

SAMSTAG / AUTUMN SEASON

Isaac
Julien



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Cover Image: Isaac Julien, *Green Screen Goddess*
(*Ten Thousand Waves*), 2010, Endura Ultra photograph.
Courtesy of the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

INTRODUCTION /

Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia and John Curtin Gallery, Curtin University are delighted to concurrently host an exhibition of selected works by internationally renowned English artist and filmmaker Isaac Julien, CBE RA, for the respective 2022 Adelaide and Perth Festivals.

In a career spanning over 30 years, Isaac Julien is acclaimed for producing powerful moving-image works at the cutting edge of art and film. His deeply thoughtful practice artfully mingles cultural and social commentary, embodying metaphor, portrait-making, historical repatriation, visual poetry and legacy. In 2022 he was the recipient of the prestigious 'Goslarer Kaiserring Award' given by the city of Goslar, Germany, to a distinguished international artist of modern and contemporary art.

Samstag and Curtin are both presenting Julien's seminal *Ten Thousand Waves*, which memorably premiered at the 17th Biennale of Sydney in 2010. Inspired by the Morecambe Bay immigrant labourers' tragedy of 2004, this immersive, multi-screen installation explores the movement of people across countries and continents and meditates on unfinished journeys. Filmed in China and the UK, *Ten Thousand Waves* is a tour de force of imagination and filmic craft that poetically entwines contemporary and ancient Chinese myths.

Additionally, Samstag is presenting Julien's compelling tribute to Brazilian architect and designer Lina Bo Bardi (1914–1992). *A Marvellous Entanglement* (2019) is a multi-screen biopic that brilliantly animates Bardi's visionary social, political and creative cultural life, and illuminates her legendary modernist architecture.

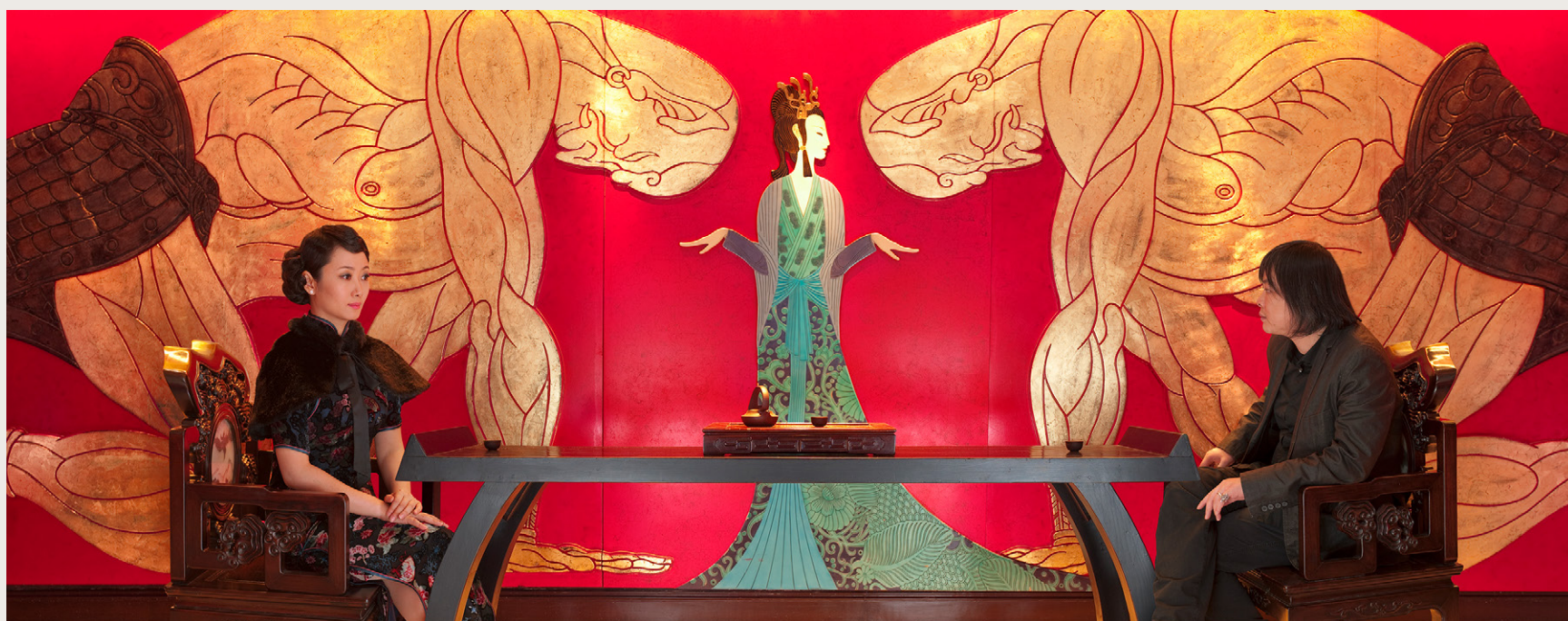
A Marvellous Entanglement is also concurrently featured in an exhibition at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, and Julien is one of nine leading international video artists in an Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney 2022 exhibition titled *Family: Visions of a Shared Humanity*, curated by Franklin Sirmans.

