

BONHEFANTEN

ENGLISH

ISAAC JULIEN

WHAT FREEDOM IS TO ME



Isaac Julien: What Freedom Is To Me

‘I’ll tell you what freedom is to me.
No fear.’

— Nina Simone

What Freedom Is To Me is the largest display of Sir Isaac Julien’s film installation works to date and reflects how his innovative artistic approach developed from the 1980s to the present day. Over the past 40 years Julien (London, 1960) has critically interrogated the beauty, pain and contradictions of this world and some of the most important pieces from his impressive oeuvre have been selected.

By constantly pushing the boundaries of filmmaking as an art form and employing aesthetics, poetry, movement and music as key forms of communication, Julien creates new ways of seeing. His art explores film’s potential to collapse and expand traditional conceptions of history, space and time, and tells important stories in which social justice is a consistent focus.

Julien has conceived this exhibition as a fluid space, encouraging a 'mobile spectator' to experience the works at their own pace. Moving through the multi-screen installations, one can explore different perspectives and make connections of one's own with Julien's film installations and artworks.



Isaac Julien, Photo © Thierry Bal

1980s

corridor

This area of the exhibition presents some of Julien's earliest experiments in moving image. Made during the 1980s, they trace the emergence of his unique visual language. For many Black British communities, the 1980s was a period characterised by high unemployment, police harassment, far-right intimidation and media hostility. 1981 saw uprisings in cities and towns across the UK, including London.

'During my second year at Saint Martins, we had the Brixton riots. That was the biggest event in my new life, those riots ... It was then that I made the choice to do Fine Art/Film. So the spring of '81 also marked my first encounters with experimental film. Nevertheless, I was fascinated by its painterly aspects. The other thing I found attractive about it was more political: those works broke down preconceptions of what 'film' should be.'

Julien co-founded Sankofa Film and Video Collective in 1983, with Martina Atille, Maureen Blackwood, Robert Cruz and Nadine Marsh-Edwards. Kobena Mercer named the group Sankofa, an Akan word meaning 'to retrieve'. Mercer chose it as a metaphor for the act of reaching back to past knowledge to effect change in the future. A new wave of Black British filmmakers and artists were creating experimental films from within, and about, their communities and experiences.

'Works such as *Who Killed Colin Roach?*, *Territories* and *The Passion of Remembrance* – essentially those were all responses to the riots. They were made in answer to certain fixed ways of looking. But not just ways of looking at Black cultures; they were also involved with ways we might feel about ourselves.'

This Is Not An AIDS Advertisement, 1987

With its pink haze, seductive soundtrack and stylistic approach, *This Is Not An AIDS Advertisement* celebrates sexual desire and queer relationships. Featuring Julien himself, it is a radical rejection of the fear that emerged during the HIV epidemic, focusing on love, desire and romance. Julien conceived the film as an activist video artwork countering dominant television advertisement

Julien asks: 'How is sexual desire surviving under the modern regime of AIDS fearing morality?' The video is an important work of LGBTQIA+ history that continues to resonate powerfully, encouraging us to reflect on what has changed.

Still from *This Is Not An AIDS Advertisement*, 1987.
© Isaac Julien. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro



Lost Boundaries, 1986

Lost Boundaries was made using Julien's personal Super 8 film archive, which spans the years 1981–1987. During this period, he made several films in diarist's form. Julien aimed to portray a lost part of an experimental film-making practice developed during the early 1980s, now known as the 'Independent Film Workshop Movement'.

Lost Boundaries uses footage shot on location during the making of the Sankofa Film and Video Collective's first experimental feature film, *The Passion of Remembrance* (1986), which Julien co-directed with Maureen Blackwood. The images show us the in-between moments of filming and filmmaking - as in a home-newsreel of the film crew, the film equipment and its various apparatus, its actors and directors are filmed in anonymous landscape (a sand quarry), waiting about and repeating various modes of performance and action - all revealing a certain intimacy.

Lost Boundaries deconstructs, and foregrounds, the means of 16mm film production. Julien has described it as 'weaving together a community of Black artists and actors who came to prominence at a time when debates in film theory were at the forefront of establishing a new politics of artistic representation, a Black avant-garde.'

Who Killed Colin Roach?, 1983

'I insisted that my camera be engaged in politics, so it was positioned very deliberately opposite the traditional media ... My real aim was to turn that gaze on the police, because, in Colin Roach, they are the people rioting.'

