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ISAAC JULIEN

METRO PICTURES

Isaac Julien's new *Western Union: Small Boats* is the final part in a trilogy of film installations that includes *True North* (2004) and *Fantôme Afrique* (2005). While Julien's work is usually depicted as a critical engagement with issues of black identity and representation, these three pieces map a poetic historiography in which a cross-cultural encounter



ISAAC JULIEN, *WESTERN UNION: SMALL BOATS*, 2007. INSTALLATION VIEW, METRO PICTURES, NEW YORK. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND METRO PICTURES, NEW YORK.

disrupts prior knowledge of real and imagined worlds. *Western Union* tracks the dangerous voyage would-be immigrants make from North Africa to Sicily. Precisely edited and scored across five screens (three of them adjoining, with two separate ones in neighboring rooms), Julien's 30-minute film presents impeccable images of chalky white cliffs, a rowboat bobbing on the Mediterranean, figures thrashing underwater, the lavish interior of Palermo's Palazzo Gangi, and bodies writhing up and down stone steps.

Although the film has a metaphoric narrative thread loosely tying everything together, the work derives its structure from a series of fragmented and stylized tableaux—so stylized, in fact, that certain moments approximate a fashion shoot, lending what is a gritty, harrowing, and sometimes fatal journey a slightly incongruous quality of slick sensuality. But if economic resources are distributed unevenly within and across societies, so too is the luxury to aspire. In this sense, beauty in Julien's work serves as a complicated signifier for desire's projected dreams.

—ALAN GILBERT

