

Timo Valjakka, "Critics' Picks: Isaac Julien Kunsthalle Helsinki," **Artforum.com**, September 2010

ARTFORUM

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Isaac Julien
KUNSTHALLE HELSINKI
Nervanderkatur 3
August 21–October 10



Isaac Julien, *Mazu, Silence*, 2010, color photograph, 71 x 94 1/2".

Ten Thousand Waves, 2010, Isaac Julien's new nine-channel video installation, is a beautiful, poetic experience. Filmed mainly in China, it weaves staged studio imagery and fragments of historical documents together with contemporary views of Shanghai and the Chinese countryside.

Behind the visual sumptuousness lie tragic events, present here in shaky black-and-white police footage. The

work was inspired by an accident that killed a group of illegal Chinese cockle pickers in Northern England in 2004. This prompted Julien to think about what makes people leave their homes and families in order to travel to the other side of the world in the hope of a better life. He gives no answers. Instead, he blends imagery from both this tragedy and a traditional Chinese folktale about the goddess Mazu, the last hope of shipwrecked sailors (played in Julien's rendition by actress Maggie Cheung).

Installed in the three main galleries of the Kunsthalle, Julien's fifty-minute story forms a labyrinth—or a hall of mirrors—with neither beginning nor end. It takes us on a journey in which the boundaries between past and present, sign and symbol, fact and fiction seem to vanish.

The main element of the otherwise very sparse sound track is an extended poem by Wang Ping, written and read in Chinese specifically for the work. (A translation is offered in an accompanying exhibition brochure.) Rounding out the show, large-format photographs depicting imagery similar to the videos lend structure to the installation, which has been created with an overall technical expertise that renders it as light and ethereal as a Chinese ink drawing.