Who Killed Colin Roach? is Julien's first film. It reflects on the death of Colin Roach, a 21-year-old who was shot at the entrance of Stoke Newington police station in East London in 1982. Roach's death and the alleged police coverup spurred protests against racism and police violence in North London. Julien set out to make an activist video art documentary showing the protests that demanded an independent inquiry into Roach's death. The film is shown alongside his first photographic artwork, made from photographs taken by Julien during the protests and the production of the film.

'I was determined to appropriate early video-art techniques to make my campaign tape. I wanted to utilise this camera taken out of an art school context and repurpose its technology for the streets.'

This work is held in museum collections including Museum Brandhorst, Munich and the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.



Installation view, *Who Killed Colin Roach?* Isaac Julien Studio, 2023. Photo: Stephen White & Co. © Isaac Julien. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro



Installation view, *Once Again... (Statues Never Die)*, 5-screen, Barnes Foundation, 2022.
Photo: Henrik Kam © Isaac Julien. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro

Once Again... (Statues Never Die), 2022 room 2.05

In *Once Again... (Statues Never Die)*, Julien returns to the Harlem Renaissance. The film centres on a conversation between Alain Locke (1885–1954), the philosopher, educator, and cultural theorist of the Harlem Renaissance, and Albert C. Barnes (1872–1951), an early US collector and exhibitor of African material culture. Scenes, footage, and lines reappear from *Looking for Langston* (also in the exhibition), as Julien explores Black queer desire through the relationship of Locke and artist Richmond Barthé (1901–1989). These references suggest that *Once Again... (Statues Never Die)* could be a conclusion to *Looking for Langston* – or even a new beginning – as time in and between Julien’s films blurs and interconnects.

With this work, Julien also returns to the museum as a site of interrogation and dreams, imagining the installation as a form of ‘poetic restitution’. With the inclusion of sculptures by Barthé and Matthew Angelo Harrison, the installation

alludes to contemporary restitution debates, examining the collection, display and significance of African visual culture in western art museums. Sculptures by Barthé and Harrison appear throughout the film as material examples of the inspiration for and the ongoing impact of Locke’s writings, respectively. Julien positions these works within the camera’s gaze so that they become inanimate characters within the film, accompanied by Alice Smith’s song ‘Once Again’.

Commissioned by the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia, *Once Again... (Statues Never Die)* was filmed at the Barnes Foundation and the Pitt Rivers Museum at the University of Oxford, where Locke was the first Black Rhodes scholar. It reflects on Locke’s ‘lifelong mission to reorient the aesthetic compass of the African diaspora in the direction of its rightful artistic heritage.’

Julien’s footage is interwoven with extracts from *You Hide Me*, directed by the Ghanaian filmmaker Nii Kwate Owoo in 1970.

This recently rediscovered film, which was shot in the stores of the British Museum, argues for the repatriation of Benin Bronzes. Julien also includes excerpts of *Les statues meurent aussi* (Statues Also Die), the 1953 film directed by Chris Marker and Alain Resnais. French authorities banned its screening soon after its debut for its anti-colonial sentiment. Also on display are objects from the Dogon, a people from Mali, now in a collection in Limburg. All of these works raise questions still relevant today about the collection, display and interpretation of ‘African art’ in European museums.

Territories, 1984

room 2.08

'I wanted to experiment, to create different visual auras, play with time, play within the film using factual material. I wanted to find out how things could be visually poeticised. My ultimate aim, really, was to create a style for political remembering. When I made *Territories*, I shot on Super 8 film, put it onto video, experimented with those images, and then refilmed them in 16mm. I remained keen to disband all the categories.'

Territories is an experimental documentary about the Caribbean Carnival that has been held in the West London neighborhood Notting Hill every year since 1966. The work reflects on the carnival's history as a symbolic act of resistance within Caribbean communities. The title refers to the shifting territories of class, race, labour, sexuality, and policing in 1980s London. In response to a heightened police presence and hostility at Notting Hill carnival, Julien explores the often contradictory territories of surveillance and resistance.

Julien draws on imagery and sound from mainstream media and archives, combining them with fictional scenes to question the conventions of documentary filmmaking. The edit refuses any fixed representation of Black experience in its search for:

'A his-story, a her-story of cultural forms specific to Black peoples.'

