

A question of desire

Visiting ArtPace resident Isaac Julien gazes into masculinity



BY JOHN EWING

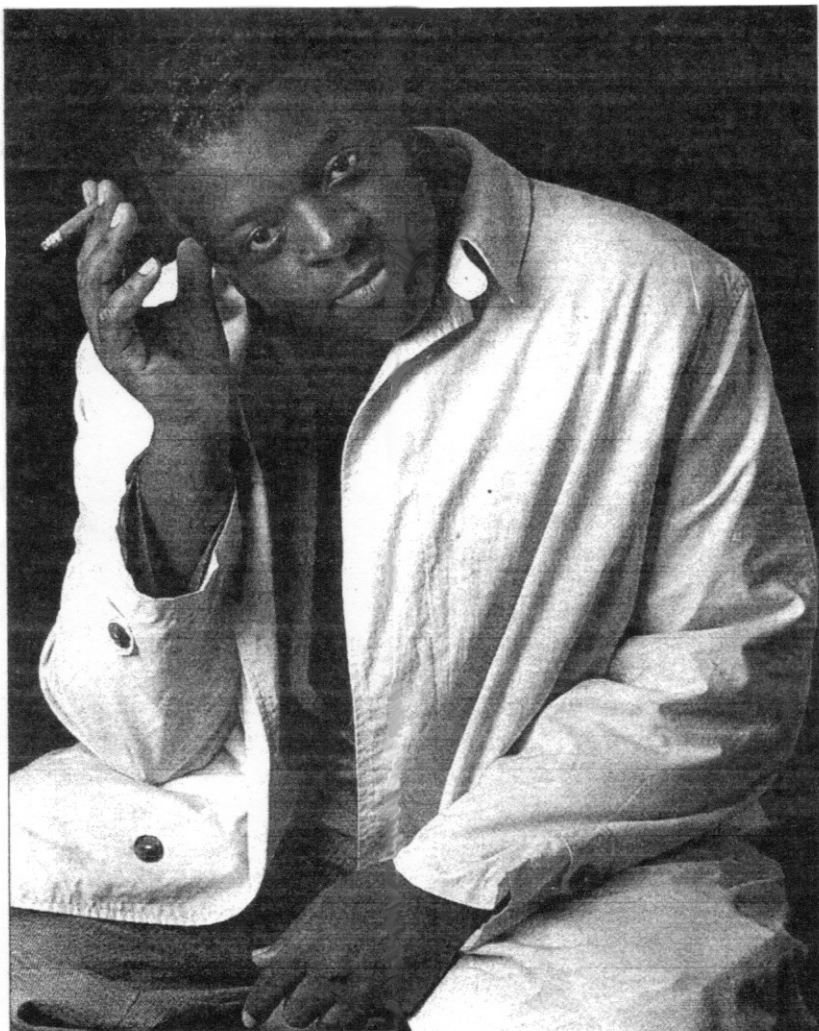
No one elected me to be an artist," Isaac Julien admits. "It's a personal choice. But if you're an artist and people want to read you as being a social worker, that's a problem." Julien's movie inspired by the Harlem Renaissance writer, *Looking for Langston*, brought the British filmmaker to international prominence in 1989, and he has grappled ever since with the complexities of identity in a diverse range of conversations and settings: in academic panels on post-colonialism and the African Diaspora, queer theory and the AIDS crisis, MTV music videos, art-house cinemas, and contemporary museums around the world.

As if cultural, racial, and sexual identity were not enough to consider, Julien finds his identity as an artist intersecting with the social issues he engages.

In Isaac Julien's creative vision, identity of any kind is often constructed around questions of desire. Denied, repressed, policed, or indulged, the position of desire in Julien's work is never an end in itself. Rather, it is the central starting point from which the filmmaker explores issues of race, class, sex, and history.

As a current resident at ArtPace, Julien continues his visual explorations with *The Road to Mazatlán*, a collaboration with dancer and choreographer Javier de Frutos. As stated in a proposal for the project, the film installation is "a meditation on masculinity and desire and their relationship to American landscape within the mythologies of the West." Funded in part by Grand Arts Foundation in Kansas City, *The Road to Mazatlán* was shot in and around San Antonio, with local filmmakers at Railroad Productions arranging locations, crew, and technical support.

