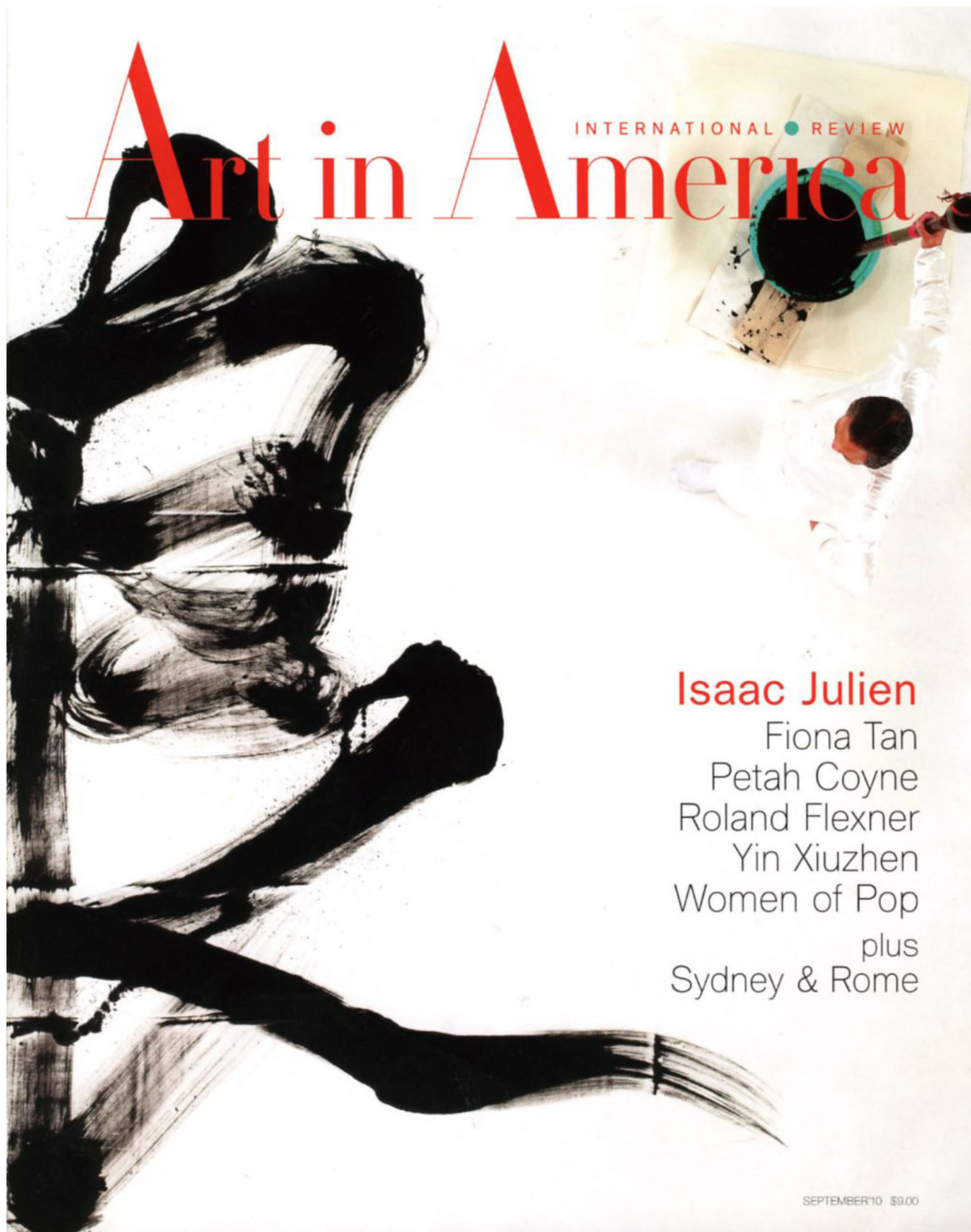


METRO PICTURES

Borysevicz, Mathieu. "Screenings: China Imagined," *Art in America* (September 2010): 57-60.



