

RUBY CITY ISAAC JULIEN FANTÔME AFRIQUE



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Isaac Julien (b. 1960, London; lives London and Santa Cruz, CA)

Fantôme Afrique, 2005

Three-screen projection, 16mm film transferred to digital,
color, 5.1 surround sound
17 min.

Fantôme Afrique presents Burkina Faso in West Africa and its capital, Ouagadougou, as the dynamic result of its complex history and present-day realities. The multiscreen installation includes images of architectural sites from the past and present, a cinema, rural areas and the busy streets of Ouagadougou. Interspersed are clips from early colonial African expeditions and pivotal events in African history.

Figures central to the film, a female “witness” and a male “trickster/phantom,” guide viewers through many of the sites Isaac Julien depicts. As her name implies, the witness serves as a representative onlooker of the current state of things, including bustling pedestrians, quiet rural areas and a cinema. The trickster/phantom combines a West African folkloric character who creates disruption and chaos with a representation of the past. This figure dances his way through precolonial buildings, which serve as a reminder of Burkina Faso’s vigor before European subjugation, and futuristic-looking structures under construction among other sites, such as the cinema, that show its continued vitality.

Burkina Faso, as Julien demonstrates, is a hybrid like many other African countries. It has been shaped by a long period of French occupation (1896–1960) and more recently by the country’s self-determined response in the aftermath of colonization. In a bold move following independence, Burkina Faso’s leaders fostered the development of a film industry, based in Ouagadougou, and included support for cinemas and film studies to sustain it. Today, the city is the center of African cinema and among the most internationally connected on the continent. Both pre- and postcolonial forces remain strong and have created a city and country that occupy an altogether new territory, one that is alternatively local and global, rural and urban, preindustrial and contemporary. With *Fantôme Afrique* we see how in Burkina Faso the past, present and future are always haunting our experiences of this place.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Sir Isaac Julien is internationally known for his poetic, meditative multiscreen film installations and photographs, which reflect his long-term study of film history and production. Using these mediums, he often focuses on specific places and landscapes to present counter or unknown histories in a nonnarrative style. With both lyrical and descriptive power, Julien's works reveal the complexities of contemporary human experience along with the historical forces or events that continue to affect the present. Black and queer identities, diaspora, migration and the underlying effects of capitalist economic systems have been the focus of his films.

His work has been the subject of numerous international exhibitions. They all underscore his ability to present complex subjects in a nuanced, multilayered manner while also immersing viewers in the experience of his work through specially conceived installations. He was recently the subject of a major solo exhibition at Tate Britain in London which highlighted his work from the 1980s to the present. His active art practice is balanced by his role as Distinguished Professor of the Arts at UC, Santa Cruz where he co-founded the Isaac Julien Lab. Ruby City owns the largest collection of Julien's work outside his own archive.

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