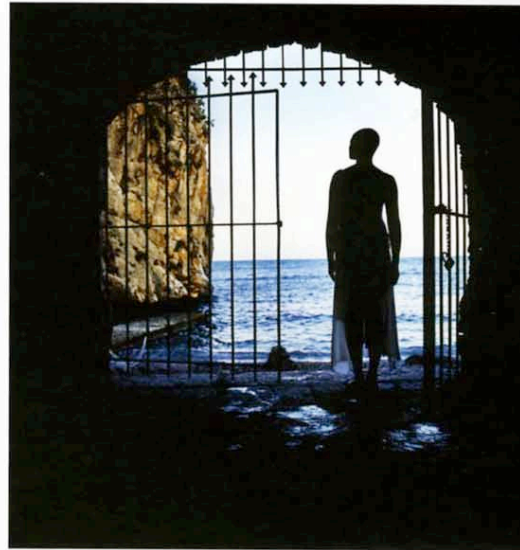
I J There is. There's a gender-question aspect, and I'm attracted to her powerful and unusual appearance; there's a certain *otherness* to her look. A female-masculinity. It's something that's developed from her cyborg character in *Baltimore*. In most of the works she has that male-female aspect, which I am parodying and developing. You can never tell books by their covers. In my work nothing is as it seems.

MK This photograph in the ballroom has so many other associations as well—

I J Of course, that ballroom is the main space where the [Luchino] Visconti film *The Leopard* [1963] takes place, which is a very famous, very long scene [in which the prince hosts a celebration for his upstart nephew and the nephew's commoner fiancée, symbolizing the end of the old order]. There's a *signifying* of that film and the use of that location in *Small Boats*. The Visconti *Leopard* was about Italian unification between north and south, between Sicilian society and Italian society, which are two distinct societies, and also about the decline of the Sicilian aristocratic classes. [The film is adapted from the 1958 novel *The Leopard* by Giuseppe di Lampedusa, himself a prince.] So I was very interested in occupying that space in the twenty-first century as a way of commenting on the ways in which Sicilian society has changed, Sicily being a place that's got a long history of migration built into it—including the migration of Sicilians to America, and the Ottoman Empire invading Europe from this point.

MK The prince, the main character in *The Leopard*, is in a time of transition. There's one famous quote where he says, "The middle class doesn't want to destroy us, they simply want to take our places very gently." There is a necessary change, accompanied by a loss as well. In political terms it seems that the industrialized countries feel their privileges threatened. Does the prince in the Visconti film play a role in your piece? At an earlier stage, you called this piece *Small Boats/Better Life*: were you thinking about a revolution for a better life?

I J *Small Boats* is really about the so-called clandestine immigrants who have been coming by the thousands to places like Sicily and islands like Lampedusa for some time, and of course they are looking for work, but someone has to pay for Italy's pensions or do jobs that Europeans don't want to do, whether they are working illegally or not. There's this transitional moment in *The Leopard*, and I'm very interested in this other transitional moment, which is the contemporaneous moment in Sicilian society. The subtitle *Better Life* was ironic. Many people who seek a better life on their way to Sicily end up having that better life in heaven, so to speak. They are fallen angels in Walter Benjamin's sense. So there's a slight ironic



placement with the Vanessa Myrie character, but also in the piece itself there's something oscillating in these spaces and locations and one is not quite sure what that is. In an article that RoseLee Goldberg wrote recently, she discussed the fact that I purposely cover up my tracks to the trajectories of my research to produce something else. So perhaps one is producing a piece where certain tensions will lie that suddenly pop up unexpectedly to the surface, creating something unfamiliar. The fantastic space of the Palazzo Gangi is a cinematic reference that allows me to relocate these questions that I think need to be re-articulated today in Sicilian society, and indeed in relationship to the world's general perception to questions of people moving from one location to another, which I think is seen in fairly negative terms in Europe.

MK You have said that this piece traces the effects of trauma: trauma on the survivors, but also on buildings, monuments, architecture, life itself. You work with the history and memories inherent to the actual location. You reexamine places like the Palazzo Gangi in Palermo; the Scala Dei Turchi, or Turkish Steps, at Agrigento, where the Turkish colonizers arrived as part of the Ottoman Empire; the coast of Scopello, once the site of a tuna-fishing farm, now the dead space of tourists' holiday-making.

