

METRO PICTURES

Gerges, Merray. "Isaac Julien: On Political Expediency," *CanadianArt.ca* (January 26, 2017).

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Western Union: Small Boats (The Leopard) (still), 2007.

Before I sat down to speak to Isaac Julien on a leather couch outside his installation “Other Destinies” at the Royal Ontario Museum, I crashed a class field trip where Julien gave a tour to a group of University of Toronto students writing about his work. He introduced the work before he guided us through it with terms and ideas that are now customary in the literature surrounding it over the past three decades: the tension between realist documentary and narrative cinema; making objects into subjects to reconcile with secret histories and make them perpetually contemporary; queering white history and white spaces through visual reparation; asserting the agency of the black body through images that have only ever signified ethnographically.

True North and *Western Union: Small Boats*, the alpha and omega of a trilogy unfolding between 2004 and 2007, share the same protagonist, Vanessa Myrie. Both non-linear, narrative films unfold across three screens—further disorienting an already-distracted spectator, Julien says.

True North subverts the whitewashing of history by focusing on the story of Matthew Henson, an overlooked African American man who was in fact one of the key figures in white American explorer Robert Peary’s 1909 expedition to the North Pole. The vast, frigid expanses traversed by the explorer—though the story takes place in the Arctic, Julien filmed it in Iceland—are reminiscent of Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*. Julien warps the passage of time: there are mere moments between the presentation of a glacier and its dissolution, between the protagonist trudging through tundra, her figure in the distance only a silhouette, and her fluttering, translucent white dress and bare feet on a beach awash with dissolved icebergs. Inuit throat singing punctuates moments of narration from Henson’s travel journal: “I think I’m the first man to sit on top of the world.”



Western Union Series No. 3 (Flight Towards Other Destinies I), 2007.

Western Union: Small Boats wavers between the splendor of Palazzo Gangi, one of the filming locations of Italian director Luchino Visconti's history epic *The Leopard*, and the vastness of the Mediterranean, with dancers drifting between both to articulate journeys from south to north. Here, Julien levels beauty and terror on the same plane.

Both works feel as if they might have been made yesterday. When I spoke to Julien about this, he cautioned about thinking of our current moment as the only one invested in identity politics—taking on *Moonlight*, intersectionality and more in a conversation that felt both tense and grounding.

Merray Gerges: Have you seen Kerry James Marshall's survey, "Mastry"?

Isaac Julien: I did, yeah.

MG: When you speak of your commitment to transforming the black object into a subject, I see parallels between how both of you insert the black subject into spaces where it historically hasn't been welcome, or rarely represented: Marshall inserts the black subject into the suburb, the artist's studio, the Eurocentric art-history narrative in general, while you insert the black subject into the Arctic as an explorer in *True North* and into a palazzo as a *flâneur* in *Western Union: Small Boats*, both of which environments have historically been white designations.

IJ: Perhaps I might disagree with that reading. I've seen quite a lot of work made by different black artists where basically that motif is very much part of their *lingua franca*. I always think of these discussions about what's being framed and conditioned as a kind of centre versus margin. In terms of these questions pictorially or in literature, let's take for example the question of science fiction: there are many black sci-fi writers who were established in that genre, but in relation to the question of otherness in the landscape we could say, with the Henson story, it's a secret history, but it's a historical fact. It's just that a lot of those images are hidden in the archive. We don't have the accessibility to those images, but it's not to say that they've not been articulated, that they're not there. What I was struck by in Kerry James Marshall's work was the fact that these modern-day history paintings weren't so much about the artist in the studio being unusual, but that these representations have been *ignored*, which I think is entirely different from the fact that it's unusual. It's not unusual. Think about the Harlem Renaissance, till before World War II there's a whole genre, lots and lots of black artists making work. That's just to do with canons and what's being considered the centre and what's being ignored.



Western Union Series No. 8 (*Sculpture for the New Millennium*), 2007.