SCREENINGS

CHINA IMAGINED

In his new film installation, *Ten Thousand Waves*, Isaac Julien reflects on Chinese myth and history, cinematic techniques and the perils of immigration.

AN INTERVIEW BY MATHIEU BORYSEVICZ



Isaac Julien: *Green Screen Goddess No. 1 (Ten Thousand Waves)*, 2010, Endura Ultra photograph, 70 7/8 by 94 1/2 inches.

All photos this article courtesy the artist and Galería Helga de Alvear, Madrid; Metro Pictures, New York; ShanghART Gallery, Shanghai; and Victoria Miro Gallery, London.

ON THE EVENING OF Feb. 5, 2004, 23 illegal Chinese workers drowned in the rising tide while picking cockles in Morecambe Bay in northern England. The incident became a catalyst not only for impassioned debates on human trafficking and England's immigration laws but for Isaac Julien's latest installation, *Ten Thousand Waves*, which debuted in May at the Biennale of Sydney [see article this issue] and has since been touring internationally. The surround-sound projection—35mm film transferred to HD video—lyrically weaves the Morecambe Bay incident with scenes from China's history and several self-reflexive passages unmasking cinematic techniques old and new. Running 50 minutes, the piece—a mix of historical clips and Julien's own cinematic work—unfolds montage-fashion across nine scattered, variously angled

screens. At moments, several screens offer identical shots; at other times, they show multiple perspectives on the same action, or present a single image fragmented from one screen to the next. Occasionally, only one screen is illuminated, framed by the darkness of the labyrinthine structure. In lesser hands, the unpredictability of where images will appear next, along with the overlapping of several ambiguous narratives, might frustrate attention; Julien keeps the viewer constantly engaged with the work.

Throughout his career, Julien (b. 1960, London) has focused on the broad politics and intimate dramas of cultural change. His early experimental "documentaries," such as the 1989

Looking for Langston (about Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes), combine archival footage with staged fact-based scenes as well as unfettered personal fantasies. More recently, Julien's globetrotting productions—which have taken him from the Caribbean (Paradise Omeros, 2002) to Iceland (True North, 2004)—have set the formal parameters for his even more freely imagined Ten Thousand Waves. Starting in 2007, Julien made a series of trips to China, where he conducted research and enlisted collaborators for the project. Chinese participants included the Shanghai video artist Yang Fudong, who became both a source of inspiration and a character in the film; the poet Wang Ping, whose "Small Boats" is recited on the soundtrack; actors Maggie Cheung and Zhao Tao; calligrapher Gong Fagen; cinematographer Zhao Xiaoshi; and a crew of over 100.

Ten Thousand Waves is notable for its cultural specificity. Apart from an initial scene, a mix of police documentation and staged reenactment that powerfully recounts the Morecambe Bay tragedy, the film evokes mainland China through a sequence of virtually archetypal images. A 16th-century fable about lost seamen from Fujian province (where the drowned modern-day cockle pickers originated) provides the thematic skeleton of the film, which draws together migration narratives from various iconic moments in China's history. In one recurring motif, scenes shot at the Shanghai Film Studios reference the legendary actress Ruan Lingyu, who was born to a housemaid, rose to silent-film stardom in the 1930s and then, harassed by tabloids, committed suicide at age 24. Meanwhile,

on opposite screens, black-and-white documentary clips from the same era show foreigners being blithely whisked about Chinese streets in rickshaws.

In another scene Maggie Cheung, playing Mazu, the ancient goddess of the sea, flies through the famous hill-studded landscape of Guilin. Ang Lee's 1999 Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon comes immediately to mind, as does the classic Hong Kong kung-fu cinema from which it was derived. Other passages feature the glimmering skyline of Shanghai's hypermodern Pudong district, or archival shots of Red Guards marching in Beijing's ceremonial Tiananmen Square. And in an apparent nod to Yang Fudong's revisionist work [see A.i.A., Sept. '09], a portion of the 1934 Shanghai film classic The Goddess is re-created. (In the original, Ruan Lingyu played the title role of a protective single mother who works as a prostitute.)

