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 REVIEW, B6

# MIRROR IMAGES IN TUHOE LAND

The North Island provides a balance to Isaac Julien's black-and-white work from the North Pole, writes **Stephen Jewell**

**I**NSPIRED by little-known Afro-American explorer Matthew Henson, who accompanied the more celebrated Robert Peary on his 1909 mission to the North Pole, British artist Isaac Julien explored the connections between history, landscape and identity in his 2004 installation *True North*.

"I'd always wanted to make a piece of work about a black subject in a white, snowy place," he recalls. "It's a meditation on the journey that he took, which retraces his steps in the modern day."

The Turner Prize-nominated photographer and film-maker first travelled to New Zealand when *True North* was exhibited at Two Rooms in Newton as part of the Auckland Triennale in 2007. After forming a friendship with gallery owner Jenny Todd, he resolved to return to shoot a companion piece, *True South*, which will premiere as part of the Auckland Festival which opens next week.

"You could say that I've been on the road myself for quite some time," says Julien. "When I went to New Zealand, I thought of this idea of geographical polar opposites. The name *True South* came to mind as a mirror image of *True North*. New Zealand is completely different and it's about as close to Antarctica as you can get."

Accompanied by curator and artist Jim Vivieaere and Tuhoe members Patariki "Onion" Orupe and Terry Firkin, Julien spent a week touring around the North Island last year.

"It was quite a journey," he says. "It was like my own expedition in terms of mining the history of those spaces. Terry and Onion were constantly reframing it for me in terms of the Tuhoe/Maori history of the space. The works took longer to work on because I'd be thinking about the images in relation to their stories."

Born in London to West Indian parents, the 48-year-old can empathise with the experience of Maori. "The work is very much about how an outsider might look at the space in a slightly different way," he says. "That's something I can do because of



**HOMAGE:** Isaac Julien and actor Tilda Swinton at Derek Jarman's grave in England. PICTURE / NINA KELLGREN

## AUCKLAND FESTIVAL

**What:** Te Tonga Tuturu/*True South* (*Apparatus*), by Isaac Julien  
**Where and when:** Two Rooms, 16 Putiki St, Newton, March 5-April 11  
**Artist's talk:** Friday, March 6, at noon  
**On the web:** [www.tworooms.org.nz](http://www.tworooms.org.nz)

my own background as someone who comes from a diaspora."

Julien visited various locales, including the Urewera Ranges, Bethells Beach and Port Waikato, which he found particularly striking with its "other-worldly" sand dunes.

"There's an eerie, science fiction quality to the New Zealand landscape. But at the same time, it's also a landscape that has been contaminated in that it's both beautiful and has been reconstructed."

"It has an uncanny resemblance in some respects to England, which is to do with how the Europeans farmed the land. I was really interested in the way in which as I went further into the journey, this other psychic space was revealed."

Unlike *True North*, which combined pictures with video, *True South* is entirely photographic as Julien uses digital techno-

logy to give the visuals a still-life quality.

"I was thinking of it in terms of painting," he says. "It was more about adjusting the hues and poetically adjusting the image so it is more of a construction. There are some images that have been subtly reconfigured while others have been altered to a larger degree, but I don't talk about that. Some artists have made that a part of their signature, but it's difficult to look at an image that has been digitally manipulated and not think about it in that way."

As its subtitle (*Apparatus*) indicates, Julien's camera equipment, which features in several shots, is a part of the piece itself. "That's become a theme within my work," he explains. "Trying to enhance the awareness that the images have been constructed from technology."

Instead of traditional light boxes, Julien employed more ecologically friendly glow boxes, developed in conjunction with his own studio.

"It has a much more subtle glow," he says. "It uses LED [light emitting diodes] so it doesn't get as hot as the old ones, which need florescent tubes and harder light. They last nearly 30 years before you have to change anything so they're more ethical in a conservation sense and much friendlier to the actual images, which are graded so that they work with the actual aura of the technology itself."

Despite the digital trickery, Julien was impressed by the distinctively clear quality of the New Zealand light.

"When we were working on the images, people would say, 'Is that image manipulated?' and I'd say, 'No, it isn't. The clouds really were like that,'" he laughs.

"It has a certain hyper-real effect and I remember thinking it was like an idealised simulacrum of a landscape because the grass is incredibly green. These things seep in and there's romanticism to the landscape that harks back to lots of early New Zealand painting. But I'm sure I'm not the first artist who has been imbued by the New Zealand landscape."



TUHOE GUIDE: Patariki "Onion" Orupe in a scene from Julien's *Long Ago: Homage to the Tuhoe* — *True South* series.