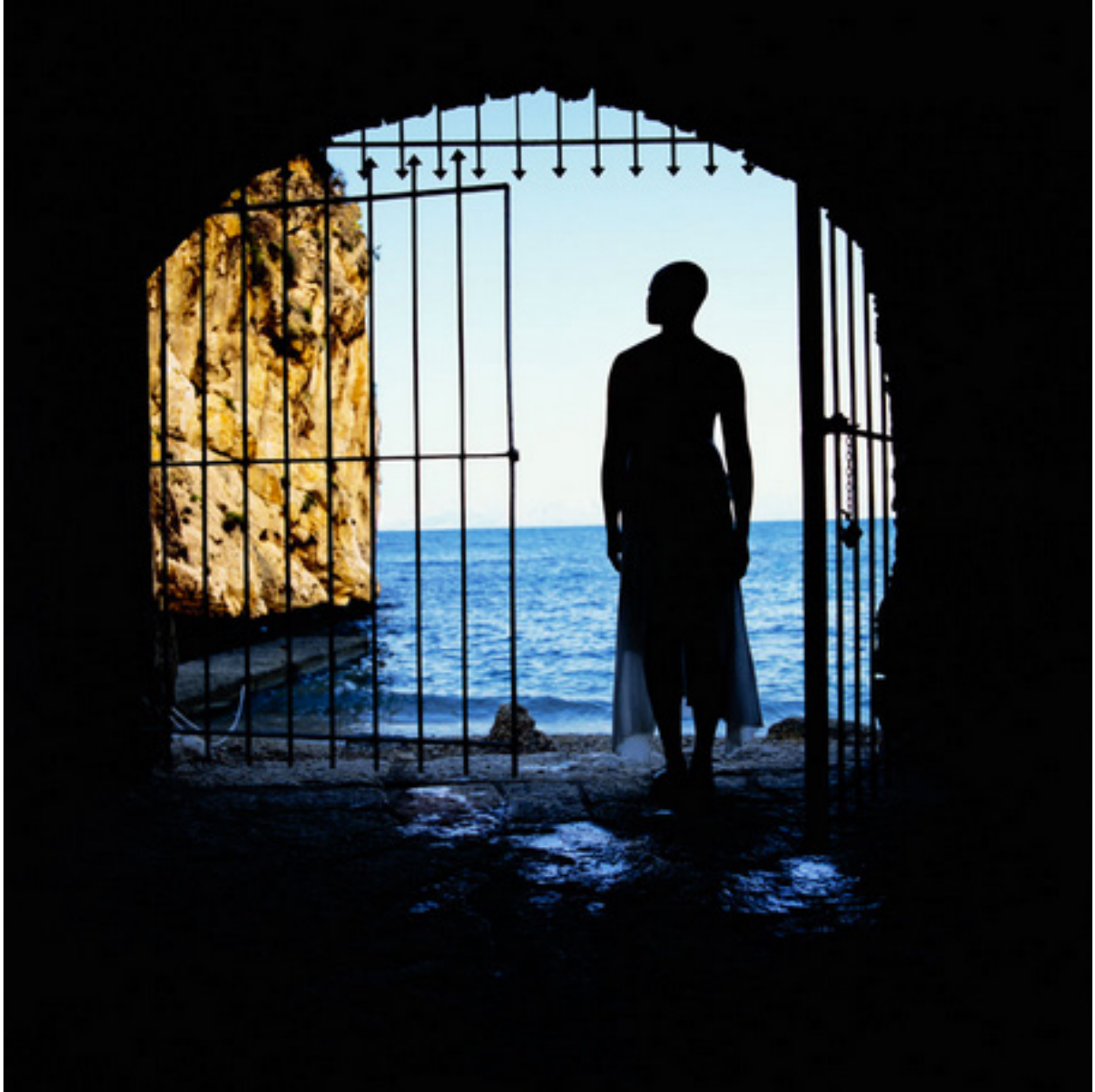
MG: I was thinking about this erasure when *Moonlight* first came out and the way it was discussed as being an unprecedented portrayal of queer, black masculinity, how that discourse is symptomatic of the collective amnesia of the perseverance of marginalized bodies, so that a film like *Moonlight* is framed by the media as being this never-before-seen representation.

IJ: But in the case of Kerry James Marshall or *Moonlight*, I think what we're really talking about is the mainstreaming of these kinds of visual representations. *Moonlight* is ostensibly a queering of the black subject but it's a work that's made for mainstream heterosexual audiences, and actually I could say, there's nothing queer about *Moonlight*. Actually. It's beautifully crafted in a cinematographic sense, and has excellent performances, but in a sense it's really not a queer film. I think it's conservative in its representation and therefore it can be less offensive to a wider audience. The radicality of *Moonlight* is only posed in the sense that it's a film with a gay subject made by a black director, but there are lots of films that have been made with queer narratives, [my 1989 docu-drama] *Looking for Langston* being one of them. But I think it's really about the mainstreaming of those aspects. In a similar way, I would say Kerry James Marshall has been making works for such a long time...

MG: When you introduced both of these works, you talked about how at the time that they were made, over a decade ago, conversations about migration and the anthropocene hadn't really been a part of popular discourse. Perhaps they weren't deemed to be crises yet...

IJ: But I think that those debates were taking place, but they were taking place elsewhere, in cultural studies and in certain academic circles. We probably have to be a little bit tentative about the idea of when things get taken up and why things get taken up as well. These debates are getting taken up now in relation to climate change because the weather's changing physically—we can literally see it—even if people want to deny it. Some people in cultural studies were very prophetic—when Lisa Bloom wrote *Gender on Ice* in 1993, that was very future-looking—but dominant media are catching up to these debates more recently.

MG: I see this work as being future-looking, too. You use the word "intentionality" multiple times to talk about how you envision your work's future legibility, decades after its creation. I see you taking prophecy into account, similar to how Ursula K. Le Guin or Octavia E. Butler are now seen.



Western Union Series No. 1 (Cast No Shadow), 2007.

