

METRO PICTURES

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Isaac Julien METRO PICTURES

"It seems to us next to impossible for white men to take likenesses of black men, without most grossly exaggerating their distinctive features," Frederick Douglass wrote in 1849. "And the reason is obvious. Artists, like all other white persons, have adopted a theory respecting the distinctive features of Negro physiognomy." Douglass, an escaped slave turned abolitionist writer and orator, understood all too well how the racist image-repertoire of white America structured its relationship with its black citizens, and the ways in which the literal dehumanization of people of color not only impelled but was also impelled by the dominant culture's cruel imagination. Recognizing the opportunities presented by photography for reclaiming and restructuring black subjectivity, Douglass was a vocal champion of the newly available medium's potential, writing and speaking about it at length. He was also an enthusiastic sitter for portraits; in fact, he would become the single most photographed American of the nineteenth century.



Isaac Julien, *The North Star (Lessons of the Hour)*, 2019, inkjet print, 63 × 84".

Isaac Julien's exhibition at Metro Pictures, a deeply thoughtful and meticulously rendered consideration of Douglass and his relationship to photography, brought the activist and statesman to vivid, high-definition life. The show was built around an immersive ten-screen film installation that took its title, *Lessons of the Hour*, 2019, from a speech Douglass gave in Washington, DC, in January 1894—just a year before his death—and it managed to endow its subject with the same charismatic brilliance and regal moral ferocity for which the man himself was celebrated. The centerpiece of the film is an address, voiced by an actor portraying Douglass, from a podium before a well-heeled crowd gathered in an elegant wood-paneled room. The oration collects elements of "Lessons" as well as Douglass's 1852 speech "What to the Slave is the 4th of July?" and his 1861 "Lecture on Pictures." When he publicly read the last work—on the same stage in Boston where just a year before he had been physically attacked during a memorial service for the executed abolitionist John Brown—Douglass extolled the "mighty power" of photography, namely its ability to make "subjective nature

objective." Here, Julien—whose work has often poetically interrogated the boundaries between the fictive and the documentary—complicates the relationship between these two realms, engineering an imaginative scenario that conjures the truths of Douglass and his time as plainly as any original source artifact could.

The installation was accompanied by a suite of sumptuously colored large-scale photographs, shot during the film's production, which depict various figures from Douglass's life such as Anna Murray and Helen Pitts, his first and second wives, respectively, and J. P. Ball, the African American photographer who took many of Douglass's portraits. The photographic portion of the show also included a series of contemporary tintypes depicting the actors playing Douglass, Murray, and Ball, along with a collection of stills from Julien's first film, *Who Killed Colin Roach?*, 1983, a reflection on the death of a twenty-one-year-old black Londoner in police custody. The juxtaposition summoned the same kinds of strategic spatiotemporal misalignments that animate the film *Lessons of the Hour*: Shots of Douglass in Scotland, where he gave dozens of antislavery speeches, and of the hands of Southern slaves harvesting cotton against a soundscape of the foreman's whistling whip; scenes of Douglass in an autumnal wood beneath a thick-limbed tree, intercut with black-and-white footage of the dangling feet of a lynched man; views of Douglass's Washington, DC, home, today preserved as a historical site, and of the man in his thunderous prime, resplendent in a blue frock coat, standing before a rapt audience in both period and contemporary dress. Near the end of the film, the setting shifts to an aerial view of the Inner Harbor of modern-day Baltimore, the city from which Douglass successfully escaped his bondage. As we hear him deliver a booming righteous jeremiad against the patent injustice of American society, Fourth of July fireworks fill the night sky and then fade from view—dissipating like the phantasmal promises of freedom and equality on which the United States was founded, and on which it still bases its shamefully triumphalist national imaginaries.

—Jeffrey Kastner