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MEMORIAL ART GALLERY PRESENTS

“Lessons of the Hour”

A multimedia installation inspired by the life of Frederick Douglass

Rochester, NY, November 17, 2018 — The Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester is pleased to announce [*“Lessons of the Hour”*](#), a multi-screen film and video installation by artist Isaac Julien. The work is freely inspired by the life of Frederick Douglass (1818–1895), and by issues of social justice that shape so much of global history. *“Lessons of the Hour”* will open at MAG on March 3, 2019, with a two-gallery installation featuring a single-channel filmic projection, and a multi-screen video installation. With the support of the Eastman Kodak Company, Julien created the work on 35mm black-and-white and color film utilizing both analogue and digital technologies. According to Isaac Julien, “This installation is a staging of history seen through a contemporary lens. It opens with a film piece that reflects the archive of the past and that takes on life in the multi-screen installation that follows.” The exhibition will be on view at the Memorial Art Gallery through May 12, 2019. It will also premiere in New York City roughly simultaneously with its presentation in Rochester, opening on March 7 at Metro Pictures.

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” 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 will interact with other personalities of his time, namely photographer J.P. Ball; Anna Murray and Helen Pitts, Douglass’ two wives; Anna and Ellen Richardson, the two English Quakeresses who allowed Douglass to return to America as a free man; Susan B. Anthony, the suffragist and Douglass’ long-time friend; Otilie Assing, a feminist friend and lover, and Ida B. Wells, the anti-lynching black-people’s rights activist. 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’ “timely words,” Isaac Julien gives expression to the zeitgeist of Douglass’ era, his legacy, and 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; 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, and inside London’s Royal Academy period rooms. Douglass delivered more than 300 lectures in Scotland 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, as well as with screenwriter, author, and playwright Caryl Phillips, Isaac Julien imagines the person of Frederick Douglass through a series of tableaux vivants. Composer Paul Gladstone Reid created the film’s original score. His music work firstly takes the form of a complete contemporary classical score (of 40–50 minutes duration) for voices, solo violin, solo piano, strings, wind, brass, and percussion. The second element is an electro-acoustic sound piece, synchronising ambient music, sonic art, and sound design to resonate with the subconscious and inter-dimensional expression of the “inner life” in response to traumatic and transcendental experience that oppress or emancipate the human spirit.

Isaac Julien is a pioneer of the art of the moving image who, since the early 1990s, has innovated a distinctive non-linear, multi-screen form of storytelling. His open-ended narratives propose that spectators actively interpret the work through a



physical and sensorial immersion. Drawing from painting, architecture, photography, and performance and sound, Julien constructs poetic narratives of hybrid scenes. “Due to the nature of my practice,” the artist has stated, “I do not produce my films using a standard filmic construction, which is mainly grounded in scriptwriting. I often work on multiple screens, which demands a montage technique specially developed for that purpose. I pay great attention to set décor, lighting, performance, mise-en-scène, as well as editing, sonic, and visual effects to create a space for meditation on political and cultural questions.”

The project curator John G. Hanhardt notes, “Isaac Julien is a master of the moving image. His films and installations demonstrate a complete command of the medium. In an extraordinary body of work spanning almost three decades and including such masterpieces as *Paradise Omeros* (2002) and *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010), Julien has created installations that bring history and individual stories alive. There is no artist working today who makes such compelling and powerful statements about global forces shaping history and our world. His moving images astonish and inform, and demonstrate how art can speak to all of us.”

Jonathan P. Binstock, MAG’s Mary W. and Donald R. Clark Director, has said that “realizing this project and bringing Isaac Julien, one of the most important and influential artists working today, to Rochester is the culmination of one of MAG’s grandest ambitions, which is to be a platform for the creation of new works of art for our local audience that will be relevant globally. We look forward to sharing this work of art inspired by Rochester with audiences around the world.”

“*Lessons of the Hour*” is the second exhibition to be presented as part of [“Reflections on Place.”](#) a series of media art commissions inspired by the history, culture, and politics of the City of Rochester, New York, and curated by world-renowned authority on the moving image John G. Hanhardt. The first exhibition, [NOSFERATU \(The Undead\)](#), by Javier Téllez was on view at MAG April 22–June 17, 2018. The third commission, by artist Dara Birnbaum, will be on view at MAG April 13–October 13, 2019.

Project Credit Line

The “Reflections on Place” series of media art commissions by the Memorial Art Gallery is made possible with support from the Zell Family, and Deborah Ronnen and Sherman Levey.