I J That's right, yeah. And there are certain motifs of Islamic design inside the Palazzo Gangi that the dance that Russell [Maliphant] choreographs in the space will bring out or interpret. This is physical evidence that stems from historical fact. When you film a body on location, you can bring out tensions that remain hidden if viewed naturally, the architecture of space between the body and the location.



TRIPTYCH FROM THE TRUE NORTH SERIES, 2004.
DIGITAL PRINTS, EACH 39" x 39".

MK Your main character, Adriana, has a history of displacement, and the film is about relocation. Is there something in your own family background that echoes in this piece? Your mother, Rosemary, was the narrator in *Vagabondia*, which is how I know she speaks in the St. Lucian French Creole dialect. Adriana makes me wonder how it is to come to a new land—a better life.

IJ That's certainly been a theme in my work. But my parents were not refugees: they chose to come to England, in fact they were invited to come to work. And my mother's been in England since she was 20. She's now 74, so for all intents and purposes she is English, in a complicated sort of sense. This pattern has become more universal as more people get displaced and move about for all different reasons. Refugees, or exiles, or émigrés, intellectual laborers, the whole brain drain thing. That's a way that society develops and moves on. So I don't think my own experience is particularly unique, but its echoes are indeed located within some things I make. *Vagabondia*, for instance, is very much a way of trying to re-read the Sir John Soane Museum [a house-museum of artifacts collected by the eccentric architect, whose fortune resulted partly from the slave trade]. But my problem with the ways in which a lot of these questions have been written about in art, is that there's generally an expediency at work around these questions or they're very much part of something that is already known. I'd like to complicate that, and make unusual what those actual themes might be in a work of art. That's been one of the quests of making works like *Baltimore*, like *Vagabondia*, and indeed, *Small Boats*. The works were just following those themes and they are interrelated. But that is only one trajectory of my work.

MK I see a subtext when we talk about "displaced" persons, that they have no location, they have to create their own space.

IJ I'm also playing with the idea that someone might not be a displaced person. It's also about trying to second-guess what people might see as being incongruous to a space. In a way the trauma of architectural space has been located in the filming

of it that we may want to trouble the definitions of who might occupy them. It's about displacement of the person, but also about a displacement of how you might read certain spaces in a more normative fashion. That's the thing that's really interesting about the Turkish Steps: thinking about the Mediterranean as a space that is between east and west, north and south, Europe and Africa. It's a contact-zone that has a number of different markings, a number of traumas, that are very much still present in the actual location today. They also look very nice. (LAUGHTER)

MK Do you follow a detailed script, or try to maintain an open form with room for improvisation? The locations are so charged with history and visually compelling in cinematic terms—

IJ There's not always a script, but there's always a lot of research. We've been researching *Small Boats* for the past three or four years, and in that sense even though there is a script, there's very specific imagery that I want to construct: I mine the news reports for images that I make into tableaux vivants, such as a scene from a newspaper photograph of corpses wrapped in silver foil on a beach. So there is a certain reading of the archive through the actual landscapes and reconstructions that I make. But you're absolutely right in saying that the actual locations do resonate.

MK You're making notes during the research, sketching out a score that could be compared to a music or dance work—a sort of notation?

IJ Yeah. We're thinking about shooting something, thinking about the structure of something visually, that perhaps resembles a musical score. The structuring motif is much closer to the structure of musical notational sequences than a strict narrative.

MK For Bresson, cinematography is the higher function of cinema, and your work is highly crafted in terms of aesthetics. You have such a strong cinematic vision. Let's talk about your collaboration with your camerawoman, Nina Kellgren, with whom you have worked for 20 years. She first made *Looking for Langston* in 1989 with you. How do you prepare your shots? They are so exquisite, and so strongly felt and seen.

I J One of the problems with cinema is that it has forgotten that it is an art form. In Britain, in fact, they hate it, and that's why one has had to return to the space of art to remember it. We don't really have art cinema in Britain. Nowadays film is thought of as a skill to be honed for getting Oscars. The art cinema got killed off after Derek Jarman's death in 1994. That's been one of the reasons, at least in the English context, that art became, I would say, *obsessed* with cinema in the mid-'90s and that we've produced video artists like Douglas Gordon or Steve McQueen, or the Wilson twins. It's been the space of art where we've been able to give back attention to making pictures.

