

METRO PICTURES

Jury, Louise. "Isaac Julien: 'London is the most interesting arts capital in Europe, if not the world,'" *LondonEveningStandard.co.uk* (January 1, 2014).



Making waves: renowned film-maker Isaac Julien

It is a cinematic epic with a crack cast by a black artist film-maker from London.

But, no, this is not *12 Years a Slave*, the Bafta-nominated Golden Globe-winning movie by Steve McQueen. This is *Playtime* by Isaac Julien, a seven-screen installation about capital and capitalism starring James Franco, James Bond actor Colin Salmon and Maggie Cheung, of Jackie Chan's *Police Story* series and arthouse hits such as Wong Kar-Wai's *In the Mood for Love*. Auctioneer Simon de Pury plays himself. It will be unveiled at the Victoria Miro gallery next week.

At 53, Julien is internationally renowned and has been making waves for a quarter of a century. He was picking up the critics' prize at the 1991 Cannes Film Festival for *Young Soul Rebels*, the movie debut of Sophie Okonedo, when McQueen was still at Goldsmiths. But as he does final editing in 3 Mills Studios, just a stone's throw from where he grew up in east London, Julien demonstrates a magnanimous satisfaction.



Perhaps he can afford to. While he lost the Turner Prize in 2001 to Martin Creed and is yet to be honoured with a major retrospective on home turf, his last work, *Ten Thousand Waves*, a nine-screen installation inspired by the 2004 Chinese immigrant cockle-pickers tragedy in Morecambe Bay, is currently on show in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It has also been bought by galleries and institutions worldwide, including the National Museum of Norway, the LVHM — Louis Vuitton — Foundation, the Brandhorst Museum in Munich and the LUMA Foundation of influential collector Maja Hoffmann. The black experience has been a theme in works stretching back to an early video documentary, *Who Killed Colin Roach?*, about the young black man who died in Stoke Newington police station in 1983, and *Looking for Langston* in 1989, about the Harlem poet Langston Hughes.

He and McQueen are not alone as black artists currently celebrated in major institutions, he adds, pointing to John Akomfrah, 56, whose three-screen installation *The Unfinished Conversation*, investigating cultural identity, is now at Tate Britain. “*Ten Thousand Waves* is on show at MoMA, Steve is up for 10 Bafta nominations and Akomfrah is at the Tate. There needs to be an acknowledgement of that,” he says.

He has been thinking about achievement “a lot” in the wake of the lawful killing verdict on Mark Duggan, whose death sparked the 2011 London riots. Julien thinks there is a need for “a different kind of representation” of black men — and more role models.

As role models go, there are few more fascinating. Julien, a bearhug of a man with a ready laugh, grew up in Bow, black in an area riven with racism, homosexual where a gay culture was yet to develop. His Creole-speaking parents had come from St Lucia and his late father, Joseph, worked at the Ford car plant in Dagenham as a porter; his mother, Rosemary, was a care assistant. But he always had aspirations. “When I was growing up, I knew that I didn’t want to work in a factory.”

In the days before the YBAs and hipsters invaded Hoxton and Shoreditch, Julien found his east London arts education in the local Kingsley Hall community centre, a hotbed of artists and performers. He met Astrid Proll, formerly of the German Baader-Meinhof terrorist gang, was taught photography by a New Zealand anarchist and documentary film-making with Alan Hayling, who would later work at Channel 4 and the BBC. “I saw this bohemian crowd and I thought, ‘This is really interesting.’”

As he got older, clubbing was a passion and he rubbed shoulders with Bryan Ferry, Bianca Jagger and even Andy Warhol at the Embassy Club in Old Bond Street. When he went to St Martins School of Art, the Forrest Gump-like encounters continued, drinking in a pub in King’s Cross alongside the Pet Shop Boys and film director Derek Jarman.

Julien soaked it all up. And does so today. Asked what he does when not working, he talks of seeing Wagner’s Ring cycle in Paris and Phyllida Lloyd’s all-female Julius Caesar at the Donmar and declares: “London is the most interesting arts capital in Europe, if not the world.” He and his partner, Mark Nash, an academic, live in a Sixties flat in Bloomsbury to be close to the film facilities of Soho.

It appears natural that he would call on friends such as James Franco to star in his new work. They met a few summers ago when Franco, himself an artist as well as an actor, was living in London and attending private views at Victoria Miro’s Hoxton/Islington border gallery, where Peter Doig, Grayson Perry, Elmgreen & Dragset and Yayoi Kusama are among the big names represented.



A silent three-minute edited version of scenes from the resulting installation, including Franco as the art dealer — “A very controversial character but also a generous person,” says Julien — acted as a curtain-raiser when it was shown in Times Square, New York, in the run-up to Christmas. *Playtime* explores three places defined by their relation to finance — London, a metropolis transformed by the deregulation of the banks and a centre of the commercial art world; Reykjavik, which was at the forefront of the 2008 financial crisis; and Dubai, one of the Middle East’s fastest-growing markets.

The ideas behind the work follow on from *Ten Thousand Waves* and the victims who died “searching for a better life,” Julien says. “The question of capital kept on coming up. People were seeking capital in one form or another to better their lives, sometimes at fatal risk to their lives.” And friends of Julien’s were also hit by the 2008 financial crash. An Icelandic photographer lost his home and his family when his lucrative career in advertising dried up. “This is a portrait of that, in a poetic way.”

But the photographer’s story is woven with others; a Filipino maid played by Mercedes Cabral, a hedge-fund manager played by Salmon. Filmed in Iceland, Dubai and the City of London last year, the 70-minute work will be shown with *Kapital*, a documentary with Marxist academic David Harvey exploring similar ideas with critics and theorists.

The project was “expensive and quite complex, with lots of challenges” — just like making a more mainstream movie. But *Playtime*, which takes its name and some inspiration from the film of the same title by French film-maker Jacques Tati, is more than a movie, it’s a “total experience,” he says. “*Playtime* is really about making an artwork that is an event — and people don’t even have to pay for this one.”