

METRO PICTURES

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Isaac, you are an internationally acclaimed artist and filmmaker known for technically complex and politically charged visual installations. Born and raised in London, graduated in 1985 from Saint Martin's School of Art, where you studied painting and fine art film. You later co-founded Sankofa Film and Video Collective in 1983, and were also a founding member of Normal Films in 1991. Well-known for films like *Looking for Langston* (1989), a poetic treatment of gay black poet Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance, and other studies of racial and sexual identity, and cultural displacement. In short, what does cinema have that other art forms don't?

That's a really interesting question about cinema these days. Cinema as an art form is in some sort of crisis. For example, because of the development of new technologies like Netflix, cinema has been serialised; we watch movies on our phones. I would say that me making multiple-screen works and exhibiting them in galleries or museums is part of this displacement of cinema, of finding it in different places and formats.

In a sense, what I've been trying to do is rescue cinema, explore its parameters and expand some of its genres in a space where we are able to experiment them differently (a museum context, mainly). So I would say that my works are very much a march to cinema. But at the same time, it recognises that this process of digitalisation can present exciting new ways of building and experimenting from a cinematic origin.



In any case, you are known for trying to break down the barriers that exist between different artistic disciplines, drawing from and commenting on film, dance, photography, music, theatre, painting and sculpture, and merging them to build a visually powerful narrative. What made you pursue an artistic career?

Because of two main reasons really. One is that cinema, generally, became a quite conservative place in terms of experimentation. But also, at the same time, the advent of new technologies has placed cinema into new, different realms. So now, we can see that even VR is appropriating cinematic forms that are viewed completely differently from how we ordinarily watch cinema. I would say that I bring together sculpture and theatrical forms in cinema and create a choreography of screens in a space where narratives can be followed.

I'm still interested in narratives. I'm still interested in telling stories to some extent, but I think that in a sort of more 'broken art' sense. This question of fragmentation and of how we view/see is something that we all participate in these days. My argument would be that I had to revert to the galleries to try to salvage some of the things I like in cinema, so it's a kind of really ironic position to be in. I find really interesting the role museums are playing for cinema in the 21st century.



The subject of your body of work is always related to social themes and the human as individual. You treat art as a means of raising social awareness on globally critical topics. What are your references for such a way of storytelling? And where do you find the inspiration to create?

In a way, the starting point is perhaps connected to one's own narrative and own biography. I'm the son of parents from West India and the Caribbean, subjects who came to Britain in the search for one's quest for certain questions connected to identity, which is already a question that I'm trying to raise in my work. That's the case if I think about works like *Paradise Omeros*, which was shot in St. Lucia in collaboration with Derek Walcott, or if I think about earlier works like *Looking for Langston*. But in a way, one of the things that also interests me in a kind of more philosophical sense is the way in which technologies change the rules of representation somehow – and I think this radical rewriting has been taking place.

We know that new technologies are also quite suggestive and have led to certain issues and problems, but I think we can utilise them to try to make different experiences. I think this has been one of the ways to use them I've been more interested in – trying to move beyond the identitarian questions and into the global sphere. That's why I've shot in China or Dubai, for example. I'm obviously very interested in biography, in history, but also in how to deposit those things in a way that shows a new interpretation for a new audience. I do that through technologies and the way that they enable me to use multiple perspectives so that the works are structured in the multiple screens – such as in *Playtime*.



“I am someone who is very interested in global culture,” you once said. Indeed, your film *Playtime* explores global themes of the circulation of capital, economic disparity, migration, and geopolitics, and it offers rhetorical yet intimate narratives through six main protagonists: the artist, the hedge fund manager, the auctioneer, the house worker, the art dealer, and the reporter. Starring James Franco, Maggie Cheung, Mercedes Cabral, Colin Salmon, Ingvar Eggert Sigurðsson, along with world-famous auctioneer Simon de Pury, who plays himself, *Playtime* is best described as part documentary and part fiction. Could you tell us a little bit more about the creation of these characters and how personally close they are to you?

I would say that, for example, in some of my earlier works like *True North* or *Western Union: Small Boats*, which is from 2004 and it's about people from Africa heading to Italy, what I did was use the metaphor of cinema – *The Leopard*, which is a classic of Italian cinema – to articulate that through the protagonist of Vanessa Myrie. She is a character that appears in many of my works, such as *True North* and *Baltimore*. In a way, you could say that the migratory aspect in my work has developed from questions connected to the flows of people to what aesthetics get developed from the movements in art and how do they poeticize the form.

What happens is that people tend to believe questions as just politics or just questions around identity. And my questions would be, ‘What are the poetics of migration? How does that affect the way people experience art?’ I think there's a really exciting path to try and shift the way in which people view these debates. Because they tend to view these questions of migration nearly as problems to be solved, problems that black people may have. The migration base is really of forms white people have, and they get projected onto people of colour, essentially.



