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**MEMORIAL ART GALLERY PRESENTS**

**Isaac Julien**

***Lessons of the Hour—Frederick Douglass***

World premiere of the 10-screen film installation



Isaac Julien, *Lessons of the Hour*, 2019. Courtesy the Artist, Metro Pictures New York, and Victoria Miro London/Venice

**Rochester, NY, February 23, 2019**—The Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester is pleased to announce the exhibition [\*Lessons of the Hour—Frederick Douglass\*](#), featuring a 10-screen installation titled *Lessons of the Hour* by artist Isaac Julien. The work is inspired by episodes in the life of Frederick Douglass (1818–1895), and the issues of social justice that shaped his life’s work. *Lessons of the Hour—Frederick Douglass* will open at MAG on March 3, 2019, with a two-gallery presentation featuring, in the first gallery, three tintypes—an early type  
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of photography in which the photographic emulsion is presented on a metal plate. These are portraits of performers in *Lessons of the Hour*. Julien had a tintype camera and developing facility on the film set provided by Rob Ball, who made the tintypes for the *Lessons of the Hour* project. The second gallery will showcase the world premiere of the 10-screen film installation.

Isaac Julien created the installation using both analogue and digital technologies: 35mm color film as well as 4k digital. Julien describes the exhibition 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.” The exhibition will be on view at the Memorial Art Gallery through May 12, 2019. *Lessons of the Hour* will also premiere at Metro Pictures, New York, on March 8, with a presentation of large-scale photographic works and the 10-screen film installation. The installation is also scheduled to be exhibited at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts beginning July 2020.

Frederick Douglass was a visionary African American abolitionist, a freed slave who was also the most photographed man of the 19<sup>th</sup> 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 4th 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 will interact with other cultural icons of his time, namely photographer J.P. Ball; Anna Murray and Helen Pitts, who were 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’ 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’ “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 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.

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. Adam Finch, Julien’s longtime editor, is a key collaborator in this regard. Julien’s open-ended narratives propose that spectators actively interpret the work through a physical and sensorial immersion. Drawing from painting, architecture, photography, 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

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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—Frederick Douglass* 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 14–October 13, 2019.

### Public Program

Sunday, March 3, 2019, 2:00 pm at MAG: Isaac Julien in conversation with John G. Hanhardt, Project Curator and Consulting Senior Curator of Media Art

### Project Credit Line

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

*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, Ford Foundation, 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 work was shot.

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 the need to rearticulate it. He is acclaimed for his subtle and compelling films as well as for his vibrant and inventive media art 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 explore narrative and the representation of 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 for artists who want to conceptualize, create, and exhibit works

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involving moving and still images. Julien's work is held in collections that include Tate, London; Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA); Centre Pompidou, Paris; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,

Washington DC; Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo; Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris; LUMA Foundation, Arles; Kramlich Collection, San Francisco; and Zeitz Museum of Contemporary African Art, 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 is part of MoMA's permanent collection. The newly conserved director's cut of Isaac Julien and Mark Nash's film *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin White Mask* has just been released by Film Movement Distributors, NY.

## 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, had 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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*Images upon request.*



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