JJ: I certainly did in *Western Union: Small Boats*, in terms of people moving from one part of the planet to another. At the time, I remember having a debate with [the film's choreographer] Russel Maliphant saying, "You have the image of the refugees in this work but who are the dancers?" and I said, "They may be the future." That's what I said to him then. It becomes a test of the work if people want to see it in the future for whatever reason. Sometimes it's political expedience, when they have to do with newspaper headlines. But the question is: how can your work survive beyond the politically expedient newspaper headline of the day? You have to [anticipate] how technologies will be seen in the future and what are the pictorial legacies of what you're trying to construct, how will they be perceived. There's a lot of that second-guessing what you're doing, though in some cases, like with *Looking for Langston*, it was shot in black and white in 1989 so it's already quite—



True North Series, 2004.

MG: Timeless. Right. And so when you're creating work in the '80s and the '90s, conversations about identity politics are prevalent. You collaborated with people like Stuart Hall and bell hooks, the key cultural critics whose output formulated so much of that discourse. There's a continued relevance to your work, from then to now, but the conversation about identity politics—from *Artforum's* identity issue in summer 2016 to the term "identity politics" being used in 2016 election discourse to denigrate the left, especially feminist LGBTQ, BIPOC—has supposedly become "hot" again. But perhaps the discourse feels more pointed now because so much of it is taking place on, and amplified by, social media, and how it's been an activism tool for Black Lives Matter and Standing Rock.

IJ: *Who Killed Colin Roach?* which I made in 1983, is around questions of policing, and there's a [resurgence of] those very early works. When we were involved in making works in the '80s, they were very much around problematizing the notion of identity politics. We were questioning how that was being used as a way to try to explore questions of cultural difference, and we were really contesting what we saw as essentializing—I wrote essays like "de-essentializing black identities." There were a lot of problems with those debates and what happens is that it gets flattened out now that we're talking about whether there's a return to identity politics. I would say no. First of all, we were problematizing questions around identity politics and in a sense, questions of identity never really went away. Perhaps it takes something like Trump's election or Brexit to realize how they never actually went away. They were always actually there and perhaps there's a lot of ignoring of those questions—which in a way helped secure the consent of these kinds of political positions—because people saw it as finished business, rather than seeing it as unfinished conversation, to use Stuart Hall's phrase. They might've come back but I think they've come back in a different module because there are different constellations now. It's not just the return of identity politics, it's actually something different.

MG: What is it now?

IJ: We're in a different cultural, political moment from the one we were involved in in the '80s and if anybody wants to look at what that difference is they can look at the films. Some of what we tried to do in some of these works like *Western Union: Small Boats* or *True North* is to bring these ways of looking and this criticality and sensibility into the works in a different manner, but we didn't have a black president in America in the '80s—

MG: Intersectionality wasn't a consideration.

IJ: I don't really like the term "intersectionality" at all...

MG: Can we talk about your disdain for the term?

IJ: I feel like it's just a buzzword that has been popularized, a descriptive term that sort of talks about the question of multiple different identities and how they criss-cross one another, but I don't think the radicality of intersectionality is a secured one. There's a lot of taking for granted how those terms can be appropriated and re-used, of who's looking, and there's a poverty of how we're discussing those images. You [ought to] contest a film like *Moonlight*, to think that it's good and then be fairly critical and pragmatic about whether you think it's a radical movie or whether or not some of its success is about its conservatism in its representation of sex, for example, when in a way it's a return to the '50s. It's definitely not queer cinema.

MG: There's a moment in *True North* when there are close-ups of one face on each of the three screens: the black subject is in between the two Indigenous subjects on either side. They're almost perfectly still, but the frigid wind blows in their faces, with icicles in their facial hair and the fur linings of their parkas. It struck me as a metaphor for black-Indigenous solidarity, sovereignty and resilience.

IJ: Absolutely. That's very important, because apart from the fact that Matthew Henson knew the Inuit culture and could speak some of the Inuit languages—after all, he went there over 20 years—there's a certain interdependence that gets developed and that's really interesting in terms of the master narrative of the heroic explorer that [forgets] the dependency that the explorer develops on those Indigenous cultures. It's interesting in terms of talking about whiteness and the construction of whiteness as a category and that's perhaps one of the most astonishing things about Trump and the success of Trump being precisely around what version of whiteness is being both celebrated and is a cause of embarrassment. So a work like *True North* is very much critiquing those in a straightforward manner, to a certain degree, but I like this question of the indeterminacy of the reliance on the other to produce this heroic subject and the fact that the heroic white subject has to contest and ignore, to erase those histories—now, to undo the bills that Obama placed. It's just a kind of flagrant, stupid arrogance. It's alive and well.

MG: It seems to me that this past election cycle might be the first time that the neutrality of the white subject was very much publicly contested, especially in identifying the quintessential—often white, working class—Trump supporter and how that led to the alt-right. I hadn't heard "white identity politics" before now, even though cultural theorists have been dissecting whiteness and its construction and the oppressiveness of affording whiteness neutrality for a while. I thought about this when you were talking about the whiteness of the landscape in *True North* and who occupies it—or doesn't, as if it's a *terra nullius*.

IJ: It's Canada. Isn't it?