

# Visualizing Capital: Isaac Julien's 'Playtime'

by Adela Lovric // Apr. 25, 2023

*This article is part of our feature topic 'MONEY.'*

In the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, Isaac Julien took on the complex and near-impossible task of making capital—the ineffable force that reigns supreme on micro and macro levels of society—visible. The result is his video installation 'Playtime' (2013), an intriguing and visually stunning take on the life-altering repercussions brought on by the uneven circulation of money. Ten years after its debut, it is now presented jointly with the Wernhörer Collection at Berlin's PalaisPopulaire—ironically enough, a space belonging to Deutsche Bank—to instigate new readings and debates on contemporary issues. The work has gained fresh significance as the world sinks into recession and the flow of capital accelerates, introducing previously unfamiliar forms, including those that render artworks as pure speculation objects, more than ever before.



Isaac Julien: 'PLAYTIME,' installation view, PalaisPopulaire, Berlin, 2023 // Photo: Mathias Schormann, © Isaac Julien, Courtesy Wernhörer Collection

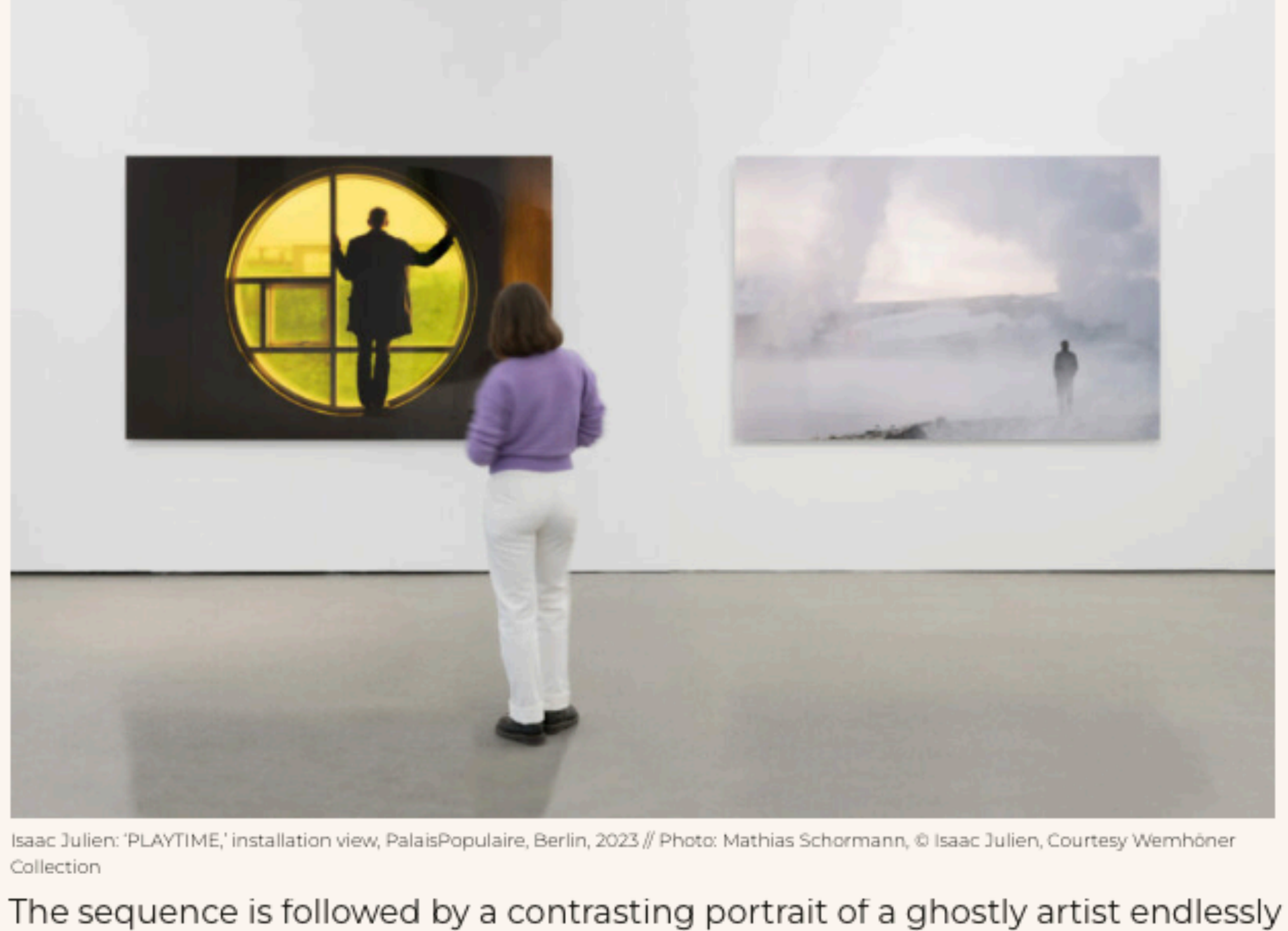
With 'Playtime,' Julien created a spin on Jacques Tati's eponymous 1967 film that commented, in a humorous way, on the confusing absurdities of modern 1960s Paris. Aside from the name, the two films share a similar structure comprised of several sequences without a single plot line. The alienating "brave new world" in Julien's three-channel video installation, however, is much more cynical and somber. Five scenes introduce different protagonists: hedge fund managers, art market players, an artist and a migrant laborer. Each of these roles illustrates the filmmaker's attempt to reveal the inner workings and the far-reaching influences of the global flow of capital intertwined with the art world as its major component. Yet, possibly due to a non-traditional filmmaking approach and the emphasis on images, these characters tend to only superficially represent the real-world personalities that inspired them.