Along with *Ten Thousand Waves*, John Curtin Gallery will also feature the Australian premiere of Isaac Julien's ten-screen *Lessons of the Hour*, a beautifully conceived reflection on the life of African American photographer, abolitionist and self-liberated slave Frederick Douglass. Cited as the most photographed American of the 19th Century, Douglass was intimately aware of the expressive power of images in the fight for social justice and human rights.

Samstag's experimental and ambitious collaboration with our sister institution, the John Curtin Gallery, reflects the productive spirit of cooperation between Australian university art museums under the shared banner of UAMA (University Art Museums Australia).

ERICA GREEN,
*Director, Samstag Museum of Art,
University of South Australia*

ISAAC JULIEN /
TEN THOUSAND WAVES, 2010



Isaac Julien, *Red Chamber Dream (Ten Thousand Waves)*, 2010,
Endura Ultra photograph, diptych. Courtesy of the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.

ISAAC JULIEN /
TEN THOUSAND WAVES, 2010

Made on location in China, this epic work poetically weaves together stories linking the nation's ancient past with the present. Through an elaborate architectural installation, the work explores the movement of people across countries and continents and meditates on unfinished journeys. A single-screen version of the film – *Better Life* – premiered at the Venice Film Festival in October 2010, where *The Telegraph's* David Gritten described it as “a sorrowful, strong and haunting work.”

Conceived and made over four years, *Ten Thousand Waves* sees Julien collaborating with some of China's leading artistic voices, including: screen goddess Maggie Cheung; rising star of Chinese film Zhao Tao; poet Wang Ping; master calligrapher Gong Fagen; artist Yang Fudong; acclaimed cinematographer Zhao Xiaoshi; and a 100-strong Chinese cast and crew. The film's original musical score is by fellow East Londoner Jah Wobble and the Chinese Dub Orchestra and contemporary classical composer Maria de Alvear.

Filmed on location in the ravishing and remote Guangxi province and at the famous Shanghai Film Studios and various sites around Shanghai, *Ten Thousand Waves* combines fact, fiction and film essay genres against a background of Chinese history, legend and landscape to create a meditation on global human migrations. Through formal experimentation and a series of unique collaborations, Julien seeks to engage with Chinese culture through contemporary events, ancient myths and artistic practice.

The original inspiration for *Ten Thousand Waves* was the Morecambe Bay tragedy of 2004, in which 23 Chinese cockle-pickers died. In response to this event, Julien commissioned the poet Wang Ping to come to England and write *Small Boats*, a poem that is recited in the work. In the successive years, Julien has spent time in China, slowly coming to understand the country and its people's perspectives and developing the relationships that have enabled him to undertake this rich and multifaceted work.

Through conversations with academics, curators and artists both in China and the UK, Julien uncovered a symbolic body of material which he has used to create a work that explores modern and traditional Chinese values and superstitions. These are encapsulated in a fable about the goddess Mazu (played by Maggie Cheung) that comes from Fujian Province, from where the Morecambe Bay cockle-pickers originated. The Tale of Yishan Island tells the tale of 16th Century fishermen lost and in danger at sea. At the heart of the legend is the goddess figure who leads the fishermen to safety. Using this fable as a starting point, Julien deftly draws on this story and the poignant connection between it and the 21st Century tragedy of Chinese migrants who died struggling to survive in the North of England.

Following ideas surrounding death, spiritual displacement and the uniquely Chinese connection with ‘ghosts’ or ‘lost souls’, the film links the Shanghai of the past and present, symbolising the Chinese transition towards modernity, aspiration and affluence. Here, Julien employs the visual language of ghost stories, with recurrent figures and images appearing and disappearing. Mazu's spectral figure traverses time and space, serving as a guide through the interlocking strands of the work. Mirroring the goddess of the fable, a ghostly protagonist (Zhao Tao) leads us through the world of Shanghai cinema via the Shanghai Film Studio, to a restaging by Julien of scenes from the classic Chinese film *The Goddess* (1934), and finally to the streets of Modern and Old Shanghai.

