

METRO PICTURES

"500 Words: Isaac Julien," *Artforum.com* (March 17, 2015).

ARTFORUM



Isaac Julien, *The Abyss (PLAYTIME)*, 2013, Endura Ultra photograph, 62 x 94".

PLAYTIME is a film installation representing three cities and their relationships to capital: London, a city transformed by Thatcherism, neoliberalism, and bank deregulation; Reykjavik, where the 2008 financial crash stopped capital in its tracks; and the new art and financial center Dubai, an oil-fueled metropolis that sprang from the desert. It features six main characters whose lives are entangled via the global flow of capital and labor: Maggie Cheung as a Hong Kong reporter who converses with Swiss auctioneer Simon de Pury (appearing as himself); Mercedes Cabral as a Filipina domestic laborer, who describes her workplace imprisonment in Dubai; an American art adviser, played by the debonair James Franco; Ingvar Sigurðsson as an Icelandic artist bankrupted by the financial crash; and a cocky black Brit hedge fund manager, played by Colin Salmon.

Each character is based on extensive research in film, artworks, newspapers, and literary representations, as well as on interviews I conducted; the characters are both empirical presentations and archetypes. For instance, Colin's role is in part modeled on banker Keweku Adoboli, who was found guilty in 2012 of an estimated two-billion-dollar embezzlement. Colin's masculinist performance may seem alluring and authoritative, but in essence it's a disjointed, riddling patchwork of quotations derived from theoretical texts, film scripts, novels, and other sources. Later, we see how, through the act of "performing himself," the auctioneer creates what David Harvey calls "fictitious capital"—capital literally generated through speech. Behind Simon's mastery of language and theater is a meticulously organized army of auction-house researchers, whom we glimpse behind the colored glass of an "office" that is actually a film set—a cinematic fabrication, as is the interview between Simon and Maggie. Their performances were filmed three weeks apart; in reality, they've never met.

Mirroring these complexities of representation, including how an appearance of masculinity is performed, is James: the straight/queer icon and *bête noire* of the art world, whose own speculative art practice I think nicely mirrors and intersects his performance here. Questions of labor and transparency are further developed in Mercedes's performance as a maid in Dubai. Her acting is deliberately emotionally haunting, to produce a more empathetic reading, but again, this is not an issue of authenticity. My work is sincerely inauthentic. For me, the pleasure of making film lies in the manipulation of the various identifications viewers can make.

PLAYTIME also has a sister project, *Kapital*, 2013, from which it was originally developed. *Kapital* is a two-screen video work presenting a conversation between Harvey and myself. Staged as part of a seminar I organized at the Hayward Gallery in 2012, the event involved theorists, critics, and curators—including the late Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Irit Rogoff, and Colin MacCabe. In the piece, Harvey declares that the architecture of capital has not changed since Marx's *Capital*, but *PLAYTIME* offers another possibility. In today's markets, digital technologies have given rise to the "dark pools" described by author Michael Lewis in *Flash Boys*—private securities-trading forums where the sheer speed of digital exchanges allows capital to reduplicate and perform itself in microseconds. In *PLAYTIME*, digital technologies similarly permit a diversity of special effects, creating slippages of meaning, significance, and identity. In both Lewis's book and *PLAYTIME*, the faster data travels, the more things become opaque and less accessible.

A retrospective exhibition shows how I have always been interested in societal and economic hierarchies in relation to aesthetics and art—which capital is embedded in and exacerbates. My 1984 documentary *Territories*, for example, is an aesthetic critique of politics that includes trenchant images of police violence and explores shifting perceptions of labor and the working classes. *Territories* relates to both *PLAYTIME* and *Kapital* in that it looks at systems of self-performativity and power.