Nina Kellgren has been interested in foregrounding the language of pictures, and we've been able to make interventions into television and into film in a more classical sense, and now that has shifted into art. In a couple of days I'm going to be attending a forum for documentaries called Britdocs, and this year the theme is "the art of documentary." One of its bylines is that documentary filmmakers have a lot to learn from artists. So thinking about the ways in which the art of filmmaking has gotten lost has united Nina Kellgren and myself over the years in our practices.

MK It is great that you have such continuity in your collaboration with her. How did you two meet?

I J She was a co-cinematographer of a film I made in 1986 called *The Passion of Remembrance*. That's a film that we both feel slightly ambivalent about. The project where we really utilized our interests was *Looking for Langston*. That film was admired for its cinematography; even cinematographers like Ellen Kuras were very enthusiastic about it. *Looking for Langston* represented a pivotal point: For us it was all about how to create the space to secure that way of thinking about images. These days when she's not working with me, Nina is a feature film cinematographer and also works in advertising, which is also a space that's very attracted to the idea of making images. Of course they're images to sell something, but the line between art and advertising has always been blurry in Europe, where the two slip in and out of one another quite often.

MK It is clear that within your production you can keep up a very high standard of making films. Do you work in 35mm film or in the digital medium?

I J For *Small Boats* we work on 35 and use digital for certain scenes. Digital works well for very controlled conditions, interior conditions. It also works incredibly well if you're shooting underwater. Bill Viola uses digital high definition to shoot a lot of his work, because it suits that environment. We have several underwater scenes in *Small Boats* and we're shooting them in digital, but hopefully they will not look like Bill Viola's.

MK You started out using film equipment and film stock, which has different aesthetics from digital video.

I J Yes, and even though the digital medium works very

well for some scenarios, for how I like to film, which is on location using landscapes, film is much more flexible. Film has a painterly quality; it's immensely elastic in that it can cope with quite contrasting scenarios. I probably do have a bias toward film as a material, and although in the end one usually shows the works in a digital medium, it's quite interesting to think about things originating in the medium of film and then being digitally worked on. I have been doing that since 1993, when I made *The Attendant*.

MK Digital video also gives the liberation of moving around with a handheld camera, working with available light; it's a different approach. The British filmmaker Mike Figgis [shoots in digital and] talks about having happily regained the freedom of improvising with the actors, being flexible.

I J Yeah, it's completely liberating in those terms. It's really about what you want to film, and how you want to film it.

MK Some of your work is made to be seen in the movie theater space, but you are now moving into other spaces, with your installations, to give the audience a visual experience in a museum or gallery. How do you approach the fact that the audience is not sitting still



in front of the screen, like in a movie theater, but are walking around? In the work you're now planning, you have chosen the form of a triptych.

IJ I still have a commitment to people being part of a cinematic experience. At the same time, what we see in that context is quite restrictive, I'd say, unless you're in Paris. I've been working with the audience's active relationship to the image for quite a long time, since 1999, so I'm really excited about my gallery show in New York this fall, at Metro Pictures. Going from three screens to six or seven, which is how many I'll have in that installation, entails a shift between the cinematic and the conceptual. I'm interested in the translation of the cinematic into another context. The interdisciplinarity of my practice becomes extrapolated into another arena when it's in the theater. When *Cast No Shadow* shows at BAM in November, for instance, that will be its connection with live

performance, with dance. It's about trying to make work where in one instance the audience might be stationary but in another it's part of the spectator's movement that also makes the work. I've been specifically interested in that since my show at the Pompidou in 2005, with *Fantôme Creole*, but I'm very excited about what I want to develop in the gallery space. It's keeping the idea of experimentation alive that attracts me to making work in an art context. It's an exciting challenge.

MK For the staged production of *Cast No Shadow*, you planned the choreography of the imagery that is in the video projection, but Russell Maliphant choreographed the movement and the dances. How was your collaboration?