ISAAC JULIEN /
A MARVELLOUS ENTANGLEMENT, 2019



Isaac Julien, *O que é um museu? / What is a Museum? (Lina Bo Bardi - A Marvellous Entanglement)*, 2019, Endura Ultra photograph facemounted, 180 x 240 cm



ISAAC JULIEN /
A MARVELLOUS ENTANGLEMENT, 2019



Isaac Julien, *Tecnologia pré-histórica / Prehistoric Technology*, Lina Bo Bardi -
A Marvellous Entanglement, 2019, Endura Ultra photograph, facemounted 180 x 240 cm.
Courtesy of the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.

ISAAC JULIEN /
A MARVELLOUS ENTANGLEMENT, 2019

Isaac Julien's multi-screen installation *A Marvellous Entanglement* (2019) traverses a collection of visionary modernist architect and designer Lina Bo Bardi's most iconic buildings, offering a meditation on her legacy and iconic works.

'Linear time is a western invention; time is not linear, it is a marvellous entanglement, where at any moment points can be chosen and solutions invented without beginning or end.' – Lina Bo Bardi *

Having filmed on location in the São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP), SESC Pompéia and in the Teatro Oficina, Julien proposes an open-ended reflection on Lina Bo Bardi's architecture and her approach to Brazilian culture. These three buildings, widely regarded as landmarks of Brazilian modernism, stand as representative of Lina Bo Bardi's ground-breaking ideas. Travelling further north, the work also encounters Bo Bardi's buildings in Salvador: the Museum of Modern Art of Bahia, the Coaty Restaurant and the Gregório de Mattos Theatre.

Starring the acclaimed Brazilian actresses Fernanda Montenegro and her daughter Fernanda Torres (as seen above), *A Marvellous Entanglement* portrays Bo Bardi at different stages of her life, as Montenegro and Torres recite texts closely adapted from the architect's writings.

A central figure of Latin American modernist architecture, Lina Bo Bardi (1914–1992) devoted her working life to promoting the social and cultural potential of art, architecture and design. Exploring these themes, *A Marvellous Entanglement* establishes Bo Bardi's iconic staircase, which she designed for the Museum of Modern Art of Bahia, as the stage upon which Julien orchestrates an original work by choreographer Zebrinha, performed by the Balé Folclórico da Bahia. The Coaty, a modern ruin perched on the Ladeira da Misericórdia in Salvador, accommodates in turn a series of performances by Brazilian art collective Araka. In close collaboration with Julien, the collective performs *in situ* happenings, reflecting upon the significance of Bo Bardi's seldom-accessed masterpiece for a young contemporary audience.

Julien has created a multi-screen film installation – part homage, part poetic journey – that orbits Bo Bardi's life and work. It features artists as well as personal acquaintances of Bo Bardi's, such as José Celso Martinez Corrêa (known as Zé Celso) – actor, director, playwright and co-founder of São Paulo's Teatro Oficina.

Bo Bardi graduated from the Facoltà di Architettura in Rome just before the outbreak of the Second World War, and shortly afterwards became editor of *Domus* magazine. (Bo Bardi used to say she started her career at a time when nothing would be built, only destroyed.) After the war, Bo Bardi married Pietro Maria Bardi and the couple moved to Brazil. There she would find elements that permanently changed her professional life and world view. Travelling to the Northeast hinterlands, a region blighted by droughts and poverty, Bo Bardi was compelled to bring the creative spirit of Brazilian folk cultures into her sophisticated, prolific practice. Through building, furniture, jewellery and stage design, as well as a powerful theoretical approach, Bo Bardi was able to bring high culture to the masses and cultural awareness to the elites.

Inspired by official as well as anecdotal stories about Bo Bardi's life and work, *A Marvellous Entanglement* is shot across seven buildings designed by the architect – four in Salvador in Brazil's northeast region of Bahia, three in São Paulo. Each becomes a locus for a performance, intervention, enactment or reinvention of scenes that have shaped the history of—and the legends around—her architecture. Full of visual echoes and alliterations, the film focuses on key structural elements of Bo Bardi's designs: staircases, windows and walls opening on to cityscapes, nature or the sea; details of construction; public spaces designed for social interaction. It also reveals the perilous condition of many of Bo Bardi's masterworks, especially those in Salvador, and the pressing need for their conservation. In a country where a fragile democracy tries to survive after a dictatorship that lasted 21 years, Julien looks at Bo Bardi as a character whose voice can still shed light on issues that are as pertinent today as they were during her lifetime.

