

Reading James Baldwin

21.11.25–25.01.26

Closed for the holidays: 22.12–06.01

Public Programme: Saturday 6 December, 14.00–16.00

James Baldwin (1924–1987) was one of the most important public intellectuals of the twentieth century. He was a prolific writer with an oeuvre that spans essays, novels, and plays. Baldwin's rhetoric was exact, lyrical, and unflinching. Born in Harlem, New York, he brushed against the harsh racial structures of Jim Crow America which he would spend a lifetime naming. A master of the sentence, he used language to enunciate the modern day and its fractured pasts.

In the exhibition *Reading James Baldwin*, the life of this often mythologised and revered figure is given a soft landing. The film *James Baldwin: From Another Place* (1973) by Turkish photographer and filmmaker Sedat Pakay (1945–2016) provides a tender monochromatic portrait of Baldwin in Istanbul. The viewer is introduced to him at the break of day, stripped down, in an intimate setting. Soon after we set off onto the streets where he continues to narrate his take on the politics of the U.S, desire and intimacy, homophobia, and over and above the power of love.

Like a stanza *Reading James Baldwin* connects threads and pulls in *Tongues Untied* (1989), an experimental video documentary by Marlon Riggs (1957–1994). The film brings into focus the Black queer experience in a fractious period in American history and art. SNAP! *Tongues Untied* demands an attentive ear to the narratives of those operating from the margins. African American gay men navigating love and eroticism, in the face of homophobia, racism and the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Marlon Riggs was a filmmaker who was, in many ways, in conversation with Baldwin. He often cited him and fearlessly dedicated his practice to bearing witness, to unpacking race and sexuality politics. He made art about 'dangerous' love and desire often in collaboration with other artists including the poet and activist, Essex Hemphill (1957–1995).

Tongues Untied mirrors the 'brother-to-brother love' that Baldwin wrote about in *Just Above My Head* (1978). A hand on a bare back, tender caressing, two sets of lips touching softly ever so briefly, bodies dancing belt-to-belt – all deemed as too much by the liberal and conservative gazes. The film caused a moral uproar in the U.S inciting vehement criticism, ridicule, and censorship.

Reading James Baldwin operates from the power of poetic rendering and opens pathways to sit with James Baldwin and Marlon Riggs, and their lingering legacies. It offers reading as a physical act, of touch and presence on the page. As interpretation, attending to language and the tensions it holds. As floating and crossing over to other geographies, temporalities, and sensations. As a communal site of reflection against the backdrop of the current state of the world.

Curator: Tawanda Appiah

Technicians: Jenny Berg, Linus Svensson, Jesper Veileby

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