This work is held in museum collections including The Centre Pompidou, Paris and The Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt.

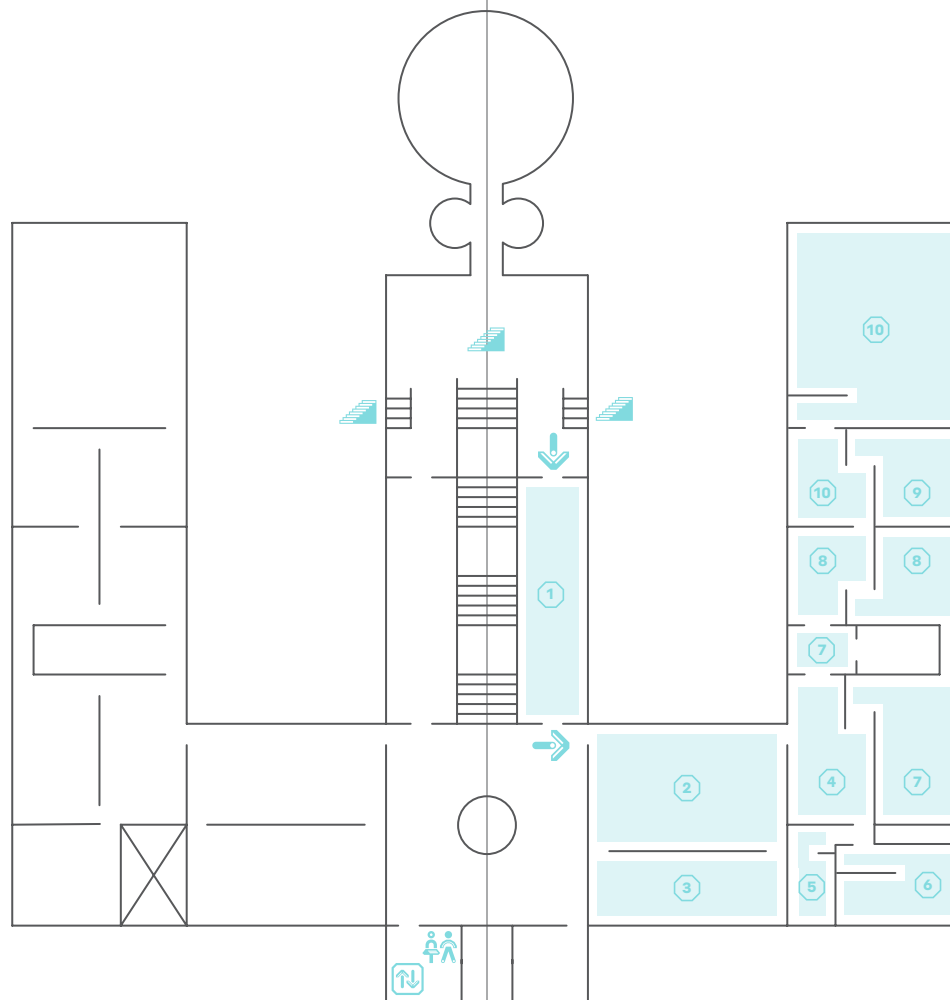


Installation view, *Territories*, Life Between Islands exhibition, Tate Britain, 2021. Photo: Tate Photography / Lucy Dawkins. © Isaac Julien. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro



← Exhibition starts here

- ① Corridor: 1980s
This Is Not An AIDS Advertisement
Lost Boundaries
Who Killed Colin Roach?
- ② Room 2.05
Once Again... (Statues Never Die)
- ③ Room 2.06
Once Again... (Statues Never Die)/ Sculpture Room
- ④ Room 2.07
Once Again... (Statues Never Die)
Ten Thousand Waves
- ⑤ Room 2.08
Territories



- ⑥ Room 2.09
Lina Bo Bardi - A Marvellous Entanglement
- ⑦ Room 2.10 & 2.11
Western Union: Small Boats / Ten Thousand Waves
- ⑧ Room 2.12 & 2.13
Looking for Langston
- ⑨ Room 2.14
Vagabondia
- ⑩ Room 2.15 & 2.16
Lessons of the Hour

- Lift to other floors
- Stairs to other floors
- Toilets



Lina Bo Bardi - A Marvellous Entanglement, 2019

room 2.09

Lina Bo Bardi – A Marvellous Entanglement signals Julien's commitment to dance and choreography. It honours the work and legacy of modernist architect and designer Lina Bo Bardi (1914–1992). Celebrated for her buildings in Brazil, Bo Bardi devoted her career to promoting the social and cultural potential of art, architecture and design.