Following the conceptual thread which led to artistic investigations around portrait-making, such as *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010) or the more recent *Lessons of the Hour* (2019), *A Marvellous Entanglement* looks at historical reparation through visual poetry, moved by the breadth and refined sensibility of Bo Bardi's work, and a profound belief that her legacy has yet to be fully acknowledged.

* FERRAZ, Marcelo C. (Org). *Lina Bo Bardi*.
São Paulo: Instituto Lina Bo Bardi e Pietro M. Bardi, 1993. p.333

ISAAC JULIEN /
LESSONS OF THE HOUR



Isaac Julien, *The North Star (Lessons of the Hour)*, 2019,
framed photograph on gloss inkjet paper mounted on aluminium, 160 x 213.29 cm.
Courtesy of the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.

ISAAC JULIEN /
LESSONS OF THE HOUR



Isaac Julien, *Lessons of the Hour* (*Lessons of the Hour*), 2019,
framed photograph on matt archival paper, mounted on aluminium 160 x 213.29 cm.
Courtesy of the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.

ISAAC JULIEN / LESSONS OF THE HOUR

Lessons of the Hour (2019) is a meditation on the life, words and actions of visionary African American abolitionist and freed slave Frederick Douglass (1818–1895), and on the issues of social justice that shaped his life's work. Julien created the installation using both analogue and digital technologies: 35mm colour film as well as 4k digital. He describes the installation as a “staging of history seen through a contemporary lens. It opens with tintypes suggesting the archive of the past, and which take on additional resonance in the multi-screen installation that follows.”

Frederick Douglass was a visionary African American abolitionist, a freed slave who was also the most photographed man of the 19th Century. Julien's project is informed by some of the abolitionist's most important speeches, such as “Lessons of the Hour,” “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” and “Lecture on Pictures,” the latter being a text that connects picture-making and photography to his vision of how technology can influence human relations. In the film,

the character of Douglass interacts with other cultural icons of his time: photographer J.P. Ball; Anna Murray and Helen Pitts, who were Douglass's two wives; Anna and Ellen Richardson, the English Quaker who allowed Douglass to return to America as a free man; suffragist Susan B. Anthony, Douglass's longtime friend; and Otilie Assing, a feminist friend and lover. Mostly women, these characters were chosen for being representatives of ideals of equality, which were as important then as they are today.

Through extensive use of Frederick Douglass's “timely words”, Julien gives expression to the zeitgeist of Douglass's era, his legacy, and the ways in which his story may be viewed today. The work was shot in Washington, DC, where Douglass lived late in life and where his house in Cedar Hill has been kept almost intact as a National Historic Site, and in Scotland, where Douglass was an active member of the “Send Back the Money” movement, and where he delivered a number of anti-slavery speeches, which Julien restaged inside London's Royal Academy of Arts. Douglass delivered more than 300 lectures in Scotland, Ireland and England as he sought to affirm his struggle for equality as a global citizen who was very much ahead of his time.

Working in consultation with Professor Celeste-Marie Bernier of the University of Edinburgh, author of *If I Survive: Frederick Douglass and Family in the Walter O. Evans Collection*, Isaac Julien imagines the person of Frederick Douglass through a series of tableaux vivants. Composer Paul Gladstone Reid created the film's original score.

Lessons of the Hour was commissioned and acquired by the Memorial Art Gallery with the partnership of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and with generous support from Mark Falcone and Ellen Bruss, the Ford Foundation, the VIA Art Fund and Lori Van Dusen. The commission is also made possible by Barbara and Aaron Levine, Deborah Ronnen, the Maurice and Maxine Forman Fund, the Marion Stratton Gould Fund, the Herdle-Moore Fund, the Strassenburgh Fund, and the Lyman K. and Eleanore B. Stuart Endowment Fund. Production of the work is generously supported by Metro Pictures, New York; Victoria Miro, London/Venice; the Arts Division of the University of California Santa Cruz; and by Eastman Kodak Company, on whose film stock the installation was shot.

ABOUT ISAAC JULIEN /

Isaac Julien's films and video installations are often swooningly beautiful and always deeply engaged in diverse cultural histories, reflecting on diaspora and Blackness, queer identity and the movement of people, among much else. His work actively involves other art forms and is often produced from collaborations with choreographers and actors.

