



Fig 1: Stanley Spencer. *Love among nations*, 1935-1926. Oil on canvas, 91,1x280 cm. Fitz William museum, Cambridge. Photo credit: The Fitzwilliam Museum.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Wednesday, October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2022, with a seminar on *Global Dynamics of Colour, Transnational modernisms of Race*, still fresh in mind I was visiting the Fitz William museum in Cambridge and got taken aback by a big horizontal work of Stanley Spencer (1891-1959) *Love Among Nations* (1935-36) (Fig 1). Contrary to the ideal worldview the title suggests, the artwork confronts you with a patriarchal representation and racial stereotyping of mundialism. Despite being conceived of as an expression of free love [Spencer's naïve solution for 'a world at war'], the painting is an offensive expression of the postwar modernistic Eurocentric sentiment<sup>2</sup>. Within the typecasting of the nations of the 'Global South', the ethnically superior picturing of a diverse, white and distinguishably dressed 'Global North' frames the indigenous half-naked 'other' as monolithic black and uncivilized. The contact between cultures, Spencer was aiming for in this painting, is fully penetrated by cultural supremacy, a centralistic viewpoint defining the postcolonial modernism of that time. The text plate next to the painting announces that "conversations are developing around the status of paintings like this"<sup>3</sup>. However the painting is still exhibited without much context, emphasizing an aesthetic and ethnocentric perspective of modernity. Why is the critical note limited to two phrases on a text plate? Is there a way to exhibit such a painting, as being part of British cultural heritage in a more planetary, transcultural manner? Contemporary modernist studies are characterized by a comprehensive interconnection between modernity and modernism. In her essay on Planetary modernisms Susan Friedman writes that modernism is:

an aesthetic reflection of and engagement with a wide spectrum of historical changes, including [...]. Once modernity became the defining cause of aesthetic engagements with it, the door opened to thinking about the specific conditions of modernity for different genders, races, sexualities, nations, and so forth.<sup>4</sup>

As such we recognize different modernisms/modernities at different locations and moments in time intersecting with other domains of change. We need a planetary approach which replaces the "old models of modernist internationalism" based on "binaries as Self-Other, modern-traditional, civilized-savage, high art-primitive art".<sup>5</sup> With that multidimensionality in mind I will use the actual installation of Isaac Julien (1960) at the Barnes Foundation *Once Again ... (Statues Never die)* (2022) to reflect on the possibilities of an intersective and polycentric approach to the exhibition of a vexed body of art.

<sup>1</sup> Fitz William museum "Audioguide" consulted October 24, 2022 <https://fitzwilliammuseum.cam.ac.uk/objects-and-artworks/audio-guide/love-among-the-nations>

<sup>2</sup> Steve Jones, "Artwork of the week", May 31, 2015 consulted October 24, 2022, <https://artworkoftheweek.wordpress.com/2015/05/31/stanley-spencer-love-among-the-nations-1935-6-and-love-on-the-moor-1949-54/>

<sup>3</sup> Fitz William museum, textplate next to the painting, October 19, 2022

<sup>4</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms, Provocations on Modernity Across Time* (United States: Columbia University Press), 51.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms*, 64.

## Isaac Julien and the Barnes Foundation

Sir Isaac Julien (fig 2) is a black British artist, filmmaker and professor of the arts at UC Santa Cruz and regarded as one of the pioneers of international black cinema.<sup>6</sup> Last June



he got knighted for his services to diversity and inclusion in art and this October he received the Goslarer Kaiserring 2022.<sup>7</sup> The jury justified their nomination with the following words : "Isaac Julien habe die Grenzen zwischen Kunstgattungen niedergerissen und durch seine Kombination von Film, Tanz, Fotografie, Musik, Theater, Malerei und Skulptur "eine poetische und einzigartige visuelle Sprache geschaffen". Seine Arbeit greife wichtige gesellschaftliche und menschliche Themen der Zeit auf wie Rassismus, Migration, Diversität, Queerness, Homophobie und

Chauvinismus. Sie rege dazu an, soziale Verantwortung neu zu denken und auszuloten".<sup>8</sup>

One of his major works is *Looking for Langston* (1989), a semi-documentary about the queer poet Langston Hughes (1901-1967) and the Harlem Renaissance, a period of boosting black creativity and repressed 'gay aestheticism'.<sup>9 10</sup>

