

ISAAC JULIEN

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TEN THOUSAND WAVES | 2010

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INTRODUCTION

Isaac Julien is as equally acclaimed for his fluent, arresting films as his vibrant and inventive gallery installations. Moving deftly between the film world and the art world, he remains one of the most original voices in the contemporary art world.



TEN THOUSAND WAVES

TEN THOUSAND WAVES is a new work from Isaac Julien, exploring the desires and fantasies of workers in foreign lands and examining the aspirations and dreams that drive people to risk everything for a better life. Through formal experimentation and fresh artistic collaborations, Julien looks beyond the controversy to present his intriguing research into Chinese itinerant workers and the context of their migration within and outside of the People's Republic of China.

The format of the project will marry fiction and film essay genres against a poetic background of Chinese history, legend, and strong imagery. The concept will submerge images in a tableau of a multi-screen piece to include a three-screen narrative work which will slowly take over all the screens, building to a crescendo of images and sounds, which will symbolise the enormous movements of change taking place within China and the world.



TEN THOUSAND WAVES is a complex work weaving a collection of ideas, comments and themes to create a work which poses questions around the value of life from the individual journey to the universal conditions in which we all exist. Julien has previously explored the impact of location – both cultural and physical – to resounding effect through a juxtaposition of opposing global regions: in works such as True North, which tells the story of the first black explorer to go the North Pole, and Fantôme Afrique, shot in Burkina Faso in West Africa. However, this new work distinguishes itself from past pieces with a significant conceptual leap in his artistic practice. He investigates the dislocation of population from a wider and international scope: in this case.



This work was conceived as part of Julien's meditation on the nature of the diaspora, of how and why humans move around the world on restless journeys to find a personal nirvana. In TEN THOUSAND WAVES he searches for another approach to his subject represented in the passage of Chinese itinerant workers travelling to the United Kingdom in search of a better life where the outcome of their aspirational, but dangerous journey ends in tragedy.

In researching this work – through travel in China and the UK, conversations with China experts, and a broad approach to Chinese sources available through the media – Julien discovered a rich and poetically symbolic body of information which he will use to create a work that presents modern and traditional Chinese values and superstitions encapsulated in a fable that originated from the Fujian Province, from where the Morecambe Bay cockle-pickers originated. The Story of Yishan Island tells the tale of fishermen lost and in danger on treacherous seas. At the heart of the legend is the goddess figure who leads the men to safety and protects them until they can return to their homes. Using this fable as a starting point, interwoven with the narrative will be multifarious references to themes that have engaged Julien during his research. Considering the shared origination from Fujian Province of the Morecambe Bay cockle pickers and The Story of Yishan Island, a poignant connection can be made between the Chinese fable and the 21st century tragedy of Chinese migrants who died struggling to survive in the North of England.





Following the ideas surrounding death, spiritual displacement, and the uniquely Chinese connection with ‘ghosts’ or ‘lost souls’, links will be made with Shanghai of the past and present symbolising the Chinese move to modernity, aspiration and affluence that inspires global movement. Mirroring the goddess of the fable, a ghostly protagonist will lead us through the world of Shanghai cinema via the Shanghai Film Studio and its streets from both Modern and Old Shanghai, a creator of dreams and fantasies feeding Chinese desire and ambition. Travelling through China over a period of three years, Julien has developed strands that will interweave to create a rich and multifaceted work. Water will play a particularly symbolic role, firstly, in *The Story of Yishan Island*, then the treacherous sands of Yorkshire, where only local knowledge can ensure safety. Parallels can be found in the development of the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River (threatening ecological destruction in pursuit of modernity and economic growth), flooding the locality and the fast incoming tides of the Morecambe Bay. The water dragon of *The Story of Yishan Island* is apparent in the powerful, relentless swirl sweeping away all before it.

The themes are foregrounded by the locations: the Shanghai Bund, not only a glamorous playground, but also a thriving port and financial hot-bed whose waters once acted as the deliverer of invasion and war. Water will remind us that the pursuit of affluence and power demands a high ecological and human price, as symbolised in the title, TEN THOUSAND WAVES.

This new work will see Julien make a dramatic departure from his previous explorations with form in its use and treatment of narrative. TEN THOUSAND WAVES will be an experimental narrative work, involving the director working alongside a script-writer and storyboard artist. The project will also be the first 7 time Julien will have included animation within live action in his work, indicating the artist's intention to push the boundaries of genre.



The project will utilise texts from high profile Chinese and Western writers and poets to contribute to a political meditation on the central themes. In response to the tragic events of 2004 in which 23 Chinese cockle-pickers died in Morecambe Bay, Julien commissioned the Chinese poet, Wang Ping, to write a text called 'Paper Boats'. The poems will be heard as recited by the poet herself, running in and out of the visual sequences. Julien has also been working closely with musician Jah Wobble and his Chinese Dub Orchestra to transpose Ping's poems into song. Julien has commissioned Jah Wobble and his Orchestra to create a new piece specifically for the audio track of TEN THOUSAND WAVES.



Interwoven to the work will be archive police footage of the Morecambe Bay tragedy as it unfolded lending a chilling reality to the piece.

Extensive research has been undertaken by Jacqueline Hoang Nguyen; artist, curator and researcher, whose artistic and curatorial practice has taken her around the world with exhibitions in international institutions. She was the recipient of the Swedish Research and Development in the Arts (2007), the Swing Space Residency and production grant at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council in New York, USA (2006), and the Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art NIFCA (2004) amongst many other recognitions. Production Co-Ordinator will be Huang Fan who has extensive experience including credits for Kill Bill, The Kite Runner, Panda: The China Adventure, and Himalaya with Michael Palin and has worked with major studios both in China and Hollywood.



THE STORY OF YISHAN ISLAND

The Story of Yishan Island is one of many legends about the folk goddess Mazu, a patron saint of all seafarers. Mazu is a very popular deity on both sides of the Taiwan Straits and was also once an actual person. The first mention of her occurred in the Song dynasty. In reality her name was Lin Mo (or Lin Moniang--"Silent Maiden" Lin), born at Putian, Meizhou, Fujian Province. She was named "Silent" because, according to legend, she didn't utter a sound for a month after being born. Today, she is worshipped in many temples in Fujian, Guangdong and Taiwan and wherever the descendants of those from Southeastern China live. The former Portuguese colony of Macao is named after her, and boasts a temple dating possibly from the fifteenth century (Ming dynasty). The island of Matsu, north of Taiwan and under Taiwanese administration, is also named after her. The most renowned Mazu temple on Taiwan is at Pei-kang (Beigang), a popular destination for pilgrims. The temple in her hometown, Putian, remains a very important centre of Mazu worship.



These poems were commissioned by Isaac Julien for the second of a trilogy of installations on migration. The first part, entitled 'Small Boats' premiered in October 2007.

PAPER BOATS by WANG PING (extract)
XIE XIAO WEN

On the night of the Lantern Festival
We stream into the sea
Jumbos, tiernels
Three-forked prongs
Wind bites our ears, hands and toes
Home, we say, home
And tears streak our rubber sleeves
On the night of riddles and light
The moon is full behind thick clouds
We cockle, cockling
In the sand of the distant North Wales Sea



WU HONG KANG

We pat the sand, we pat the sand
Teasing cockles to the cold surface
We dig, we pick, we break our backs
Bagging cockles for ten pounds
They say we could return
When the bag is full
But home is far away
In the dark, we can't make out the sea
No stars point our ways to the shore
Wind comes from all directions
Cutting our bones
How steely is the boss' soul
How empty is desire, foaming like mad
On the cold North Wales Sea

