

For Immediate Release:

***Lessons of the Hour: Isaac Julien*
A Portrait of Frederick Douglass
October 14, 2020 – March 13, 2021**



Isaac Julien, *Lessons of the Hour*, 2019 (installation view, detail), ten-screen installation, 35mm film and 4k digital, color, 7.1 surround sound. 28" 46". Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.

I learned that the point from which a thing is viewed is of some importance.
Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage My Freedom*, 1855

SAN FRANCISCO, CA, July 9, 2020 — McEvoy Foundation for the Arts is pleased to announce the West Coast debut of *Lessons of the Hour*, a moving image and photography exhibition by British filmmaker and installation artist Isaac Julien, CBE RA. Opening on October 14, 2020, *Lessons* explores the life of Frederick Douglass, the visionary African American writer, abolitionist, statesman, and freed slave through a few of his most compelling

speeches and moments from his private life. The centerpiece of the exhibition is Julien's multi-screen film installation *Frederick Douglass: Lessons of the Hour* (2019) offers a contemplative, poetic journey into Douglass' zeitgeist, a complex imagining of a man affirming his struggle for equality as a global citizen, and a forceful suggestion that the lessons of the abolitionist's hour have yet to be learned.

"*Lessons of the Hour* is a catalyst for conversation, reflection and community," says Susan Miller, executive director. "With this monumental achievement that demands a physical experience, Isaac Julien welcomes art goers of all backgrounds back to the transcendence of a shared space for a discussion of unparalleled importance. We look forward to providing access to this exhibition freely to all communities in and beyond the Bay Area."

Adds Nion McEvoy, founder and president: "Isaac is a critically important storyteller whose work has the power to soothe, provoke, and entertain all at once. We are thrilled to be working with him. McEvoy Arts is an accessible art space for all to enjoy museum-quality exhibitions that are aligned with themes in the McEvoy Family Collection. With *Lessons of the Hour*, we offer visitors, both new and returning, a chance to engage with a mesmerizing installation usually seen at much larger institutions. It is our absolute honor to bring Isaac's work to the West Coast and the Bay Area."

Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) is a pivotal figure in the history of abolitionism and social reform in the United States. An escaped and then freed slave, Douglass developed his oratorical skills as a preacher before embarking on anti-slavery campaigns across the northern United States and the United Kingdom, where he expansively documented the sensations of freedom from enslavement and other forms of racial discrimination he felt there as opposed to the United States. He was active in the women's suffrage movement and published three autobiographies which continue to wield cultural influence. Throughout his lifetime, Douglass, the most photographed man of the nineteenth-century, was a prominent proponent of the medium as a means by which Black people could control their likenesses beyond caricature.

Frederick Douglass: Lessons of the Hour is an immersive ten-screen film installation, hung salon-style to create what Julien describes as a "moving image montage." The work's presentation not only echoes the picture-hanging conventions of the era but allows the artist to draw connections between many images at once without relegating any particular detail to the background. Shot with 35mm film and 4k digital technology at sites in the United States and United Kingdom that hold historical significance to the abolitionist's life, *Lessons* places Douglass (portrayed by Ray Fearon, a member of the Royal Shakespeare Company) within settings alternately pastoral, domestic, and public. *Lessons'* opening sequences present Douglass amidst a sublime natural landscape before giving way to meticulous recreations of nineteenth-century rooms—kitchens, living spaces, and photography studios—offering more

intimate details of his life. Midway through we see Douglass as the professional orator, delivering two piecing monologues in the highly formal Royal Academy of Arts in London. Later, Julien introduces contemporary images of drone surveillance and found footage of twentieth-century American life that brings Douglass' timely words into the present.

Working closely with the art historian Celeste-Marie Bernier on the film's narration, Julien constructs "*tableaux vivants*" that reimagine Douglass' relationships to the influential women and men in his life, among them Anna Murray and Helen Pitts, his first and second wives; Ellen and Anna Richardson, who raised funds to purchase Douglass' freedom and supported his return to America; the suffragette Susan B. Anthony; feminist activist and translator Otilie Assing; and JP Ball, a pioneering African American photographer. Julien's inclusion of these historical figures indelibly ties them to our contemporary understanding of Douglass' legacy, offering an intersectional approach to the ongoing struggle for racial justice and human rights.

Three of Douglass' seminal speeches provide the thematic core of *Lessons*. "Lessons of the Hour" (1894), his final delivered speech, addresses lynching, suffrage, and legacies of slavery in the post-Civil War American South. "Lecture on Pictures" (1861), in which Douglass famously declared that "rightly viewed, the whole soul of man is a sort of picture gallery," draws a connection between advances in photography and equality. "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" (1852), Douglass' most well-known speech, offers a pointed critique of American democracy advanced by the condition of slavery. Employing the nonlinear narrative devices for which he is acclaimed, Julien crafts a multi-layered meditation on the historicity and contemporaneity of Douglass' writings.