IJ Well, we were a team, you might say. I really love Russell's work. He is very attracted to the way in which my film work has a choreographic aspect, in terms of its montage, in terms of the number of screens, in terms of the relationship to what the body is doing in each screen, and indeed to what the general mise-en-scène was. How that's going to work in the theateric context is really quite exciting. But it's been almost two years now that we've been working on the project, and it can be very demanding from my point of view, since film and dance are different languages. Nonetheless Russell and I have now collaborated on the shooting of *Small Boats*; we brought his dance company to film in Sicily. So there will be this transition that will take place in *Small Boats* between both the subjects in the film and on the stage itself. Extrapolating, really, from what we were working with in *True North* with Vanessa Myrie on the stage, from film to the stage and back again. It's quite complex.

MK I want to refer to a sentence I read where you say, "I want to see my work as resisting categories." Then you say that Toni Morrison said it well when she said, "I'm not a writer, I'm a black writer."

IJ Well, I am sure that Toni Morrison was responding to that question that always gets thrown at artists who are not white. But she is a universal writer with a Nobel Prize in Literature. Obviously she is writing from the black American experience, and she has an incredibly important voice. The experience I am interested in could be read as being universal as well but, you see, I take that for granted and it takes time for people to generally catch up with what artists might think. So I'm making work that may be addressing black figures or themes, but as far as I am concerned that is universal, because in the end we are all humans. As a good friend pointed out to me a long time ago, "race" is a fiction that racism has helped keep alive. That's something that always comes up. I'd be discussing *True North* and I'd say something like "Matthew Henson may have been the first person to reach the North Pole," and it would get corrected in print to say, "Matthew Henson was the first African American to reach the North Pole." Or somebody would say



TOP: PHOTOGRAPH FROM THE FANTÔME CRÉOLE SERIES (PLACE DES CINÉASTES, AFTER BODYS ISEK KINGELEZ), 2005, LAMBDA PRINT, 47 x 47".
BOTTOM: PHOTOGRAPH FROM THE FANTÔME CRÉOLE SERIES (MISE EN SCÈNE N° 2), 2005, LAMBDA PRINT, 47 x 47".

PRODUCTION STILL FROM SMALL BOATS, 2007.



something to the effect of, “Matthew Henson may have gotten to the North Pole during Peary’s expedition. . . .” But as we know, in the dominant narrative, it’s Peary who is credited with discovering the North Pole. It’s very interesting how people read what is the universal, and they always read whiteness or the West as being the universal. Of course that’s something that I want to resist, that I want to contest. People who write about art might classify the work that I do because of its themes, but it resists categories. That’s why I liked the idea of calling our piece *Cast No Shadow*. One interpretation is that it’s about the question of shadowing and casting doubt over what people may have to achieve in order to take back their lives.

MK I read your diary notes *Diary of a Young Soul Rebel* from 1990 and now I have the diary notes you gave me to read, in 2007. When you look back, do you see differences in the way you as an artist are treated? Do you feel empowered now to make your work?

IJ It’s always been very much about making interventions, about utilizing all the things that you have at your disposal, to make your statement in the most artistically uncompromising way possible. That said, the conditions of *Young Soul Rebels* as portrayed in the diary were conditions that I didn’t want to repeat. That’s one of the reasons I haven’t been particularly interested in making feature films since then. But *c’est la vie*. (LAUGHTER)

MK I have your diary notes in front of me, and I see that exactly a month ago, on June 24, you were in Sicily; it was your travel day to Agrigento to prepare for filming at the Turkish Steps. You describe a beautiful cinematic image. “The body molded into the rock and

encapsulated into white chalk,” and then the dancer “lying inside the rock suddenly appears—covered in chalk including his hair now looking gray.” As if he were aging.

IJ That text is really all about the things that can only be achieved for the act of making something; you can theorize and discuss and plan and read as much as you like into a scenario, but it’s only in the *doing* that things actually come about. It’s about what gets crystallized in this particular moment of becoming; despite some of the preconceived notions that you may have, the vibe of a performance that is actually achieved is something of a surprise. That’s something that you could never get from a script or a dialogue, those preplanned ways of making a work come alive.

MK It’s like a transcendence of reality within this coincidence. Taking cinematography as an art form, one creates an image that cannot be translated into words.

IJ Precisely. That’s exactly what I’m interested in: making images that cannot be translated into words. That’s my attraction to dance, basically. The mystery comes from the act of making, and that’s something you can utilize in the art context that is always unique.