The Barnes Foundation is an art collection and educational institution with a large number of French impressionistic and modernistic art objects and a fundamental collection of African Sculptures.<sup>11</sup> It is founded in 1922 by the art collector, educator and writer Dr. Albert C. Barnes (1872-1851).<sup>12</sup> In his review in *the New York times* the cultural critic Arthur Lubow (1952) addresses that although it was Barnes' personal intention to improve the position of African Americans in the US society by showing their artistic heritage and opening up the collection for African-American artist to get acquainted with their own patrimony, the acquisition of indigenous artifacts by a white patron "was and still is questionable".<sup>13 14</sup> For the occasion of the foundation's centenary anniversary they commissioned Julien, heralded for fusing elements from film, theatre, painting and sculpture into a interdisciplinary, intertemporal and transcultural visual narrative, to create an artwork which interacts and interconnects with the African Art in their collection and in other western museums.<sup>15</sup>

## Once Again ... (Statues Never Die)

With the recurring debates about restitution and unethical appropriation of cultural heritage from marginalized communities in mind, Julien created a five-channel film installation *Once Again ... (Statues Never Die)* investigating the ambiguous relationship between the white philanthropic educator Barnes and the black cultural philosopher Alain Locke (1885 -

<sup>6</sup> "Isaac Julien", Wikipedia, consulted 21 October 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaac\\_Julien](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaac_Julien)

<sup>7</sup> The Goslarer Kaiserring is one of the most important Art prizes, awarded every October since 1975 by the City of Goslar to an internationally outstanding contemporary artist whose work sparks the art of our time. The sculptor Henry Moore was the first artist to receive this prize. <https://www.goslar.de/kultur-freizeit/kunst-kaiserring/kaiserring>

<sup>8</sup> Sven Toniges, "Goslarer Kaiserring an Filmemacher Isaac Julien verliehen," posted on October 8, 2022 in DW, Deutsche Welle, consulted October 24, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/de/goslarer-kaiserring-für-isaac-julien/a-63333770>

<sup>9</sup> Julian Lucas, "A black British artist asks, "what was Africa to the Harlem Renaissance?" *The New Yorker*, August 11 (2022), <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/a-black-british-artist-asks-what-was-africa-to-the-harlem-renaissance>

<sup>10</sup> "Langston Hughes" Wikipedia, consulted October 24, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Langston\\_Hughes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Langston_Hughes)

<sup>11</sup> "The Barnes Foundation", Wikipedia, consulted October 24, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barnes\\_Foundation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barnes_Foundation)

<sup>12</sup> "Dr. Albert C. Barnes", *The art story*, consulted October 24, 2022, <https://www.theartstory.org/influencer/barnes-albert-c/>

<sup>13</sup> "Arthur Lubow" Wikipedia, consulted October 25, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur\\_Lubow](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Lubow)

<sup>14</sup> Arthur Lubow, "Questioning the Place of Black Art in a White Man's Collection", *The New York Times*, August 5 (2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/05/arts/design/isaac-julien-barnes-review-locke-barthe-art.html>

<sup>15</sup> Arthur Lubow, "Questioning the Place of Black Art"

1954).<sup>1617</sup> The installation features five double-sided screens against mirrored walls and is, completed with a selection of sculptures, divided over two adjoining galleries: eight African artifacts from the regular collection, three bronze sculptures by African-American artist Richmond Barthe (1901-1989) and five in polyurethane encapsulated cheap African figurines by the American Artist Matthew Angelo Harrison (1989).<sup>18</sup> It narrates a multifaceted perspective on this “lesser-known chapter of the foundation’s history.”<sup>19</sup>



Fig. 3 and 4: Isaac Julien, *Once Again . . . (Statues Never Die)*. The Barnes Foundation, installation view. Image courtesy Isaac Julien and Victoria Miro, London/Venice. Photo credit: by Henrik Kam<sup>20</sup>

The movie depicts Alain Locke, the first African American Rhodes Scholar at Oxford universities, writer, critic, educator and philosopher of race and culture and appointed father of the ‘Harlem Renaissance’. He is most famous for creating the philosophical concept of *The New Negro*, with his anthology of poetry and essays on African and African American art and literature, published in 1925.<sup>21</sup> The work ignited a cultural shift [started in Harlem], ‘The Negro Renaissance’ [which in 1940 transformed into the ‘Harlem Renaissance’], that “would infuse the black subject matter and style into American culture”, which he expected to reach outside Europe.<sup>22</sup> Quite different to what modern scholars think says Ernest Mitchell, it was not a black cultural movement by black artists.<sup>23</sup> Locke had ‘planetary’ ambitions and as a pluralist he intended it to be “interracial, international and intergenerational”.<sup>24</sup> According to John P. Bowles, Locke expected “the New Negro Artist to engage with European Modernism, African Art, and African American history and culture to develop unique means of modernist expression that could be recognized on an international stage as representative of African American Culture alongside the cultural nationalist projects of Europe.”<sup>25</sup> Locke initially came in contact with African art through a visit with Barnes<sup>26</sup>. He visited the collection several times and used it for his research and writings.<sup>27</sup>