He responds repeatedly to the art, literature and cinema of the past, but is also pushing video installation into new territory, using multiple screens—sometimes as many as ten—to create fractured narratives which envelop the viewer, encouraging distinctive readings of the complex stories he tells, and constantly expanding the frames through which we see his subject matter.

Julien was born in London in 1960 and studied at the Central St Martins art school in the early 1980s. Upon graduating, he co-founded the Sankofa Film and Video Collective, a group of young film-makers who were part of a generation of artists of colour to engage directly with social and political issues. Sankofa's aim was to develop an independent Black film culture in the UK and Julien produced works like *Territories*, a film that is both a documentary and a film-essay, at this time. He came to real prominence in the film world with his 1989 drama-documentary *Looking for Langston*, a black and white movie looking at the poet Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance. He followed that with the feature film *Young Soul Rebels*, exploring London culture in the tumultuous year 1977. *Young Soul Rebels* won the Semiane de la Critique Prize/ Critics Weeks Prize at Cannes in 1991.

Since the 1990s, however, his work has increasingly appeared in the gallery rather than the movie theatre. Among his first video installations was *Trussed* (1995) which focuses on queer desire in the wake of the Aids crisis, and its presentation in the media. Shot in black and white, with bold framing of male figures, Julien called it "a Robert Mapplethorpe in motion". It set the tone for much of what follows in its dramatic visual impact and poetic approach to complex themes.

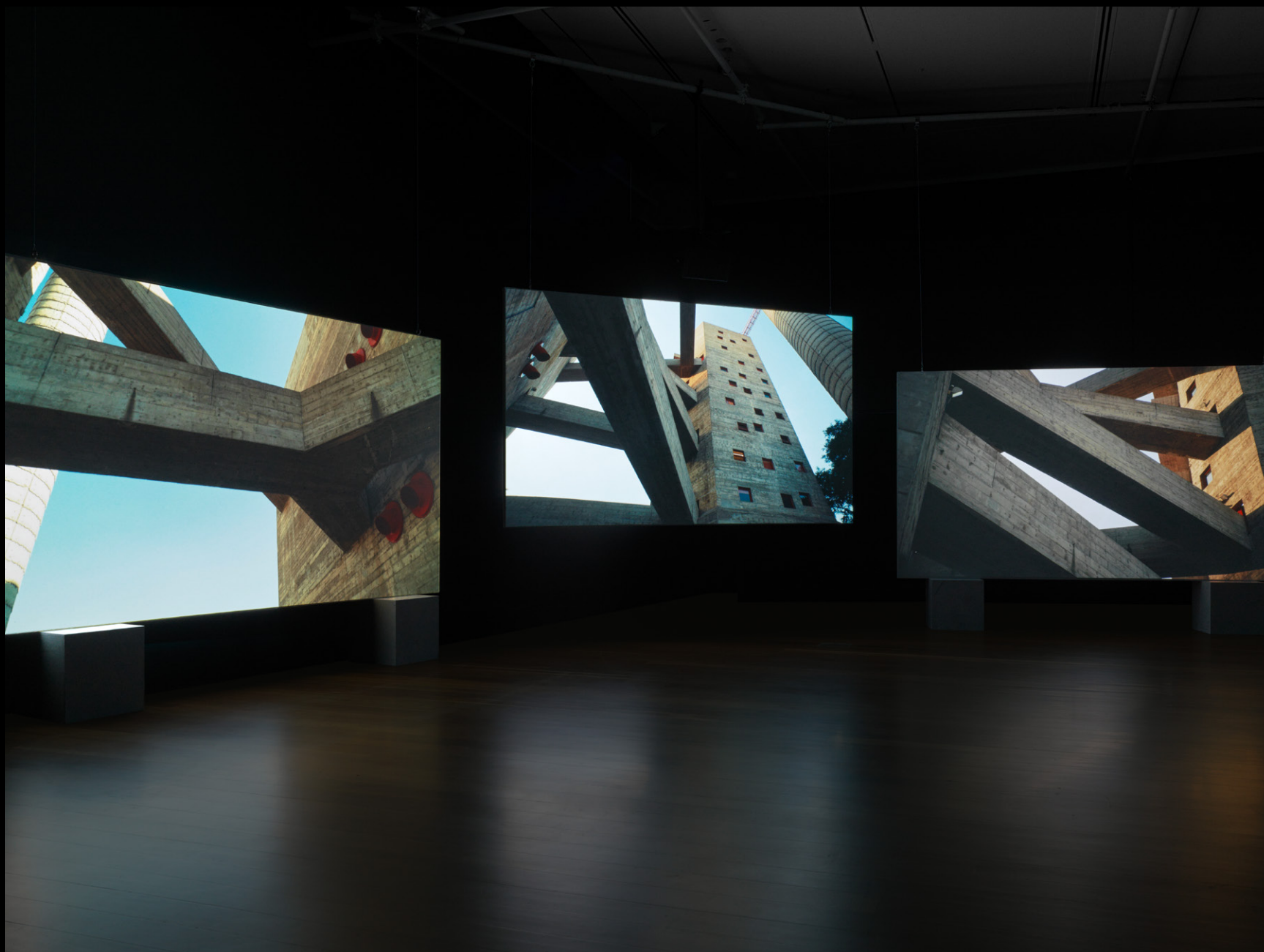
His works since have been extraordinary in their breadth of subject matter and seductive visuals. *Vagabondia* (2000) seeks the ghosts of colonialism amid the extraordinary spaces of Sir John Soane's Museum in London, *Paradise Omeros* (2002) reflected on Derek Walcott's poem *Omeros* to explore creoleness – the mixing of cultural languages – in the landscapes of St Lucia, where Julien's parents were born, and the cityscapes of London, where he grew up, contrasting Caribbean lushness with the Brutalism and brutality of urban London. *Baltimore* (2003) pictures three institutions in Maryland's capital—the Walters Art Museum, the Contemporary Museum and the Great Blacks in Wax Museum—through the language of blaxploitation cinema, the African American film movement of the 1970s. The nine-screen film installation *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010) takes the tragic death of 23 Chinese immigrants in northern England to reflect on China's ancient history and shifting present—Julien commissioned the Chinese poet Wang Ping to write *Small Boats*, a poem recited in the video. It is one of a number of films in which Julien explores cultural displacement.