Like many of Julien's films, sound plays a central role in the work, taking us through the film as the narrative unfolds. It was filmed across seven public buildings Bo Bardi designed: four in Salvador, in Brazil's north-east region of Bahia, and three in São Paulo. Each becomes a site for a performance, intervention, enactment or reinvention of scenes that have shaped the history of, and the legends around, Bo Bardi's architecture.

Julien presents a complex layering of sounds and images. This includes footage of Bo Bardi's buildings, and staged performances of music, voice and movement. It also features readings by Brazilian actors Fernanda Montenegro and Fernanda Torres, who portray the architect at different moments of her life. Performances by the dance company Balé Folclórico da Bahia also feature, filmed at the Museum of Modern Art of Bahia.

Motivated by the belief that Bo Bardi's work and legacy has yet to be fully acknowledged, Julien emphasises her social, political and cultural views, alongside philosophical reflections from her articles and letters. 'Linear time', she wrote, '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.'

Collectie van Linda Pace Foundation, Ruby City, San Antonio, Texas;
Philadelphia Museum of Art and National Gallery of Art in
Washington, D.C.

Installation view, *Lina Bo Bardi – A Marvellous Entanglement*, Victoria Miro, 2019.
© Isaac Julien. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro



Ten Thousand Waves, 2010

room 2.10

'*Ten Thousand Waves* and *Western Union: Small Boats* are kind of sister projects because they're both about people searching for the so-called 'better life', which, of course, is why my parents came to England from the Caribbean in the first place. Artists and filmmakers have always been involved in trespassing and translating cultures ... and I utilise fantasy to make political statements.'

Ten Thousand Waves was made in response to the Morecambe Bay tragedy in 2004. In February that year, 23 people from China drowned while picking cockles off the coast of north-west England. They had been smuggled into the UK to work illegally as cockle pickers, for very low wages and under unsafe working conditions. The film weaves contemporary Chinese culture with ancient myths, including the story of the goddess Mazu which stems from the Fujian Province, where the workers were from. *Ten Thousand Waves* reflects Julien's commitment to telling stories that illuminate the human cost of capital, labour and extraction, exploring the movement of people across countries and continents.

Versions of this work are held in museum collections including SF MoMA, Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris; M+, Hong Kong; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo; Towner Art Gallery, Eastbourne; The Whitworth, Manchester and Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, Cape Town.



Isaac Julien, *Mazu, Silence (Ten Thousand Waves)* 2010. Endura Ultra photograph, 180 x 239.8 x 7.5 cm. © Isaac Julien. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro

Western Union: Small Boats , 2007

room 2.10

Western Union: Small Boats and *Ten Thousand Waves* explore the movement of people across countries and continents. Reflecting on unfinished journeys, Julien connects stories across different times, places and experiences.

Julien made *Western Union: Small Boats* at a time when immigration policies were being discussed and debated in the UK and mainland Europe. The film focuses on the individuals who attempt to escape each year from North Africa, making the journey across the Mediterranean Sea to the southern Europe. They begin in large vessels but are eventually transferred into smaller, overcrowded

fishing boats, in which they may find rescue but often, tragically, sink to their deaths. Julien traces how borders are used to control the movement of people. The film explores the impacts of these journeys on the lives of people who make them and on those who must stay behind. He also considers how these experiences leave traces in buildings, monuments and architecture. Dance plays a central role in the film, which was made in collaboration with choreographer Russell Maliphant. Images, dance and sound open up poetic spaces for reflection. Julien invites us to consider the many different journeys – some about to happen, some unfinished and some ending suddenly – that take place across water.

‘In *Western Union: Small Boats* I’m showing human qualities, individual elements that get lost in all the official rhetoric. To try to really illuminate these, I turned to dance. In terms of bodies and movement, dance provides a different way in which I can look at things. Dance brings the story to what Derek Jarman used to call ‘political lyricism’!

Versions of this work are held in museum collections including Buffalo AKG Art Museum, New York; Israel Museum, Jerusalem; Milwaukee Art Museum, Wisconsin; Museum Brandhorst, Munich, Helga de Alvear Collection.



