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# A CREATIVE ALLIANCE

Video artist and filmmaker Isaac Julien has teamed up with Rolls-Royce Motor Cars for a unique project. *Gemma Padley* meets the one-time Turner Prize-nominated artist at his London studio to find out more PHOTOS: DONALD MACLELLAN

pon arriving at Isaac Julien's canal-side studio in north London I am ushered into a dark screening room with thick, heavy curtains. It's a bright day outside, but no light can penetrate this space. "Isaac will be with you soon," his assistant tells me as she hands me a cup of tea.

And so I find myself alone in a room with three huge screens, each about four metres wide. Immediately I am in China; the sound of waves fills the room and a gentle bass-line melody emanates from the surround sound system. The screens are awash with bright colours and a woman in traditional dress enters the frame.

This is *Ten Thousand Waves*, the London-born artist's 2010 multiple-screen video installation, shot on location in China. In the work, which was originally devised as a nine-screen projection, Julien, who studied painting and fine art film at Saint Martin's School of Art in the early 1980s, weaves together stories that link China's ancient past with its present.

The work has been shown all over the world and has most recently been seen in Hong Kong as part of Art Basel HK in the Mobile M+, Moving Images exhibition. It has also had more than 500,000 paying visitors at the New York Museum of Modern Art, making it the most successful exhibition after Magritte at the museum.

Collaboration lies at the heart of Julien's 30-year career, which takes in countless multiple-screen video installations created for a gallery context, a feature film, documentaries, and still photographs created as artworks in their own right. His lengthy CV requires stamina to take in, but highlights include: winning the Palm D'Or at Cannes; the 2008 documentary *Derek* made with actress Tilda Swinton that tells the story of filmmaker Derek Jarman; *Looking for Langston* (1989), which explores the life of poet Langston Hughes and contemplates black gay desire (a work that is largely credited as bringing Julien to wider attention); and most recently, 2014's *Playtime*, featuring actor James Franco, among others, which muses on capital in art. Other notable works include: *Vagabondia* (2000), a two-screen installation filmed in London's Sir John Soane's Museum, which explores themes of art history and colonialism; and *Long Road to Mazatlán* (1999), an exploration of "white masculinity and desire in the context of mythologies of the American West, particularly the position of the cowboy as a gay icon," as the Tate website succinctly puts it. Themes of frustration, loss, desire,

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STONES AGAINST  
DIAMONDS, 2015  
Endura Ultra Photograph  
180 x 240 cm

homeroeticism, identity, and a sense of journeying – both geographically and in time – permeate his work. Eclectic is one word to describe his wide-ranging oeuvre.

I could happily continue, but I'm here to discuss Julien's latest project, a commission from Rolls-Royce Motor Cars. Julien has a longstanding relationship with the company, starting when he was invited to present an artist talk for the Rolls-Royce Art Programme during Frieze Art Fair London 2012. Ongoing discussions with RRMC's art advisor Ellen-Andrea Seehusen eventually moved on to the topic of a commission for Rolls-Royce. "I had a couple of conversations with Ellen-Andrea and Rolls-Royce about what a commission might be like and how it could develop," he says. "I felt it was important to have a space in which to show moving image; for something to be initiated by Rolls-Royce was very exciting."

Discussions developed and the terms of a project were agreed. Julien visited Rolls-Royce Motor Cars' headquarters at Goodwood and saw first-hand the craftsmanship that goes into producing

psychoanalysis and artistic reflection."

The experience also proved challenging, not least in terms of the extreme weather conditions – storms and blizzards – that disrupted filming on occasion. "We travelled across an ice terrain to get to the glacier – it was quite inaccessible."

The film features Vanessa Myrie, "an important figure in several of my works," says Julien. In 2004, Myrie appeared in his film *True North* where she "retraced" the footsteps of African-American explorer Matthew Henson who travelled to the North Pole in 1909. Myrie was an "iconic presence", says Julien, who wanted to find a way to echo this in his new project.