Further complicating matters, Julien reveals his own cinematic apparatus periodically throughout the piece, extinguishing any suspension of disbelief. In one striking sequence, a flying scene with Cheung, the artist suddenly discloses the green-screen studio technique used to create the illusion. The images quickly tumble from one screen to the next like a line of falling dominoes.

After the film's recent screening in Shanghai (where, the artist noted, "the piece has come home"), I met with Julien and asked him to help unravel this highly complicated work.



MATHIEU BORYSEVICZ This is a tremendously wide-reaching piece, both geographically and historically. Could you tell me about its evolution?

ISAAC JULIEN I was interested in doing a project about illegal immigration. When the Morecambe Bay incident became a highly publicized controversy, one that stayed in the British newspapers for several years, I collected clippings as my initial research. Then I met Wang Ping. After a similar tragedy in New York, she had written a poem about Chinese immigrants trying to get to America. So I commissioned her to

come to Morecambe Bay and write a new poem.

MB Is that also when you began coming to China?

IJ Yes, finally. Due to the huge Chinese diaspora, a lot of images and ideas circulate outside of the country. I've been watching Chinese cinema since the mid-'80s. But to really get things right, you have to come to China, not just imagine it; you have to be in this space.

MB How did Chinese contemporary art appear to you from the outside,

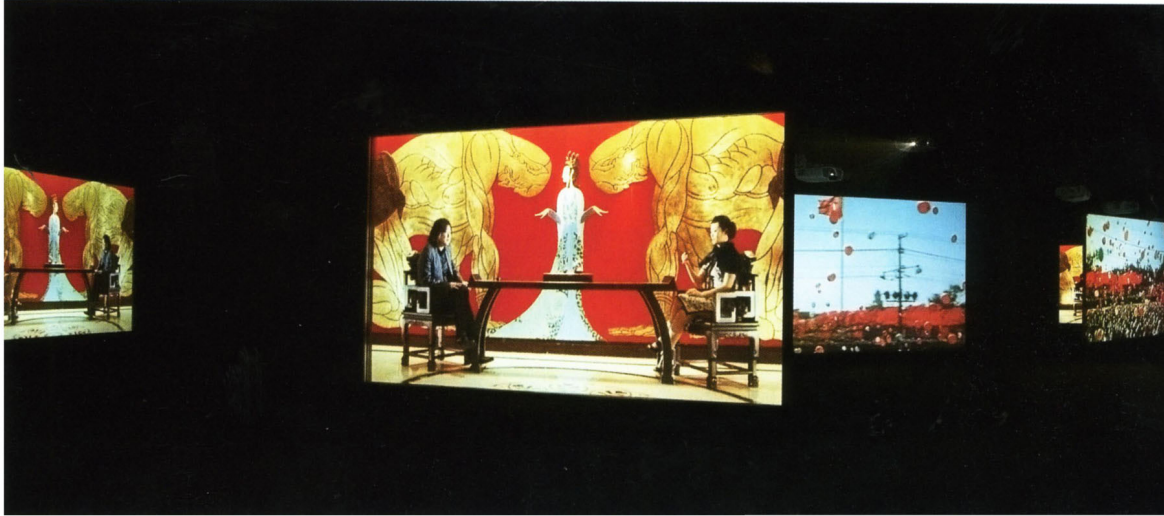
before you came and saw it here?

IJ Back in the UK, there was considerable interest in the Ullens Center and 798 [Beijing's largest art district], and I was already looking at Chinese art. I especially admired the work of Yang Fudong. The Serpentine Gallery had done a show on China that was mainly moving-image pieces ["China Power Station 1," 2006], and I saw the kind of language that was being developed here. I began to formulate what position, if I were to make a work, I'd want to inhabit esthetically. After coming to China, I realized that I would have to be in dialogue with some of the work I was seeing.