The “*Lessons of the Hour*” commission is also funded by Mark Falcone and Ellen Bruss, Ford Foundation, VIA Art Fund, and Lori Van Dusen, with additional support provided by Barbara and Aaron Levine. The commission is also made possible by 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. In-kind support is provided by Eastman Kodak Company, and production of the work is also supported by the Arts Division of the University of California Santa Cruz.

In Rochester, the exhibition is made possible by the Margaret Davis Friedlich and Alan and Sylvia Davis Memorial Fund, the Robert A. and Maureen S. Dobies Endowment Fund, the Kayser Fund, the Elizabeth and Eric Rennert Family Foundation, the Robert L. and Mary L. Sproull Fund, and an anonymous donor.

About the Artist

[Isaac Julien](#) CBE RA (U.K., b. 1960; lives and works in London) is a global artist whose command of the moving image has not only transformed installation art, but also how we can relate to history and its necessity to be rearticulated. He is as acclaimed for his fluent, arresting films as for his vibrant and inventive gallery installations. He came to prominence in the film world with his 1989 drama-documentary *Looking for Langston*, gaining a cult following with this poetic exploration of author Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance. During the past two decades he has made work largely, though not exclusively, for galleries and museums, using multi-screen installations to express fractured narratives exploring memory, desire, and cultural displacement. “*Lessons of the Hour*” is Julien’s first work made in the US



since *Baltimore* (2003). Isaac Julien is Professor of Digital Arts at the University of California Santa Cruz, where he and Professor Mark Nash are establishing the Isaac Julien Lab Santa Cruz.

Julien's work is held in collections that include Tate, London; the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA); Centre Pompidou, Paris; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington DC; the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York; Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris; the LUMA Foundation, Arles; the Kramlich Collection, and the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art (Zeitz MOCAA), Cape Town. Among the many books and catalogues published on his work, Julien's intellectual biography, *Isaac Julien: Riot*, was published by MoMA in 2013 to coincide with the museum's presentation of the nine-screen projection *Ten Thousand Waves*, which it has since acquired.

About the Curator

John G. Hanhardt is MAG's Consulting Senior Curator of Media Arts. Hanhardt began his career in the Department of Film at MoMA in New York City, and from there went to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis to establish its film program and film study collection. From 1974 to 1996, he was curator and head of the film and video department at the Whitney Museum of American Art. He was senior curator of film and media arts at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum from 1996 to 2006, and consulting senior curator of film and media at the Smithsonian American Art Museum from 2006 until 2016. Hanhardt is recognized for, among other distinctions, being a leading scholar of Nam June Paik, Bill Viola, and Andy Warhol.

About MAG's "Reflections on Place" series

The moving image in all its forms holds center stage in today's art world—from single-channel video works projected on a screen to immersive multimedia installations. The Memorial Art Gallery is undertaking a major new media arts initiative to bring these exciting contemporary art practices into its collection, exhibition, and education programs. MAG has commissioned Javier Téllez (Venezuela, b. 1969), Dara Birnbaum (U.S., b. 1946), and Isaac Julien as part of a new media art series, "Reflections on Place," inspired by the history, politics, and culture of the City of Rochester, New York. The three works are being individually presented and will enter MAG's permanent collection at the end of the exhibitions. The first commission to be completed, *NOSFERATU (The Undead)*, by Javier Téllez will have its European premiere from October 18, 2018 to February 25, 2019 at the Fondazione Prada in Milan in the group exhibition *Sanguine: Luc Tuymans on Baroque*, which is organized by the celebrated Belgian painter, Luc Tuymans.

About The Memorial Art Gallery

The Memorial Art Gallery showcases visual art from antiquity to the present day, including an outdoor public Centennial Sculpture Park. In addition to its permanent collection, MAG offers a year-round schedule of special exhibitions, lectures, concerts, tours, after-hours social events, and family activities.

Hours: Wednesday–Sunday 11 am to 5 pm, and until 9 pm on Thursdays and select Fridays. Closed Mondays and Tuesdays.

Admission: \$15; senior citizens, \$12; college students with ID and children 6–18, \$6. Always free to members, University of Rochester faculty/staff and students, and children 5 and under. Half-price general admission Thursdays from 5–9 pm is made possible in part by Monroe County. For more information, call 585.276.8900 or visit <http://mag.rochester.edu/>

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