

Mark Rappolt, "Isaac Julien Ten Thousand Waves," **Art Review**, October, pp. 91

Isaac Julien

Ten Thousand Waves

in *Move: Choreographing*

You, Hayward Gallery



Inspired by the Morecambe Bay tragedy of 2004 (in which 23 Chinese cockle-pickers, all, it turned out, illegal immigrant labourers, drowned off the coast of Lancashire), and four years in the making, Isaac Julien's *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010) premiered at the Sydney Biennale earlier this year before being screened in Shanghai to coincide with the Expo. An ambitious nine-screen projection, configured in something approximating a spiral, the work is probably most accurately described as an experience or a piece of architecture. 'Film' doesn't really do it justice (and unlike many works of film or video art, you don't have the option of simply demanding a viewing copy and watching it on a computer screen). But perhaps the slippery nature of any definition of the work itself is appropriate to the experience it presents.

In formal terms the setup allows Julien to present several types of shot – establishing, tracking, closeup – simultaneously and for the visual narrative to be variously atomised, sequenced or united as a whole. For the viewer, the microlabyrinthine structure proposes a multitude of ways in which the work might be experienced: you can't see all the screens at once, but you get fragments of some as you're looking at others; to get a true sense of the whole (it's 49 minutes long), you need to be as much in motion as the images before you. Unusually, for something that is essentially filmic, the viewer is a source of animation, and his journey through the space and time of the installation parallels the narrative journey of the film. Of course, and it may be crass to say it, there is also the sense of being drowned in the work.

Beginning with genuinely creepy (and genuinely genuine) recordings of emergency calls at the time of the tragedy as well as radio conversations involving helicopters searching for survivors, the work spans the geography of the Lancashire coast, the Yangtze River and Shanghai (past and present). It also features some of the iconic figures of recent Chinese cultural production: notably actresses Maggie Cheung and Zhao Tao, artist Yang Fudong and calligrapher Gong Fagen. As well as spanning a broad spectrum of arts (the project started when Julien commissioned the poet Wang Ping to write in response to Morecambe), *Ten Thousand Waves* deploys historic fables from Fujian Province (where most of the cockle pickers originated), ghost stories and a brief history of Shanghai cinema to explore the emergence of contemporary China and its flickering identity – from Maggie Cheung floating about in the guise of the goddess Mazu to police camera images of Morecambe Bay and the complex relationships of culture, power and alternate gazes these encapsulate – in a world being constantly reformed by the ebbs and flows of global communication and migration. And it's hard not to think that *Ten Thousand Waves*, and the slow dances of form and content, spectator and spectacle that it sets up, represents something of a great leap forward in terms of what moving-image artworks can achieve. *Mark Rappolt*