

METRO PICTURES

Finlayson, Ciarán. "Subject Lessons," *Artforum.com* (May 6, 2019).

ARTFORUM



View of "Lessons of the Hour - Frederick Douglass," 2019. Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester.

In March, Isaac Julien's show "Lessons of the Hour – Frederick Douglass" premiered at the Memorial Art Gallery in Rochester, a week before it opened at Metro Pictures in New York during Armory Week. I caught a flight upstate for a weekend of events surrounding the debut and was toured around sites important both to Douglass's life and to Julien's process, including the George Eastman Museum, the graves of Anna Murray Douglass and Douglass, and Highland Park—the location of a 120-year-old bronze statue of Douglass, the first public monument in the country to memorialize a black American. Julien's experimental biopic, which is at the heart of the exhibition, covers Douglass's life in Rochester and his travels throughout England, Scotland, and Ireland on a trip undertaken in 1845 to secure the twenty-seven-year-old fugitive's legal freedom following the publication of his first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Splayed across ten screens of different sizes, the story unfolds nonlinearly and is narrated through excerpts from the letters, lectures, and memoirs of Douglass and his compatriots, playing on the relation of history to memory.

Set in Rochester, the video spectacularly recasts Douglass as a homegrown internationalist. Douglass and his family lived there for a quarter of a century, from 1847 until his family home mysteriously caught on fire. On a historical tour, Carvin Eison, the general manager of Rochester's Community Media Center, told me the fire was suspected to have been an act of arson committed by a local Klan cell. Eison, best known for his work on *July '64*, an Emmy-nominated documentary on the 1964 riots in Rochester, was responsible for erecting thirteen life-size statues of Douglass around the city as part of the "Re-Energizing the Legacy of Frederick Douglass" initiative commemorating his birthday bicentennial. Near the lost house, our group was directed to look toward an empty street corner where, four months ago, two white college students drunkenly ripped one of the commemorative monuments from the site and dragged it through the streets. A witness reported watching the young men haul the statue while yelling racist slurs. Eison noted the students have tellingly denied any racially motivated intent, saying they were so overcome with reverence for the historical figure that they accidentally destroyed his likeness. In light of the monuments debates of the past two years, community organizers in Rochester called for a restorative, rather than punitive, justice path forward for the alleged vandals, and by working with the district attorney, they are ensuring restorative justice becomes an option for other nonviolent offenders.



Isaac Julien and Mark Nash.

Douglass, the professional orator, is played by Ray Fearon, a member of the Royal Shakespeare Company, and the actor presents two great monologues that anchor *Lessons of the Hour*. Early on, Douglass, the “slave philosopher,” as Julien calls him, presents his witty and prescient “Lecture on Pictures,” which the artist lauds for anticipating Walter Benjamin’s reflections on photographic reproduction by seventy years. (The nature of this relationship isn’t specified.) In this sequence we watch Douglass, the most photographed American of the nineteenth century, sit for his portrait in a meticulous recreation of African American photographer J. P. Ball’s studio. Tintypes bloom in chemical solutions, and stereograms from slave states and portraits of victorious Northern soldiers punctuate Douglass’s meditation on the socially leveling function of the photograph. Julien adds personal intrigue to these words, seizing the opportunity to use the film to compensate for gaps in historical records by imaginatively foregrounding the women in Douglass’s life. His rarely photographed first wife, Anna Douglass, a free woman of color who helped Douglass escape slavery, joins him in the studio and in a picture gallery in London, while on another screen his German Jewish lover and translator, the abolitionist and journalist Otilie Assing (niece to Rahel Varnhagen), gazes at him longingly in the lecture hall of London’s Royal Academy of Arts.