The Rolls-Royce project is a meditation on Italian-born Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi, says Julien, whom he describes as a kind of "female Oscar Niemeyer," the Brazilian pioneering architect. "She made amazing curatorial expositions and novel glass easels. I've taken a number of her iconic works and set these in the dream-like ice cave space. By doing so I hope to make a connection between these organic aspects, such as the stones and



**ISAAC JULIEN**  
in his London studio

each vehicle. "I realised the artistry involved, the couture part of that whole production line, which has many collaborative components," he says. "In that sense, there's a kind of mirroring with moving image – you can't make images, or I certainly can't, without there being lots of different artistic inputs."

For the recent commission, Julien filmed on location in Iceland, five hours' drive away from Reykjavík. He had a team of more than 40 people including a steadicam operator, who had worked with Oscar-winning director Kathryn Bigelow, he tells me. The shoot lasted around five days (this is the trip from which he has just returned when we meet.) "We filmed in a kind of ice cave in what is thought to be the biggest glacier in Europe," he says. "It's an unusual, beautiful place and I don't think many works have been shot there. I've filmed in Iceland several times but I've never been able to gain access to an ice cave," he adds.

"It is one of the most sublime spaces I've filmed in. The cave can be read as a metaphor of the unconscious, a place of rich beauty but difficult to access, except through the process of

the carved glacial ice, and the simplicity of forms that was one of Lina's signatures," he says. Although Myrie will not speak in the film, music will feature, as it often does in Julien's films.

"The idea is for the work to have a Zen-like feel," he says. "I want to create a piece that is sonically alluring."

Inspiration stems from a letter written by Bo Bardi, in which she describes her love for semi-precious stones over more 'precious' gems such as diamonds and recalls how she began, while still in Italy, a collection of these stones that later enabled her to rethink design in a most remarkable way.

Rolls-Royce Motor Cars gave him artistic autonomy, says Julien, and he worked intuitively on the project. In making the film he drew heavily on a sense of craftsmanship in line with Rolls-Royce's ethos, he adds. When I press for details, Julien says "We shot with the idea of having certain special effects in order to create a number of uncanny moments," adding that he hopes the film will be "a very enigmatic work" There will be an exclusive preview for Isaac Julien's new work *Stones Against* →

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*Diamonds (ice cave)* 2015 during the Vernissage for the Venice Biennale, ahead of the public presentation of the work during Art Basel in Basel 2015. “We’ve worked with the verticality of the image and have shot in a more pictorial nature – the work is more connected to images than to a narrative.” Julien also wants to reproduce and showcase Bo Bardi’s glass easels to emulate the “curatorial styling that she was famous for.”

The project will be different to his other work, says Julien, and his hope is for it “to work uniquely for the Rolls-Royce commission, yet to echo my other works.”

“I shot in super high definition so I’m excited to see what the image will look like on the flat screen – the level of detail,” he adds. “I think the film is going to have a very fresh look.”

And with that, our time is up and I’m back outside again in the crisp sunlight. I have copious quotes flying through my head, and images of what the Rolls-Royce project might be like, yet strangely, I don’t feel any closer to knowing how it will be. But this, perhaps, is both the beauty and the appeal of Julien’s work – it is mysterious, enigmatic and impossible to pin down. RR

isaacjulien.com

## WHERE TO SEE ISAAC JULIEN'S WORK

### VENICE BIENNALE

There will be an exclusive preview of Isaac Julien’s new work *Stones Against Diamonds (ice cave)* 2015 during the Vernissage for the Venice Biennale, ahead of the public presentation of the work during Art Basel in Basel 2015. He will also be showing his two-screen work, *Kapital* (2013), as part of the *All the World’s Futures* exhibition, curated by Biennale artistic director Okwui Enwezor. Julien will also direct a series of readings and performances throughout the Biennale related to the work.

For more information, visit: [labiennale.org](http://labiennale.org)

### MODERNA MUSEET, MALMÖ

Moderna Museet Malmö, Sweden, will be showing Julien’s *Paradise Omeros* (2002) as part of *The New Human: You and I in Global Wonderland* until October 2015.

For details visit: [modernamuseet.se](http://modernamuseet.se)

### MARTA HERFORD, GERMANY

Marta Herford in Germany will be showing Julien’s 2010 work *Ten Thousand Waves* in the group exhibition, *Harmony and Transition: Chinese Landscapes in Contemporary Art*, from 20 June 2015 – October 4 2015.

For more information, visit: [marta-herford.de](http://marta-herford.de)