Isaac Julien: 'PLAYTIME,' installation view, PalaisPopulaire, Berlin, 2023 // Photo: Mathias Schormann, © Isaac Julien, Courtesy Wernhörer Collection

Julien is a master of multichannel video installations and 'Playtime' is a beautifully executed example of his artistic approach. Initially presented across seven screens, the 65-minute video is shown at PalaisPopulaire on three screens placed next to each other in a curved shape and meant to be watched in a cinema-like setting—ideally while sat in front and constantly panning to both sides to catch the full montage that moves from one screen to the next. It's not quite an immersive setting nor is it a typical cinematic viewing. Julien plays with the setup and editing to achieve a slightly dizzying experience, somewhat akin to a funfair house of mirrors. The effect is likely similar to what Tati achieved with his film in the '60s, in ways that are not as engaging to a contemporary audience used to far more advanced technologies and experimental filmmaking approaches.

Set in three cities that have been deeply shaped by the global financial system—London, Reykjavik and Dubai—'Playtime' deliberately uses cityscapes to paint the picture of a society organized into hyper-productive, money-making beehives, or in the case of Reykjavik, a desolate fog-covered landscape reflecting the atmosphere after the economic crash that profoundly affected the country. The skyscrapers in London's financial district only seem to be densely crowded, while a lot of the spaces in them are in fact empty, clinically sterile-looking warehouses where drab cubicles populated by equally colorless workers are replaced by large boxy computers. In one such space, Julien introduces two hedge fund managers discussing their new venture. This pair of ultimate capitalism worshippers decides to call their new company "Capital" while musing on it as "mysterious, slippery, elusive. You can't grab it, you can't hold it, you can't smell it or touch it. It's a bit like gravity. Some people claim it's invisible." Their dialogue is not exactly smooth or convincing; Julien uses them to vocalize the premise of his work and represent stereotypical financial players at the top of the food chain who aim to "make a killing."



Isaac Julien: 'PLAYTIME,' installation view, PalaisPopulaire, Berlin, 2023 // Photo: Mathias Schormann, © Isaac Julien, Courtesy Wernhörer Collection

The sequence is followed by a contrasting portrait of a ghostly artist endlessly wandering the ruins of his industrial-looking house in Reykjavik. While reminiscing about his lost dream of a perfect home, he ruminates on the financial disaster that left him shattered as the bank pulled back his loans and his family abandoned him. Julien further reveals the intertwining of the worlds of art and finance on a macro level through the characters of an art dealer, played by James Franco, and art auctioneer, Simon de Pury, who plays an exaggerated version of himself. Franco explains the various motivations to collect art, focusing on the importance that such holdings have in individual wealth and the convenience of buying and selling art as a form of safe investment. "It's a game," he exclaims as he points to the skyrocketing heights that artworks reach in auction sales and their exponential growth stoking the interest of financial investors. De Pury is meanwhile presented as an apex predator in the art market system. In an interview with a journalist, he reveals behind-the-scenes preparations for an auction where he plays the key role in gathering and enticing high-profile attendants to spend exorbitant amounts of money. To counterbalance the perspectives of the privileged, Julien also includes the character of a Filipina domestic worker slaving away in luxurious apartments in Dubai to be able to support her children. Pristinely clean and aesthetically soulless, these spaces are a prison for the lonely and depressed woman wanting nothing more than to return home to her family.



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The preferred method in filmmaking is "show, don't tell" and in 'Playtime,' despite Julien's attempts to primarily visualize the invisible, there is a lot of overt explaining on the characters' part. Even so, the performances reveal little to no depth, perhaps giving away that this film, which tries to create a dent in the stealth facade obscuring the workings of capital, cannot fulfill the task of truly showing capital's elusive nature. Images of landscapes that interlace sequences to portray the inner worlds and social standings of the characters significantly add to the overall rhythm and aesthetic of the video, and less so to its deeper understanding. While managing to represent the ebb and flow of capital through somewhat cliched images of interiors and exteriors, the characters fall flat, like avatars in a video game in which the player needs to engage to unlock their stories.

'Playtime' only offers a view through the peephole: an impression further amplified by the circular, glass-covered photographs of characters displayed in the exhibition space leading to the screening room, which reflect the viewer in their shiny surfaces. Perhaps it is to imply that we are all interlocked, complicit in and inextricable from this system. Like energy, money flows in a way that has a multidirectional effect. While many of its workings remain obscure to the overwhelming majority, its main principle is evident: one person's soaring profit inevitably means another's financial demise.

**Exhibition Info**