Isaac Julien's pioneering artistic practice incorporates the moving image, photography, and installation to create open-ended narratives that invite spectators to actively interpret the work through a physical and sensorial immersion. His 1989 documentary-drama exploring author Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance *Looking for Langston* garnered Julien a cult following while his 1991 debut feature *Young Soul Rebels* won the Semaine de la Critique prize at the Cannes Film Festival. In the decades since, Julien's body of work has touched on the iconic Brazilian-Italian architect Lina Bo Bardi (*A Marvellous Entanglement*, 2019), geopolitical immigration policies (*Western Union Small Boats*, 2007), and relationships between art and the effects of capital (*Playtime*, 2014), among others. His singular attention to set décor, lighting, performance, as well as editing, sonic, and visual effects create space for reflection on global forces shaping history and culture.

McEvoy Arts' presentation of *Lessons* is developed in collaboration with the [Isaac Julien Lab](#) at the University of California, Santa Cruz to give a community of postgraduate students a practicum experience in curation, installation, and production of an immersive moving-image work. The Lab is taught by Julien, a Distinguished Professor of the Arts at UC Santa Cruz, and independent curator and writer Mark Nash and provides opportunities for theoretical

research, curatorial debate, and artistic production. Collaboratively, the Lab and McEvoy Arts are producing a series of conversations and installation documentation for the course and select public viewing. The initiative further develops McEvoy Arts as a space for dialogue, education, and reflection in the arts by participants of all backgrounds.

The film installation is accompanied by Julien's tintype portraits and mise en scènes photographs of the film's subjects that explore a shared interest in photography between Douglass and Julien, as well as a complementary grouping of works from the McEvoy Family Collection, selected by Julien and Nash. A catalog on the project is forthcoming in Fall 2020. Additional programs, detailed below, are to be announced in full later this Summer.

Lessons of the Hour runs through March 13, 2021 and is free and open to the public.

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Additional Programming

In the Screening Room

Artist, curator, and educator Leila Weefur curates a video program that creates an intertextual dialogue between emerging and established filmmakers whose works function as thoughtful responses to the question, "what is America today?" Across a series of "film movements," Weefur generates a compositional discourse that queers the historically linear Black diasporic narrative. Concepts of movement—in screens, language, borders, and history—are threaded throughout the program and Weefur's practice at large, which explores spatial and structural complexities that influence cinematic narrative and the aesthetics of Black being.

Conversations and Events

In conjunction with both *Lessons of the Hour* and Weefur's video program, McEvoy Arts is developing a calendar of virtual and in-person public programs in partnership with a diverse cohort of organizations. The events prioritize opportunities for intergenerational and intersectional conversations on topics thematically embedded in the exhibition, including memory, historical truth, civil rights, and photography's relationship to the moving image.

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Isaac Julien, CBE RA (b. 1960) is an artist, filmmaker, and educator whose multi-screen film installations and photographs incorporate different artistic disciplines to create a poetic and unique visual language. Solo exhibitions of his work have been held at ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum, Denmark (2018); The Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto (2017); MAC Niterói, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2016); MUAC (Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo), Mexico City (2016); the De Pont Museum, Netherlands (2015); Museum of Modern Art, New York (2013);

the Art Institute of Chicago (2013); Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo (2012); Museum Brandhorst, Munich (2009); Pompidou Centre Paris (2005); and MoCA Miami (2005). He has exhibited at biennials including the 56th International Exhibition of Contemporary Art – La Biennale de Venezia (2015), Johannesburg Biennale (2012), Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art (2011), and Shanghai Biennale (2010). Julien is the recipient of The Royal Academy of Arts Charles Wollaston Award 2017 and was appointed a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) for services to the Arts in the Queen’s Birthday 2017 Honors List. He is currently a Distinguished Professor of the Arts at University of California, Santa Cruz, where he is developing the Isaac Julien Lab. He lives and works in London and Santa Cruz.

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About McEvoy Foundation for the Arts

McEvoy Foundation for the Arts presents exhibitions and events that engage, expand, and challenge themes present in the McEvoy Family Collection. Established in 2017, McEvoy Arts creates an open, intimate, and welcoming place for private contemplation and public discussion about art and culture. Rooted in the creative legacies of the San Francisco Bay Area, McEvoy Arts embodies a far-reaching vision of the McEvoy Family Collection’s potential to facilitate and engage conversations on the practice of contemporary art. McEvoy Arts invites artists, curators, and thinkers with varied perspectives to respond to the Collection. Each year, these collaborations produce exhibitions in the Foundation’s gallery, new media programs in the Screening Room, as well as many film, music, literary, and performing arts events each year. Exhibitions are free and open to the public.

Visiting McEvoy Foundation for the Arts

To ensure the health and safety of its visitors and staff during the coronavirus pandemic, all persons 12 years and older are required to wear face coverings at all times when in McEvoy Arts and Minnesota Street Project facilities, maintain a minimum of 6 feet of physical distance from others, and refrain from visiting if they are experiencing illness or symptoms of COVID-19 or have come in recent contact with someone suspected or confirmed of contracting the virus.

Acknowledgments

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High-resolution images and additional materials are available by request to press@mcevoyarts.org or wendy@norriscommunications.biz.