When planning the shoot, Julien looked at his calendar and chose August. "I was warned not to," he recalls, "but filming in the hottest part of the year was sort of deliberate. We needed to translate the heat and a certain mood." On dusty roads and familiar locales such as South Alamo's Bar America, the cast and crew managed a particularly complicated dance of desire. Through choreography, costumes, and creative camera work, Julien has transformed the looks and gestures of desire into an investigation of myth: "I wanted to question white masculinity as it coalesces around the Southwest male mystique, and within that, the gay subcultural codes which reverberate in film genres like the Western."



Isaac Julien

Julien and de Frutos eagerly embrace such reference points as Andy Warhol's *Lonesome Cowboys*, David Hockney's *Swimmers* series, and *Night of the Iguana* by Tennessee Williams, all in our local post-colonial setting of San Antonio de Béxar.

Understandably, Julien finds San Antonio a familiar setting precisely for its hybridity and colonial history. Born in London in 1960 to West Indian parents, he grew up during a troubled era in British history. Throughout the 1950s, West Indian immigrants were enticed to the United Kingdom as a source of cheap labor. Once there, they found themselves at the bottom of the economic ladder. The resulting first-generation Brits chafed at their

limited prospects, and their discontent represented a threat to the white, dominant class. The violent backlash of the conservative Thatcher government and the National Front Party gave rise to London's rich cultural resistance of the '70s and '80s. As a boy, Julien could see the resistance in the streets and hear it in the music. Reggae and ska, punk rock, and American soul provided the soundtrack to the times and would resurface years later in a Julien film.

Interested in the arts from an early age, particularly dance and cinema, Julien entered St. Martin's School of Art in 1980 with a concentration on film. His 1983 documentary short, *Who Killed Colin Roach?*,

points to mounting social and racial strife in London. As a response to the civil unrest of the Brixton riots, the British Film Institute supported an emerging workshop movement that promoted the telling of stories from Britain's minority perspective.

At the same time, "Channel 4" was created to fund and broadcast television programming with alternative voices as its focus. In the right place at the right time, Julien and three friends organized Sankofa Film and Video Collective, one of the first black workshops for film and video in the United Kingdom. According to Julien, Sankofa "wanted to make films that were unapologetically concerned with questions of black representation and identity" at an historic moment "when there was really nothing that could be taken for granted."

Looking for Langston was produced by Sankofa for Channel 4 in 1989. Written and directed by Julien, this impressionistic film found poetic links between the nostalgia of the Harlem Renaissance arts movement and the blossoming of black film in Britain. *Looking for Langston* opens with an austere funeral scene. The camera drifts downward into "queer space," a stylish bar where black and white men drink champagne and dance together to jazz and blues recordings. This setting anchors the film. Into it flows the spoken poetry of Langston Hughes and Essex Hemphill, archival footage of black artists and Harlem in the '30s, and Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs of black, male nudes.

"One of the main things I was concerned with was how one would visualize poetry and picture the silences, the absences, in the visualization of certain subjectivities," Julien says with reference specifically to blacks and gays. "The general theme was that there wasn't a sort of importance given to those lives and concerns. In the Harlem Renaissance, the relationship between the artists and their white patrons became very problematic. There was a shift; it wasn't art that was recognizably authored by a black subject in a way we expect art to look like from black people — or gay people."

While the soundtrack, camera movements, and editing stir together the film's

PHOTO BY MICHAEL LIBBY 1990

nostalgic and contemporary references, the male characters in the bar look intently at each other. Their gaze is encoded with these background references: closeted homosexuals, poems of desire, histories of racism, and images of the nude, male body. As the men come together and pair off, the film carefully acknowledges many of the historical and present-day obstacles to desire, including AIDS. "When I see this film, I have to confess that maybe 65 percent of the people in it are now dead," says Julien. "It's about reclaiming the past, but at the same time recognizing what you're doing in this particular moment."

