

# METRO PICTURES

Spence, Rachel. "Isaac Julien on Iceland, climate change and the inspiration for his latest film," *FinancialTimes.com* (December 2, 2015).

## FINANCIAL TIMES



Isaac Julien at his studio in November 2015. Photo: Anna Huix.

A beautiful woman glides through an ice-cloaked landscape with alert grace. Around her glaciers dissolve in spectacular yet melancholy symmetries. Strange formations, both natural and man-made, present themselves as if reminding us that a hidden seam of the fantastic runs through every landscape. Captured across multiple screens, the film unfolds with the forlorn rhythm of an elegy.

That languorous pulse is at odds with the reality of the shoot. "Iceland has had its fair share of global warming, so the weather fluctuates a great deal," recalls the man behind the lens, British artist Isaac Julien. "There are storms and gales so it became very arduous, very difficult. We had to hire about 15 snowmobiles. Going over a glacier is difficult." Julien makes frantic rolling motions with his hands, while grinning amiably. "You can't get insurance because it's dangerous. On the fifth day, everyone said, 'We have to get out of here.' Essentially, the ravine was melting. The ice was dripping over us."

The film, which was commissioned by Rolls-Royce's contemporary art programme, is presented this week in Miami, in partnership with the National YoungArts Foundation. Entitled *Stones Against Diamonds*, the work will be housed in the foundation's stunning Jewel Box building. The glamorous, sun-kissed showcase may be in stark contrast to its gruelling birth pangs but does not feel entirely alien to Julien's plush studio in Hackney, east London. On a sunlit November day, with the canal sparkling beyond the long window, a state-of-the-art screening room, Eames chairs and a painting by Glenn Ligon, a good friend and another of the few black artists to have scaled the pinnacle of the contemporary art world. The low-key luxury testifies to Julien's status as one of Britain's leading film and video artists.

In person Julien is a generous, gentle, and quietly compelling conversationalist. Rotund of face and figure, he carries himself with the same throwaway elegance as he wears his chic black suit and loose white shirt. When he asks politely if his assistants could put the heating up — “they always turn it down when I am out!” — it’s hard to imagine that, even on a melting ice cap, command-and-control is ever his style.

This level of achievement was never a given for a gay black man born in London’s East End in 1960. Julien’s father had a “variety of jobs” including that of electronic engineer; his mother was in the nursing profession. They wanted their son to become a lawyer but Julien’s path was mapped out from adolescence when he befriended a “group of radical film-makers and photographers.”

After exploring photography as a teenager, he studied painting and fine art film at St Martin’s School of Art. As a painter he was clearly talented. Some of his canvases were shown at the Royal Academy summer exhibition, while others were sold sufficiently lucratively to pay for his first Super 8 films. Ultimately the camera claimed his imagination, he says, because it was “more contemporary.”

For over a decade, Julien immersed himself in feature films. Among his achievements is the 1989 documentary *Looking for Langston* about the 1930s Harlem poet Langston Hughes, and a gay coming-of-age story *Young Soul Rebels* (1991), which won an award at Cannes. By the late 1990s however, he was turning towards art in a bid for “more autonomy.”

Unlike the linear narratives still *de rigueur* in moviedom, art’s looser boundaries allowed Julien to explore his innate lyricism through the plurality of screens that has become his trademark. Nominated for the Turner Prize in 2001, over the past decade his work has become too multi-textured to fit the label of “black and gay” under which many critics once filed him. His gift for mysterious yet evocative juxtapositions was exquisitely displayed in *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010), a nine-screen installation that interwove images from mythical and modern China in a homage to the cockle-pickers who died at Morecambe Bay in 2004.

Unfolding across 15 screens, *Stones Against Diamonds* is his most layered creation yet. Its seed was sown in 2013 when Julien was stunned by SESC Pompeia, an arts and leisure centre in São Paulo designed by the Italian-born, Brazil-based modernist Lina Bo Bardi. In particular, he loved the way its man-meets-nature aesthetic — the building’s brutalist lines are softened by kooky windows which resemble cave mouths — proved so inviting to a varied clientele.

“It’s an extraordinary place, [which welcomes] this huge mix, from people who come to read their newspapers in the library to business people and mums and dads doing flamenco,” he enthuses.

Bo Bardi’s gift for fluidity chimed with Julien’s own shape-shifting poetics. With admirable disregard for logistical difficulties, he transplanted her designs, including a set of glass easels and a staircase, on to his gale-swept glacier. “The day we placed the easels in the ice cave was a truly magical moment,” he whispers, still sounding awed.

The film’s title was inspired by a letter Bo Bardi wrote to her husband in which, says Julien, she argued that “stones are inherently more beautiful than diamonds which as we know are sculpted. It’s the idea that natural beauty is not valued [in the commercial sense] yet ecologically it’s invaluable,” he pauses, then adds softly, “And it’s melting.”