Isaac Julien, *Western Union Series no. 1 (Cast No Shadow)*, 2007. Duratrans image in lightbox, 120 x 120 cm. © Isaac Julien. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro



Isaac Julien, *After George Platt Lynes (Looking for Langston Vintage Series)*, 1989/2017, Kodak Premier print, Diasec mounted on aluminum, 180 x 260 cm.
© Isaac Julien. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro

Looking for Langston, 1989

room 2.13

‘The most interesting question for me proved to be: what did Black artists actually want to say? What would their art look like if its internal dialogues were made accessible to a wider audience? *Looking for Langston* came out of such a conversation, one connected to Black gay desire and to photography. But it was really born of thinking about the textuality that belongs to the innermost life of one’s consciousness.’

Looking for Langston is a lyrical exploration of the inner world of the poet, novelist and playwright Langston Hughes (1902–1967), a foundational figure of the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance was an intellectual, social, and artistic movement of African-American writers and artists spanning the 1920s and 1930s. Julien filmed *Looking for Langston* in London but set it in the jazz world of 1920s Harlem, the historically African-American neighborhood of New York City. Bringing together poetry, image and sound, Julien explores Black, queer desire while breaking down traditional divisions between art forms.

Using beauty and poetry to ask important questions, *Looking for Langston* was made at the height of the HIV epidemic. It is a powerful celebration of Black queer love and a rejection of homophobic rhetoric. Julien directed the film while he was a member of Sankofa Film and Video Collective, with his partner, the film critic and curator Mark Nash. Its exploration of the complexity of the queer gaze led to the film gaining cult status, becoming a hallmark of what is now described as ‘New Queer Cinema’.

‘The central question in *Looking for Langston* was how to portray desire, more specifically Black gay desire. To talk about that, I knew that right away one had to use fantasy. It’s always been my observation that questions around desire tend to be located less in the real than in fantasy.’

This work is held in the collections of Museum of Modern Art, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, and Tate, London; Linda Pace Collection, San Antonio, Texas.

Vagabondia, 2000

room 2.14

Vagabondia was filmed in Sir John Soane's Museum in London, which is famous for its eclectic collection and crowded presentation, stripping many objects of their original context. The film focuses on the dreams and fantasies of a conservator walking the halls of the museum at night. She is transported to a dreaming state, imagining hidden histories behind the collection of paintings, sculptures and architectural relics. In this fantasy, the objects appear to fold in on themselves as time and space are collapsed.

European, British and North American museums have historically functioned as places that contain and define history and culture. However, objects represent histories that are circulated over time and across space, therefore merely presenting a particular narrative of culture. Histories are left out and stories often distorted, depending on what objects are collected and by whom. In Julien's hands, the museum's permanence becomes unstuck: he sets history in motion as he blurs, and often breaks, the boundaries of time and space. Julien invites us to question 'who sees what and what it is we're actually seeing'. He often returns to museums as a subject in his work, exploring their sometimes violent histories and considering what a museum should be today: how might they collect, show and share objects, and how might we want to encounter them.



Installation view, *Vagabondia*, Turner Prize, Tate Britain, 2001. Photo: Tate Photography.
© Isaac Julien. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro

'I used Creole to vocalise the conservator's thoughts, and the narration is spoken by my mother, Rosemary Julien ... I was trying to explore a version of the repressed histories. My whole series of works about the museum is concerned with unexpected elements of the institution.'

This work is held in museum collections including, Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki; Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Massachusetts and Tate, London; Linda Pace Collection, San Antonio, Texas.

Lessons of the Hour, 2019

room 2.16

Lessons of the Hour is a poetic journey into the life and times of Frederick Douglass (1818–1895), an American visionary abolitionist, freedom fighter, activist and writer. The film installation focuses on Douglass's own memories of enslavement, and the untold stories of struggle and sacrifice of his ancestors who were also enslaved.

Julien brings us on a journey into Douglass's era, reflecting on its relationship to, and relevance with, the present. It focuses on 1845–1847, a period in which Douglass travelled to Scotland, Ireland and England to campaign against slavery. Filmed in Edinburgh, London and Washington DC, the film includes excerpts of his most powerful speeches such as 'Lessons of the Hour', 'What to the Slave is the 4th of July?' and 'Lecture on Pictures'. Here, Douglass sets out his belief that photography – which had just been invented – has the power to influence human relations and connections. He goes on to suggest that photography might support people to shape their identity after gaining freedom from enslavement.