MB In recent projects you have examined the spaces between specific cultures (*Small Boats*, *Fatôme Creole*, *True North*) and the negotiation of different cultures (*Paradise Omeros*).

Now you've taken on China, using some of its best-known visual referents. How much research did you do into Chinese history and culture, or was a keen understanding of China not really important for making the film?

IJ Whatever apprehension I had came from the fact that I didn't have a deep knowledge of China. I was familiar with the country's very rich cinema culture and its recent artistic production, but I was not really versed in the historical material. One reason the



film took a long time to produce is that it required so much research. Yet, in a way, it's not a film about China. It's a film that starts with a transcultural incident and grows to encompass certain aspects of China. But I'm not trying to make any grand statements about an entire culture.

MB Borges once said that life itself is a quotation. You present a short history of China through various citations: Ming Dynasty legends, the gilded age of Shanghai, Mao's Red China, the contemporary PRC fast-forwarding itself towards hyper-modernity. How do you see the role of historicism in your film?

IJ The quotations are clearly signified as quotations. It's not as if I'm hiding them.

MB No, your cinematic devices come across as frank and highly intentional.

IJ The research process led me to look at how I could "signpost" certain periods. Sometimes the effects arose through improvisation. For instance, I show the sumptuous red banquet space where Yang Fudong and Zhao Tao have their tea ritual,

This spread and next page, *Ten Thousand Waves*, 2010, nine-screen installation, 35mm film transferred to HD video, approx. 50 minutes.

then cut to the archival Tiananmen Square parade sequences. Those things came together in editing. My process is not just about content; it also has to do with color and tonality. The red flags mimic the red interior; the color has a long history in China. Many decisions were made like that. I was trying to achieve several different levels through a radical montage technique—one that fosters a deliberate blurring between times. Take the sequence where we're evoking the Shanghai of the 1930s. The back lot shots have all sorts of present-day tourists and workers in the frame. Of course you could try to get rid of them all, but I thought, what's the point? In a way, that temporal clash evokes the tension, the sense of time travel, you often feel in Shanghai. Everything exists simultaneously.

MB You meditate on the production of cinema or cinematic culture, not only in this work but also in past work. It seems that you are forcing cinema to look at itself.

IJ I play with film structure to help

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generate visual pleasure in my work. By foregrounding cinematic devices, I show viewers how I construct images. It’s also a way to recall Shanghai film history and the literati art movement, both of which Yang Fudong evokes in his work—a way to refocus on cultural elements that were long repressed. I think maybe that’s what the archival sequence of marching in Tiananmen Square is about.

MB As an outsider, have you been accused of exoticizing your subject matter?

IJ As a black Western person, I have to be sensitive to how Asian people get stereotyped. There’s a thin line between deriving pleasure from images of another culture and

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lapsing into patronization or worse. While filming, I was acutely aware that Guilin has a huge legacy in traditional Chinese landscape painting. For me, the place is unavoidable,

because I really like that heritage and I want to use it well—both technically and artistically—in the mythology I’m trying to construct. Ordinarily, one doesn’t employ such refined visual strategies to make a political point, but I do.

MB What is the political statement?

IJ *Ten Thousand Waves* is my aesthetic response to the ghastly political campaign against immigration that was waged recently in the UK’s general election. In that sense, the film is as much a British work as it is a Chinese work. I attempt to look at population shifts in a much more historical manner. After all, people

from Fujian province have been on the move since before the European explorers set out.

