

METRO PICTURES

Jacobs, Joseph. "Three Video Artists Who Are Invigorating the Medium," *BBook.com* (March 26, 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.

Go to Chelsea art galleries on any given day and you are bound to see at least one video installation, if not several. But it is quite remarkable to discover three installations in three contiguous galleries, and just as remarkable to encounter three exceptionally strong videos – especially since so much video falls flat on its face. Perhaps we should not be so surprised since the three galleries, Metro Pictures, Gladstone, and Marianne Boesky, all in a row in West 24th Street, are major galleries with impressive track records.



Isaac Julien, "J.P. Ball Salon 1867 (Lessons of The Hour)" (2019); digital print on Gloss inkjet paper mounted on aluminum; 22 7/16 x 29 15/16 inches 57 x 76 cm.

Next door to Gladstone, Metro Pictures is presenting Isaac Julien, a 59-year-old British artist who is best known as a filmmaker, although he produces photographs as well, which are included in the show. In 1991 he won a *Semaine de la Critique* prize at the Cannes Film Festival for his *Young Soul Rebels*, and his expertise as an award-winning filmmaker can be seen in his *Lessons of the Hour – Frederick Douglass*. Its production values are extremely high, with dazzling cinematography, costumes, and sound effects. And the work is extremely complex. It consists of 10 screens suspended from the ceiling with wires, and set against a rich red fabric on the wall, almost transforming the screens into paintings seen installed in a formal nineteenth century gallery or room.

Julien describes the installation as "a poetic meditation on the life and times of Frederick Douglass," and the imagery shows fragments of Douglass life, especially focusing on his physical and emotional experience. We see scenes of Douglass, a runaway slave, walking in nature, often leading a horse, and by the seaside, supposedly in 1840s Ireland or England where, as he wrote in his book, for the first time in his life he felt free, and where he was lecturing as well as raising money to purchase his freedom. We see the interior of a charming, nineteenth-century home, where Douglass lived, and settings of contemporaneous train and carriage travel. The film also underscores Douglass's fascination with newly invented photography, an inexpensive reproduction process that would become a social class equalizer. We also see images of cotton fields. Julien's installation includes early twentieth-century, black-and-white film footage of a lynching and train travel.

While multi-channel installations are commonplace, Julien use's of the technique is brilliant, for the ten screens give the work a sense of how the historical past is for us living in the present highly fragmented. We see history not as a continuum, but rather as an accumulation of facts. His imagery is extremely visceral, pulling us into the scene, making us feel as though we are there in the nineteenth century and directly experiencing what Douglass himself experienced.