This strategy of foregrounding the gaze — the simple yet overdetermined act of looking — against a background of historical and psychological texts has been an integral part of Julien's film work since *Looking for Langston*. Through the eyes of the characters, audiences gain access to an unusually vast depth of field, and desire is the driving force that uncovers these levels of information. In *Young Soul Rebels*, the feature film that won a prize at the 1991 Cannes Film Festival, Julien applies these strategies to memories of his own youth. The film's setting is East End London in the late '70s, a hotbed of cultural experimentation and political conflict. In the clubs and the streets, punk rockers mix with soul boys and girls. Racism and homophobia go toe-to-toe as the nation celebrates the Queen's Silver Jubilee. This is the film's historical backdrop, rich in music and visual style, but it is the young characters who reveal the era's conflicts. Black and white, soul and punk, gay and straight, the characters confront each other's prejudices by acting out their desires.

In *Diary of a Young Soul Rebel*, Julien's published account of the film's production, he states that his main objectives were "to make people feel how exciting that moment was and highlight how black culture remakes itself wherever it is placed."

In her essay collection, *Reel to Real*, critic bell hooks [sic] writes that "Julien often takes the lead in situating his work theoretically. He theorizes to explain, to talk back, to justify, and



Film set from Frantz Fanon: *Black Skin White Mask*



Frantz Fanon in Algeria, 1956

to interrogate." Visiting professorships at UC Santa Cruz and Harvard University provide the filmmaker opportunities to link his work to related disciplines. As a writer, he has collaborated with cultural critics, such as Kobena Mercer, and co-edited an issue of *Critical Quarterly* entitled "Critically Queer."

Critical and aesthetic concerns come together for Julien in such films as *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Mask*. For over a decade, the writings of psychiatrist and revolutionary intellectual Frantz Fanon have resonated throughout Julien's depictions of desire and the historic power struggles of interracial relations. His take on Fanon, co-written and directed by Julien for the BBC in 1996, combines interviews, archival footage, and stylized narrative sequences to construct a psychological portrait.

The "documentary" covers Fanon's early experiences as a Martinique-born child raised in France to his later alliance with the Algerian fight for independence in the '50s. The film dramatizes Fanon's understanding of the colonial "gaze," and its psychic ramifications for both oppressor and oppressed. Fanon theorized that the colonial subject's identity was constructed by and transmitted



Film still from Frantz Fanon: *Black Skin White Mask*



Isaac Julien with producer Mark Nash

through the gaze of the dominant class. Freedom from the oppressions and desires of the gaze required conscious and organized resistance. "Fanon is in between cultures and languages," says Julien, who grew up speaking Creole. "In the case of my own upbringing, it's been important to refuse the ways in which one is identified."

These themes resurface continually in Julien's film oeuvre. *Trussed* and *The Attendant*, involving S/M imagery, attempt to answer the question, "what does desire look like when it is repressed in the dominant culture?" Given the history of colonialism and black/white relations, the sexual bondage lingo of "master" and "slave" offers numerous opportunities for transgression and resistance. Unlike his documentaries or the more traditionally narrative films, these pieces are essentially wordless, with edited images and long gazes conveying relationships in a dreamlike atmosphere. In a visual medium, this is the equivalent of poetry, a quality that art critic Clement Greenberg described as "approaching the brink of meaning and yet never falling over it."

The move into film installations designed for the gallery is the natural next step in

Julien's career. Current contemporary art trends welcome his interests in representational identities, coded spaces, and the interaction of viewer and subject. "What I've found very refreshing about working in the gallery context is that narrative drive is not the most important aspect," Julien notes. "The work can be more open-ended, and there's an audience that is already available to accepting that. One can concentrate on how the piece is constructed, things like color, décor, and mise-en-scène."

In many ways, his 1992 short film, *The Attendant*, anticipates his move into the gallery. As *The Attendant* persuasively illustrates, museums are a continuing site of colonial domination, from the works of art hanging on the walls to the hierarchies of museum patronage and management. But the museum space also contains the real and symbolic potential for free movement, multiple points of contact, and selective viewing, all of which activate desire in ways that are impossible in the traditional cinema setting. Julien's move into the contemporary art market may also reflect a disturbing change of fortune at home. With the success of recent British features in the wider international market, the film industry has undergone a shift that is affecting the funding of independent filmmakers and programming at stations like Channel 4.