The salon-style hang of the screens allows Julien to make what he terms a “horizontal montage,” which links a great number of images in the same visual instance without relegating any particular aspect to the background. This technique is where the film excels, disclosing the lesser-known aspects of its subject without scaling back its scope of inquiry. In this way, Douglass’s intellectual and public lives are portrayed simultaneous to the revelation of his home life and private reflections. One sees the domestically isolated Anna Douglass at her sewing machine, while her husband travels through Scotland, at times elated and suicidal about the necessity of his being there. Douglass’s famously scarred back, constantly invoked in speech and writing but never shown, is visible in a private moment of him disrobing in his Washington, DC, family home, while another screen shows his second wife, Helen Pitts Douglass, a white suffragist from near Rochester, presumably reading his accounts of such violence in their shared study, creating a complex relay of intimacy, voyeurism, and moral suasion among husband, wife, and us, the sympathetic abolitionist viewers. Anna Douglass’s needlework possibly scolding her husband’s infidelity (“Two is company. Three is a crowd!”) appears next to Douglass’s proudly displayed reproduction of Karl Becker’s 1880 painting *Othello Relating his Adventures to Desdemona*.



Isaac Julien, *Lessons of the Hour*, 2019, ten screen video installation, 35 mm and 4K video, color, sound, 28 minutes 46 seconds.
Anna Murray Douglass and Frederick Douglass (Sharlene Whyte and Ray Fearon).

Later in the film, the screens darken and open onto aerial views of the Chesapeake Bay at night, each building (Transamerica, Domino Sugar) a glowing monument to the afterlife of slavery. A monologue by Douglass cuts into the flyover, shifting him from public philosopher to polemicist as he recites his famously damning “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?,” castigating the US as a bastion of world-historical evil: “There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloody, than are the people in these United States, in this very hour.” As if to fulfill his earlier prophetic announcement that the “Daguerreian apparatus” has transformed the entire world into a “picture gallery,” the screens become a wall of footage from drone cameras of protests and riots following the 2015 death of Freddie Gray while in the custody of the Baltimore Police Department. Segments of the wall then give way, cutting to Douglass in a lecture hall, while the remaining panels illustrate his speech with images of slave ships and container ships, fireworks over Baltimore Harbor, and archival videos of white Americans in marching bands.

In a talk at the Memorial Art Gallery, Julien called his montage method a way of working “in a dialectical fashion,” but the placing of Douglass’s speech amid pictures of fireworks and parades from the 1950s, the side-by-side comparison of Baltimore Harbor in the past and in the present, and the customary scene of the cotton harvest in the Deep South (set to ominous music and the sound of cracking whips) used to complement an abolitionist lecture were all familiar gestures. The literal then-and-now relationships between these images put their arrangement at some remove from dialectics, which ought to amplify tensions between thought and its objects. Even the powerful, maddening drone footage of the Baltimore uprising secured from the FBI via a FOIA request, which was brilliantly inverted so the forward-looking infrared video appeared perversely more humanizing in its chilling reduction of social activity to undifferentiated biological energy, ultimately found its place in a chain of already given association. At times, the installation undercut the profundity and strangeness of Douglass’s life and words by turning to obvious juxtapositions.



Baltimore, May 2, 2014.

I lived in Baltimore when Marshall “Eddie” Conway was released after serving almost forty-four years of a wrongful life sentence for his involvement with the Baltimore Black Panthers. I saw him lecture during his first public appearance in 2014. Speaking at an anarchist bookstore on a thoroughfare once the heart of black Baltimore, his talk there came closer to the requisite wit, irony, and reversal required of dialectical thought—after two months back on the outside he observed, in the wake of civil rights, in the wake of black power, “things are ten times worse.” I returned the following year when the Justice for Freddie Gray movement kicked off. On May 2, following State Attorney Marilyn Mosby’s decision to charge the six arresting officers, we marched through a West Baltimore that could only be described as under military occupation. Helicopters flew overhead, while militarized police and three thousand members of the National Guard lined the streets and rode through the city in camouflaged armored trucks. On the largest day of demonstrations, after the march past the prison and bombed-out neighborhoods to the seat of local government, thousands strong and growing became part of a politicized street festival. A comrade who was a longtime community organizer turned and asked in disbelief, “Now how do we take over the city?”

Julien’s film ends showing its abolitionist hero similarly on the precipice of something impossible. Having taken his horse to climb Arthur’s Seat, an ancient volcano overlooking Edinburgh, he becomes the archetypal Rückenfigur in search of the sublime. Confronted with absolute freedom and absolute subjection in a tableau straight out of Caspar David Friedrich, the newly manumitted Douglass casts his eyes up to heaven and into, as James Baldwin called it, “the sunlit prison of the American dream.”