In terms of content, there is the feeling of looking into the mirror, maybe through the presentation of such diverse characters and themes, but it definitely feels like we all can relate to some aspects of the film. What emotions do you want to evoke in the audience? How do you expect them to react?

In *Playtime*, we've got seven protagonists, and I think some people feel identified in the characters; some people are doing well under capitalism and some others are not. In *Playtime*, what I'm trying to do is to emulate society.

***Playtime* is set across three cities defined by their role in relation to capital: London, a city transformed by the deregulation of the banks; Reykjavik, where the 2008 global financial crisis began; and Dubai, one of the Middle East's burgeoning financial markets. Considering that it is a film from 2014, would you say that the situation you present is still current to these days?**

We have Brexit, we have the yellow vests and we have Trump. All of these things are directly linked to what happened in 2008. In *Playtime*, we are looking at a really particular moment in time. In a way, looking at it in 2019, there is this very strong currency because of what's happening now – not only in politics but also in this very raw articulation of competing for resources. We have a group of people competing for resources and because some groups didn't have the access, in a way, all of the things that were made to be fulfilled weren't quite fulfilled. So in a sense, there is dissatisfaction and that is produced, it's much more as if we produced a state of instability. In relation to art – the kind of art that's been produced – we've seen a move towards the commodification of art as objects on the one hand. But on the other hand, I think there has been a move around a more discursive practice. For example, take the result of the Venice Biennale: Arthur Jafa won the Golden Lion. And if we think also in relation to the fact that the person who won the honourable mention was also an African black artist.



For the most part, each of the characters is isolated from other people, focusing on their singular monetary pursuit. Generally speaking, there is not much art about money. And there is certainly not much art about art as an asset class. And it seems to be a contradiction between message and form over *Playtime*; a beautiful and absorbing art experience, appealing to one section of society that is hungry for artistic consumption on an increasingly global economic inequality. What is the personal reflection behind such narrative?

Yes, in a way, *Playtime* takes the narrative of the global inequality and, to a certain extent, the reason behind this work is the mirror reflection on what is the art world's response to this. There has been this tendency of the commodification of art, so my question is, what role does contemporary art take up in this juncture? Because it's very critical. Maybe there is a way in which, because movie works and video art can be so quickly taken up and commodified into the market, they remain as one of the mediums able to reflect on the conditions of the industry.

So in other works, maybe in the future we will look back on a particular moment and analyse what happened, and I'm hoping that *Playtime* will be useful in offering another perspective. That's why it is being shown at a number of cities around the world – Los Angeles, Tokyo, São Paulo, Amsterdam, Madrid, etc. It's in collections as well. It's like creating a massive kind of value.



From an aesthetic point of view, your presentation at LACMA consists of a huge installation of seven channels, a magnificent cinematic device that is part of the language you make, similar to what we saw in *Ten Thousand Waves* in 2010. What are your requirements when conceiving such immersive exhibitions? How would you describe this experience for the audience?

It is kind of similar to the exhibition of *Ten Thousand Waves*. I've been basically working with this sort of colour blue. I'm thinking of blue in terms of the significance it has had in African-American culture – the blue in the Derek Jarman film called *Blue*. For me, that colour represents a certain sublimity, it is in a way sublime, but it is also a colour that has a heightened sense for the audience. I want them to be reminded when they enter that it is not a cinema; it is a gallery space. It is a work of art, so I think it's really about creating that kind of significance around it and engagement.



At some point in the story, there is the revealing of how the film is being made. The whole crew comes on scene, which seems to remind us not to forget ourselves in the fiction, and gives the story a more documentary-like form. How much does *Playtime* talk about you?

To a certain extent, *Playtime* is a sort of documentary because all of the characters are based on interviews that I conducted, so actually, it derives from a documentary impulse. Personal stories and experiences that colleagues of mine had experienced during the crash in 2008 and their various responses to them in terms of how it affected them. Also, what I am trying to do sometimes is walk around members of the filmmaking itself and the film crew. That adds a different element of reflection. We can see they are invited, in a way, to witness the making of the film as well. That is an element which was given access to when we edited the film. And all of this is about just really making the audience conscious about what they are looking at.

What would you be doing if it wasn't an artistic career in filmmaking?

I'd probably be involved in some different form of art. I think that if I hadn't been involved in film, I probably would have been involved in painting or performance work.

What is left to achieve in the artistic career of Isaac Julien?

I think there are always things to achieve! I mean, I have many ideas and projects that I want to work on, and I think what it would be nice is to see how these challenge the impulse of the market. For example, today, Tate Britain is showing *Looking for Langston*, so that's thirty-eight years and it's a work that's still very relevant. I think that's quite a good test of time, to be able to expand the significance of a work that does not just respond to the impulse of the market.