

METRO PICTURES

Jeffries, Stuart. "Isaac Julien's Angel of Morecambe," *The Guardian* (September 30, 2010): 20-21.

the guardian

Arts 30.09.10

The angel of Morecambe

What does this goddess have to do with the Chinese cocklepickers who drowned? Film-maker Isaac Julien explains all to **Stuart Jeffries**





'Realism – why bother?' . . . Isaac Julien with an image from *Ten Thousand Waves*.

Isaac Julien niftily picks up a salmon dumpling with his chopsticks. “What I’m trying to do is effect an epistemological break with a series of artistic strategies,” he says. “I’m trying deliberately to frustrate the ontological gaze of the spectator. And I’m breaking with realistic traditions of cinematic narration by suturing different elements together to make a multi-temporal piece.”

We’re in the Shanghai Blues restaurant in London, at the start of a four-hour journey in which the 50-year-old installation artist and film-maker will try to explain, and make me appreciate, *Ten Thousand Waves*, the dizzyingly complex nine-screen installation he’s been working on for the past six years.

I feel slightly worried. I’ve not seen *Waves* in its entirety yet, and my guide is someone who has swallowed not just some excellent dim sum, but also the forbidding language of film theory. Julien tells me that *Waves*’s starting point was the 23 Chinese cocklepickers who drowned in Morecambe Bay in 2004. This isn’t surprising: his work has often engaged with immigrants and their journeys; his own parents came to London from Saint Lucia.

In 2007, Julien made *Western Union: Small Boats*, a multi-screen work about “clandestines” trying to cross the Mediterranean from Libya to escape war and famine. Julien’s dramas have always been deliberately aestheticised, striving for a poetic quality; you know you’re not watching a TV news bulletin. His impressionistic *Looking for Langston*, about the poet of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes, won a prize at the 1989 Berlin film festival.

So *Waves*, while mourning victims of globalisation, has a discombobulating nature. In the course of its 50 minutes, we see the great Chinese actor Maggie Cheung, best known for *Hero* and *In the Mood for Love*, play the goddess Mazu, fabled in the Fujian province from where the drowned immigrants hailed. According to myth, Mazu would assure the safety of seafaring folk as they struggled amid 10,000 waves. This failed, sad-eyed goddess becomes our spirit guide to Julien’s vision of China.

We go to a nearby screening room. Julien isn't the first to make a film inspired by the cocklepickers. In 2007, Nick Broomfield gave us *Ghosts*. "I wanted to straddle the line between drama and documentary," wrote Broomfield at the time. "On the one hand, using real people and improvised dialogue; but on the other, imposing more of a narrative structure. Drama always works best when it feels real, anyway."

Julien, however, eschews realism and overt narrative. "I admired *Ghosts*," he says. "But I always think, 'Realism – why bother?' There are other more fruitful approaches. That's why I don't lament the passing of the Film Council: it didn't engage with innovation in the moving image at all."

His first move was to invite Wang Ping, the Shanghai-born Chinese-American poet, to England, to write a poem about Morecambe Bay. Called *Small Boats*, it is intoned over Julien's images; music from Jah Wobble and the Chinese Dub Orchestra also features. At one point, Wang's verse about the immigrants widens its focus:

*We know the tolls: 23, Rockaway, NY;
58, Dover, England; 18, Shenzhen; 25,
South Korea; and many more.*

*We know the methods: walk, swim, fly,
metal container, back of a lorry,
ship's hold.*

*We know how they died: starved, raped,
dehydrated, drowned, suffocated,
homesick, heartsick, worked to death,
working to death.*

We know we may end in the same boat.

Julien visited China repeatedly, to immerse himself in its culture. "When I was a kid, I watched kung fu films and later I watched lots of Chinese cinema, but I'd never spent time there. I'm an outsider looking in, I guess." He steeped himself in the mythology of the south-east, met up with artists in Shanghai whom he roped into his project, and attended a conference of artists called Farewell to Post-Colonialism.

We settle down to watch a one-screen, miniature version of *Waves*. The screen before us splits into nine sections across which images flit, dissolve and riff off one another. Editing it, I suggest, must have been the very devil. "There's a very good piece of software for editing multi-screen, time-based installations," says Julien. Of course there is.

When *Waves* receives its UK premiere in October, at London's Hayward Gallery, there will be nine screens arranged at angles on the ground floor: a micro-labyrinth through which spectators will be able to wander. But they will never see what I experience here: a simultaneous vision of the whole work. "That's what I mean by frustrating the ontological gaze," says Julien. "In the gallery, you won't be able to see the whole work at once, so any narrative you establish is necessarily fragmented."

'They subverted me and I liked it'

Julien has choreographed viewers in this way before. "In one work, I put chairs in the middle of several screens so you have to look over your shoulder to see the screen behind. The spectators would move chairs to the side so they could see the whole thing. They subverted me, which I liked." The freedom Julien gives his spectators, he says, makes them co-conspirators in his project, each creating their own artwork before they hit the gift shop.

The installation moves from harrowing recordings of emergency calls at the time of the tragedy to lovely images of Beijing-born master calligrapher Gong Fagen at work; there are ghost stories, reconstructions of pre-war Shanghai movies, and flickering images of Pudong, the Shanghai district that has become China's hub of crony capitalism (one economist recently described Shanghai as "the world's most successful Potemkin metropolis" – meaning there is little behind the moneyed facade). Julien fits a great deal into 50 minutes: not just the tragedy of human trafficking, but a shorthand, parodic account of China's march towards modernity.

Julien has certainly done something innovative with the moving image here: the relationship between each of the screens is redolent of that between orchestral instruments, allowing for contrapuntal effects as well as variations on and restatements of earlier themes. The images are sumptuous Sino stereotypes, though: at one moment, we seem to be watching a simulacrum of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*; at another, a recreation of the east-meets-west clubland of 1920s Shanghai (complete with silk dress-clad prostitutes waylaying fedora-wearing clients). Hasn't Julien fallen prey to depicting China through western eyes, making it unedifyingly exotic? "No! They're parodic of those stereotypes. They're representations of representations, subversions of a western exotic."

Tea on a balcony facing east

As if to prove the point, we watch a striking sequence in which Cheung seems to be floating, goddess-like, over British seas and Pudong alike. But then a man in a red hoodie wanders into shot, working the wires that hold Cheung aloft. Any suspension of disbelief about the high-flying white-robed deity is extinguished. So yes, her representation is subverted. "I thought, 'Why not do this? Why not have a multi-temporal thing where you can see the crew filming in a Shanghai studio backlot from the 20s?' I wanted to draw attention to artifice and, at the same time, show the skills of the people who aren't usually regarded as artists. They guy who kept Maggie afloat was doing something very skilled, very artistic."

We head to the Victoria Miro gallery, where Julien's accompanying photographs to *Waves* are being hung: they are huge images you'd readily take for exotic depictions of China, past and present, if you hadn't heard the artist explain why they're not.

I finish by taking tea on the balcony with this black, gay, film-theory swallowing graduate of St Martin's art college, now a globetrotting art-world doyen, eternally seeking new ways of looking. From the balcony, we gaze out towards the East End and the Bow estate where Julien grew up. He has come a long way.

Will his family be at the show's opening? "My sister and her children will, and that'll be great. But mum probably won't." He shrugs. "She doesn't have to if it's not her thing." This is a shame: she'll miss one of the most mesmerising experiences her adopted home city has to offer today.