According to Julien, by the mid-'90s the workshop model of production had, for all intents and purposes, been discarded. "We've seen institutions become quickly disinterested in supporting this kind of cinema, dramatically so with the death of avant-garde filmmaker Derek Jarman.

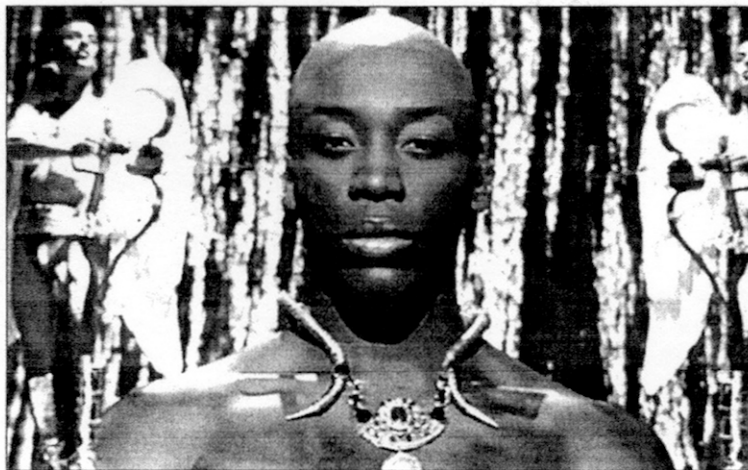
"There is a film renaissance currently in Britain, but it's a commercial and nationalist vision. There's a lot of talk about multiculturalism in other areas, but the cinema is very much policed, and the question of white masks is alive and well. The idea that you can shoot a film in Notting Hill with Julia Roberts and not see a single black person! Film is a very seductive medium, and because of that it has lots of problems in terms of one's identification with it. One should be critically

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engaged with it."

During the first week of his residency, ArtPace and the Esperanza Center hosted a marathon, three-night screening of Julien's films followed by open discussions. Attendance was high, drawing a diverse San Antonio crowd and intrepid university students from Austin. As the conversation thickened with cultural theories, rhetorical analyses, and historical dissections, it occurred to me that we would probably not be discussing these topics if not for the presence of Isaac Julien and his stimulating films. Yet when Julien describes himself as a "cultural worker" in answer to one of the questions, I can see a troubling specter rise up and hang silently over the remaining comments.

To my mind, a "cultural worker" is not far from a "social worker," but how close is either to the creative identity of the artist? Watching Julien, I see the careful, quizzical darting of ideas and observations across his large, intelligent eyes. If desire is at the root of every film he has made, then it is certainly present in the eyes of the man, or as they say, the windows of the soul. But the eyes of an artist who embarks on a life of public engagement suggest very specific questions: What do you want? Do you know what you want? Do you understand what you're asking me? What sorts of sac-



Film stills from *The Attendant*, 1993

rifices does an artist like Julien have to make in order to engage the topics that interest him and yet still maintain the necessary autonomy of the artist? The gaze of desire, then, has as much to do with maintaining boundaries as making connections.

After the discussion and a late supper, a small group goes to the Saint, a gay bar on Main, to wind down. We stand together looking out across the dance floor, gazing at the beautiful hip-hop boys and Puff Daddy look-alikes, gazing for the simple pleasure of the gaze. Isaac tells a funny story about Harvey Weinstein and the Cannes Film Festival. When Julien won the "Critic's Week" prize, Weinstein, whose Miramax Films distributed *Young Soul Rebels* with minimal enthusiasm, cornered Julien on the red carpet. "Well, I suppose I have to get behind you now," bullied Weinstein. Pulling up his short, stocky frame to counter the towering figure, Julien looked the mogul squarely in the eye and put him in his place. "No, you don't have to get behind me. Just get out of my way so I can pass!" ■

For more information on Isaac Julien's exhibit at ArtPace and other activities, check *All Day/All Night* listings on pages 18, 19, and 33.