The installation mirrors a 19th-century salon-hang – large groupings of artworks hung together. Natural landscapes appear throughout the film. They shift between places of beauty, and sites of violence and trauma that hold histories of enslavement. It also focuses on the domestic life of Douglass and his wife Anna Murray Douglass, who was also an abolitionist. The multiple screens work as portals for travelling in and out of history, representing Julien's ongoing interest in using the archive to reflect on contemporary life.

'The film tries to build into the pictures this sense of rupture and sublimity, and at the same time to use them to look back into a history and a slavery that we've been resisting in the west in the 21st century, but which nonetheless haunts the spectre of all our actions in everything that we do.'

Versions of this work are held in museum collections including the Bonnefanten, Maastricht; Memorial Art Gallery, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York and Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Virginia; de Young Museum, San Francisco.



Installation view, *Lessons of the Hour*, 10-screen, Tate Britain, 2023 Photo: Jack Hems.
© Isaac Julien. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro

Isaac Julien: What Freedom Is To Me

09.03 – 18.08.2024

Curators

Isabella Maidment, former curator Contemporary British Art, Nathan Ladd, curator Contemporary British Art, Tate Britain, Stijn Huijts, director Bonnefanten, Roxy Jongewaard, junior curator Bonnefanten, in close collaboration with the artist.

Exhibition design

Studio Isaac Julien and Adjaye Associates

Presentation & Organisation

Team Bonnefanten

Editors

Studio Isaac Julien and Bonnefanten

Translation

Sue McDonnell

Printing

Drukpartners Zuid B.V.

All works © Isaac Julien

Exhibition organised by Tate Britain, London in collaboration with Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf and Bonnefanten, Maastricht.

Bonnefanten is subsidised by the Province of Limburg, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the VriendenLoterij.

This exhibition is made possible by Blockbusterfonds, VandenEnde Foundation, VriendenLoterij, het Cultuurfonds, VSBfonds, Fonds 21, Mondriaan Fund, UC Santa Cruz, Pro AV, and Municipality of Maastricht.

With thanks to the Circle of Ambassadors: Victoria Miro, Galerie Ron Mandos, Transcontinenta BV, The European Fine Art Foundation (TEFAF), Linda Pace Foundation, Ruby City, San Antonio, Christopher C. Hill, The Robben Foundation, Mario Cristiani, Jeu en Netty van Sint Fiet and André Terlingen.

We thank the copyright owners for their kind permission to reproduce their material. Should, despite our intensive research any person entitled to rights has been overlooked; amendments shall be made in subsequent print runs, and legitimate claims shall be compensated within the usual provisions.

Cover image: Isaac Julien, *Freedom / Diasporic Dream-Space No. 1 (Once Again... Statues Never Die)*, 2022. Inkjet print on Canson Platine Fibre Rag, framed 273 x 183 x 5.6 cm. Collection Bonnefanten. © Isaac Julien. Courtesy the artist, Galerie Ron Mandos and Victoria Miro.

www.bonnefanten.nl
+31 (0)43 3290 190

SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCE

@bonnefanten
#bonnefanten

FREE WIFI

Bonnefanten gast

MUSEUM OPENING HOURS

Tuesday to Sunday, 11.00 – 17.00

Together we can do more

This booklet is free. Just like the audio tours, the Bonnefanten Free Fridays and the free lectures. We would like to keep it that way. Especially for people with a small budget. Despite subsidies, we cannot do this without some support. Your one-off or periodic contribution is extremely valuable to us. Friends and Sponsors make us especially happy. In addition, they also enjoy plenty of extras. You can donate directly via the QR code. More information can be found at www.bonnefantenmuseumfonds.nl. Send an email to vrienden@bonnefanten.nl or simply ask us. Thank you for your consideration. See you soon.



This exhibition is made possible by:



provincie limburg 

VRIENDENLOTERIJ

VandenEnde
FOUNDATION

BLOCK
BUSTER
FONDS

VRIENDENLOTERIJ
het
Cultuurfonds

VSBFonds,
VandenEnde
FOUNDATION

het
Cultuurfonds

M
mondriaan
fonds

VSBFonds,
Iedereen doet mee

FONDS21

UC SANTA CRUZ

PROAV
Pro Av Saarikko Oy

 Gemeente Maastricht