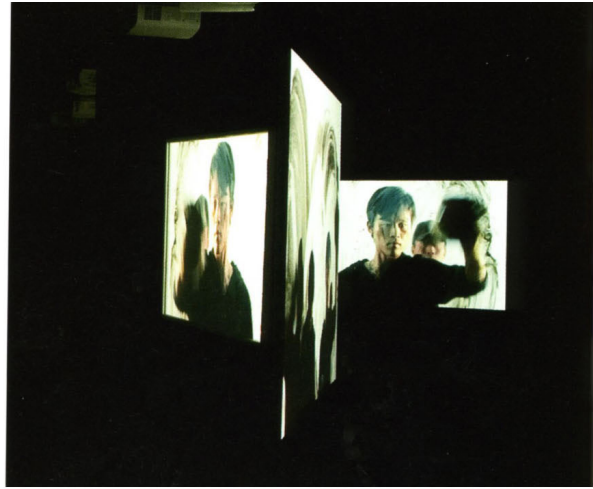
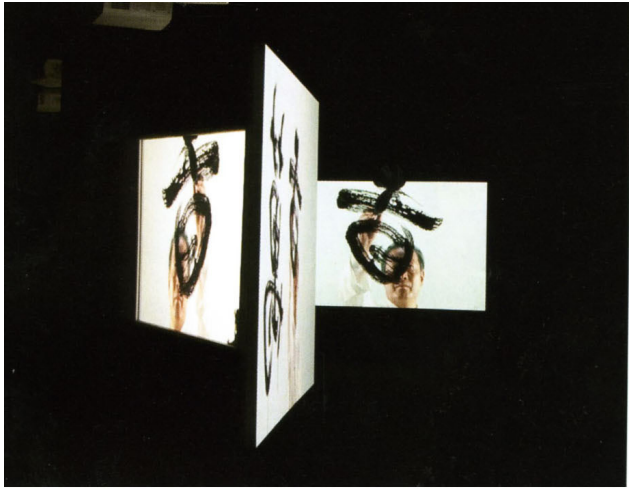
MB Your piece is extremely allegorical—indeed, the product of many interwoven allegories—and, for me, it’s almost prophetic.

IJ I was looking at the film last night with Maggie Cheung, and when we got to the final scene with the calligrapher Gong Fagen writing on glass, she said, “Wow, that’s fantastic!” Then the studio workers

started to wipe the text off, and she cried, “Oh no, you didn’t let them do that?” Well, yes, I do see a *tabula rasa* here in China. Things are being wiped away. But that scene also harks back to the Chinese immigrants lost—wiped out—in Morecambe Bay.

MB What was the response to the work in Sydney?

IJ I think there’s a much more rigorous engagement here in China, as there should be. The upcoming stop at the Hayward Gallery in London will yield something different again. *Ten Thousand Waves* will be part of a



small group show with the theme of spectatorship and movement, which will contextualize it in a new way. Working with the gallery's chief curator, Stephanie Rosenthal, led me to come up with the nine-screen format,

because we both wanted the audience to move. I'm trying to break down the normal ways that we watch moving images. Now, 50 minutes might be a long time for someone to stand on his or her feet. But I thought it was very interesting, yesterday at ShanghART, how the audience was in the piece, moving around. That physical integration creates its own *mise-en-scène*, an absorbing but somewhat uncomfortable experience—like immigration itself. ○

Ten Thousand Waves was shown at the Biennale of Sydney, May 12-Aug. 1, and at ShanghART Gallery, Shanghai, May 20-June 20. Following its current run at the Helsinki Festival, Kunsthalle Helsinki, Aug. 21-Oct. 10, the work appears in the group show "Move: Choreographing You," Hayward Gallery, London, Oct. 13, 2010-Jan. 9, 2011, and Haus der Kunst, Munich, Feb. 11-May 15, 2011. The film's U.S. debut takes place at the Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach, Dec. 2, 2010-Mar. 6, 2011. Photographs and lightbox works related to the project were shown at Roslyn Oxley Gallery, Sydney, June 10-July 10, and other examples will go on view at Victoria Miro Gallery, London, Oct. 7-Nov. 6.

MATHIEU BORYSEVICZ is an artist, curator and freelance writer who lives in Shanghai.