By mixing archival video’s and dramatic enactment Julien investigates not only the interaction between those two very different men, but also Locke’s charged dialogue with what he called “Ancestral arts”.<sup>28</sup> Julian Lucas illustrates this in his review by citing a poem by the well-known poet and novelist - and Alain Locke’s protegee - Countee Cullen (1903-1946), whether a Black American, “three centeries removed from/The scenes his fathers

<sup>16</sup> The Barnes Foundation, “About the Exhibition” consulted October 24, 2022 <https://www.barnesfoundation.org/whats-on/exhibition/isaac-julien-statues-never-die>

<sup>17</sup> Alain Locke”, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, consulted October 24, 2022 <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/alain-locke/>

<sup>18</sup> Arthur Lubow, “Questioning the Place of Black Art”

<sup>19</sup> The Barnes Foundation, “About the Exhibition”

<sup>20</sup> Julian Lucas, “A black British artist asks,

<sup>21</sup> “Alain Locke”, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

<sup>22</sup> Ernest Julius Mitchell. “Black Renaissance’: A Brief History of the Concept.” *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 55, no. 4 (2010), 645. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41158720>.

<sup>23</sup> Ernest Julius Mitchell. “Black Renaissance”. 645.

<sup>24</sup> Ernest Julius Mitchell. “Black Renaissance”. 645.

<sup>25</sup> John P. Bowles, “African American Artists as Agents of Modernism: A Challenge for American Art,” *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2018), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.1633>.

<sup>26</sup> “Charles Barnes”, Wikipedia, consulted October 25, 2022 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert\\_C.\\_Barnes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_C._Barnes)

<sup>27</sup> Amaha-Rose Abrams, “How Filmmaker Isaac Julien Brought the Late Alain Locke, the First African-American Rhodes Scholar, Back to Life,” *Artnet*, August 18 (2022). <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/isaac-julien-barnes-foundation-2160491>

<sup>28</sup> Julian Lucas, “A black British artist asks”

loved” could even relate to them beyond an empty longing for jumbled exotica:”Spicy grove and Banyan tree, /What is Africa to me?”.<sup>2930</sup> So one can wonder if it is possible for African Americans to regenerate the ‘New Negro’, as a renewed black identity by appropriating the African sculptures in museums as their heritage. Is the exhibit of African sculptures collected by white supremacy eligible, even if it was the only way to make African patrimony accessible for Black Americans? Did the aesthetics of this alienated cultural legacy not restrict the way they looked at themselves? Julien uses the endless reflections of the projection in the mirrors to play with this concept of gaze, “watching and being watched”, as determining factor in the assessment of the other and the self as being reflected in the other.<sup>31</sup>

### **Fusion of time, place and perspectives, Locke’s dream, a museum’s future**

The display of the African Art collection in the museum is largely shaped by the way Barnes wanted it to be seen. In an interview with Amaha-Rose Abrams, Julien explains that by staging the installation as Locke’s never realised “Harlem museum of African Art”, he enters Locke’s view and juxtaposes both perspectives towards the expropriated objects, while the black female curator brings in a contemporary voice.<sup>32</sup> The film fuses times, places and perspectives, starting with Locke at the eve of the Harlem Renaissance, deporting him to the Pitt River Museum today, where he was walking along the British colonial heritage.<sup>33</sup> The female voice joins him with a fusion of poems and fragments about the aftermath of colonial conquest.<sup>34</sup> Built-in parts of two other movies: *Statues Also Die* (1953) by Chris Marker and Alain Resnais and *You hide me* (1970) by Nii Kwate Owo and pictures of the Benin expedition, impose the narrative about restitution.<sup>35</sup> From the “graveyard of an anthropology museum”, the movie jumps to the “erotic workshop” of the sculptor Richard Barthé, his friend and occasional lover, where they admire the ‘New Negro’, a sculpted torso idealizing black masculinity (fig 5).<sup>36</sup> At that point the angle of black identity conjuncts with gender identity and homoeroticism. This is an aspect of the Harlem Renaissance which cannot be overlooked. The cutting-edge “modern visual language” that supported the “rediscovery” of African and African Americans, also “stereotyped and caricatured” the black body says James Smalls in his essay on Barthé.<sup>37</sup> As a counterpoint there was a group of artist who was looking for inspiration in the classical Greek art, to valorize the black male form by a way of idealization, allowing them to expose racism and satisfy their repressed sexual desires.<sup>38</sup> Barthé’s three male nudes in the installation demonstrate how he mastered the skill to combine “expressivity of the body with a focus on racial distinction”, because he believed that there were “obvious physical differences between the black and white male bodies”, that is, that race for him was “anatomically significant”.<sup>39 40</sup> The use of classical inspiration for the black body was complicated at that time, because it seemingly opposed the Afrocentrism embodied in primitivism. Nevertheless, driven by his own homoeroticism Locke tried to include this ambiguity in his New Negro Philosophy. By supporting both thoughts he argued that he opened up the conjunction with other categories as gender, sexual orientation, class and ethnicity.<sup>41</sup> By adding footage of his first movie *Looking for Langston*, Julien is reinforcing this ambiguity which is present until today.

