

METRO PICTURES

McClure, Diana. "Isaac Julien Film Explores Frederick Douglass' 'Lessons,'" *Afropunk.com* (March 28, 2019).

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Isaac Julien, "Lessons of The Hour (Lessons of The Hour)" (2019); matt archival paper mounted on aluminum; 63 x 84 inches 160 x 213.29 cm.

In a rare stateside show, British artist and filmmaker, Isaac Julien, dazzles viewers with *Lessons of the Hour*, a 10-screen film installation about the iconic and formidable American hero, Frederick Douglass. The video piece is presented at New York's Metro Pictures Gallery, in a dimly lit, red rectangular room, on screens of varying sizes, which are hung at different heights, creating a sense of horizontal movement. This cinematic flow echoes Douglass' journey, from slavery to becoming perhaps the most prominent abolitionist and international orator of the 19th century. Simultaneously, the denseness of the installation and its small viewing area create a sense of restriction. This curatorial strategy forces viewers to simultaneously engage with multiple perspectives unfurling on each screen, and establishes a sense of the visceral experience of the psychological challenges faced by Douglass.

59 year-old Isaac Julien came of age as an artist during the formation of the Black Audio Film Collective in England in the early 1980s, a response to the country's institutional racism. Along with a handful of other London-based artists, Julien formed the Sankofa Film and Video Collective with the goal of establishing a Black film culture. Since then, he's become one of the most highly innovative film installation artists of his time, mixing creative artistry and relevant narrative content.



Isaac Julien, "Rapture 1846 (Lessons of The Hour)" (2019); matt structured paper mounted on aluminum; 59 1/16 x 82 11/16 inches, 150 x 210 cm.

Lessons of the Hour – Frederick Douglass poetically presents epics and contemporaries from Douglass' life, while riffing on the present day. The film is anchored by three of Douglass' most poignant speeches through voiceover and re-enactment: "Lessons of the Hour," which addresses post-Civil War lynching in the American South; "What to the Slave is the 4th of July?," a damning speech on the hypocrisy embedded within the national holiday; and, "Lecture on Pictures," a treatise on the importance of photography (the daguerreotype at that time) and its potential to change human relations through democratic access to self-representation.

In a scene that features contemporary 4th of July celebrations with fireworks in all their glory spanning a night sky, Douglass' voice can be heard expressing the point of view of Black men. "To him the celebration is a sham...Your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless...Your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery." Sentiments that are as true today as they were in the 19th century.

While the film is stunning and mesmerizing at multiple points, layered with meanings that may take a few viewings to find, the storytelling pairing of Douglass' words with Julien's imagery is exquisitely intertwined throughout. History remembers Frederick Douglass as a force to be reckoned with, Isaac Julien's work amplifies his persona persona and legacy even further.