In two recent video installations, he has focused on two very different cultural figures, allowing him to push his medium in distinctive biographical directions: in 2019's *Lessons of the Hour*, he explores the life of Frederick Douglass, the once enslaved African American abolitionist and leading photographer of the 19th century; and in *A Marvellous Entanglement*, completed in the same year, he focuses on the work and the legacy of the Italian-Brazilian Modernist architect and designer Lina Bo Bardi, shooting in her extraordinary buildings and drawing directly on her writings, enmeshing her social and political convictions with the marvellous spaces she created.

With this rich, endlessly mineable body of work, he has become one of the world's most visionary video installation artists.

Ben Luke. From the introduction to A brush with... Isaac Julien, a podcast by The Art Newspaper.

ISAAC JULIEN /
A MARVELLOUS ENTANGLEMENT, 2019



Installation view, Isaac Julien, *Lina Bo Bardi - A Marvellous Entanglement*, 2019.
Samstag Museum of Art for the 2022 Adelaide Festival. Photograph by Grant Hancock.

ISAAC JULIEN /
TEN THOUSAND WAVES, 2010



Installation view, *Ten Thousand Waves*, 2010, by Isaac Julien.
Samstag Museum of Art for the 2022 Adelaide Festival. Photograph by Grant Hancock.

Isaac Julien is a Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia and John Curtin Gallery, Curtin University exhibition for the 2022 Adelaide and Perth Festivals.

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4 March — 27 May 2022

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25 February — 8 May 2022

Exhibition Hours /

Samstag Museum of Art / Friday 4 March – Sunday 27 March, open daily from 10am – 5pm, then Tuesday 29 March – Friday 27 May, open Tuesday — Saturday 10am — 5pm.

John Curtin Gallery / Friday 25 February – Sunday 8 May, open Monday — Friday 11am — 5pm, and Sunday 12pm — 4pm.

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Thank you to Henrietta Bentall and Ben Luke for permission to print Ben Luke's introduction to The Art Newspaper podcast, *A brush with... Isaac Julien*. The texts on *Ten Thousand Waves*, *A Marvellous Entanglement* and *Lessons of the Hour* courtesy of Victoria Miro, London, and the Isaac Julien Studio.

Finally, Samstag Museum of Art and University of South Australia are delighted to once again partner with the Adelaide Festival to present outstanding visual art exhibitions and artists to festival and South Australian audiences.

Isaac Julien is represented by Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, and Victoria Miro, London.