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<sup>29</sup> “Countee Cullen” poetry foundation, consulted October 25, 2022 <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/countee-cullen>

<sup>30</sup> Julian Lucas, “A black British artist asks”

<sup>31</sup> Julian Lucas, “A black British artist asks”

<sup>32</sup> Amaha-Rose Abrams, “How Filmmaker Isaac Julien”

<sup>33</sup> Amaha-Rose Abrams, “How Filmmaker Isaac Julien”

<sup>34</sup> Julian Lucas, “A black British artist asks,”

<sup>35</sup> Julian Lucas, “A black British artist asks,”

<sup>36</sup> Julian Lucas, “A black British artist asks”

<sup>37</sup> James Smalls, “‘Expressive Camouflage’: Classicism, Race, and Homoerotic Desire in the Male Nudes of Richmond Barthé,” *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2018), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.1632>.

<sup>38</sup> James Smalls, “Expressive Camouflage”.

<sup>39</sup> James Smalls, “Expressive Camouflage”

<sup>40</sup> James Smalls, “Expressive Camouflage”.

<sup>41</sup> James Smalls, “Expressive Camouflage”



Fig 5: Isaac Julien. *Once Again ... (Statues Never Die)*, (2022). The Barnes Foundation, installation view. Image courtesy Isaac Julien and Victoria Miro, London/Venice. Photo by Henrik Kam.<sup>42</sup>

The display of sculptures is completed with the “encapsulations” of Mathew Angelo Harrison, examining the indelible harm of colonial conquest and violence (fig 6).<sup>43</sup> Through the embalming of African souvenirs in acrylic resin or polyurethane square blocks, that rephrase the formal modernistic language of that time, he is emphasizing the erasability of the degradation of the colonized cultures.<sup>44</sup> By doing that however he is criticizing the appropriation model, which according to Susan Friedman “repeats the logic of imperialism, with the Rest providing the raw material transmuted into modernist art in the west”.<sup>45</sup> By that he risks as argued by Simon Gikandi “to refuse to grant African art the position of aesthetic or formal innovations”.<sup>46</sup> With the addition of these sculptures in Locke’s imaginary museum, Julien, actualizes the discussion about post-colonialization and decolonization and the appropriation model which is still unfinished.



Fig 6: Isaac Julien: *Once Again ... (Statues Never Die)*, (2022) The Barnes Foundation, installation view. Image courtesy Isaac Julien and Victoria Miro, London/Venice. Photo by Henrik Kam.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Amaha-Rose Abrams, “How Filmmaker Isaac Julien”

<sup>43</sup> Gallerie Eva Presenhuber, “Biography Matthew Angelo Harrison”, consulted October 25,2022 <https://www.presenhuber.com/artists/matthew-angelo-harrison#tab:slideshow>

<sup>44</sup> Gallerie Eva Presenhuber, “Biography Matthew Angelo Harrison”

<sup>45</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman , *Planetary Modernisms*, 64.

<sup>46</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman , *Planetary Modernisms*, 64.

<sup>47</sup> Amaha-Rose Abrams, “How Filmmaker Isaac Julien”

## Conclusion

The simultaneous projection, fusion of film fragments out of different geohistorical locations and periods, characters representing multiple positions, sculptures from different era expressing a different relation to their specific modernity, exhibited in an historically charged collection has results in a conjunctural, multidimensional, interdisciplinary, and intertemporal masterpiece that inflames a dialogue about race, culture, identity, restitution, black identity and sexual desire.

Coming back to my original question if there is a way to exhibit a controversial body of art in a more planetary, transcultural manner, the answer is yes. However, a museum curator needs to leave his comfort zone, break through the museum walls and cross the borders between the different disciplines of art to see the opportunities of a multifaceted dialogue which allow "something new to begin".<sup>48 49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Susan Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms*, 75.

<sup>49</sup> Julian Lucas, "A black British artist asks"

### **Consulted websites**

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