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## Steve McQueen's Next Project: Thousands of School Photographs



Steve McQueen at Tate Britain in London on Tuesday. "I just wanted to reflect back on a certain point in my life where things changed and things churned," he said. Credit Neil Hall/EPA, via Shutterstock

LONDON — To many people, a school photograph is a forgettable moment of childhood that often causes mild embarrassment later on.

But to the British artist and director Steve McQueen — the man behind the Oscar-winning "12 Years a Slave" and the coming "Widows" — that photograph can be much more: a chance to reflect on society's diversity and innocent potential.

For his latest art project, Mr. McQueen will take that idea and multiply. He announced on Tuesday that he would try to take a class photograph at 2,410 schools in London, capturing 115,000 children ages 7 to 8.

The photographs are to go on display at Tate Britain in London from November 2019, Mr. McQueen said in a news conference at the gallery. A major survey of his art will run alongside the exhibition from February 2020.

Mr. McQueen said the idea had come to him while reflecting on his own childhood. "At a certain point in one's life, you look backwards and ask, 'Where is so and so? What's happened to them?' " he said, while sitting next to a screen showing his own class photograph at that age. "I just wanted to reflect back on a certain point in my life where things changed and things churned."

At the age of 7, ideas around identity have not yet taken hold of children, Mr. McQueen said. Referring later to his own soccer-obsessed school days, he said: "At the time, it was all about football and girls. 'Oh, he's from Pakistan. He's from Iran. Who cares? Where's the ball?' "

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY



Steve McQueen, fifth from left in the middle row in the photograph on the left, at his West London school in 1977.  
On the right, the current class of children ages 7 and 8 at the same school. Credit Tate Britain

As well as looking back, he said the project would allow him “to reference where we are and where we come from.” “We all live in London, and we all think we know London. But we don’t,” he added. “And to have a reflection on that I think is quite urgent.”

Mr. McQueen said the project was conceived before Britain’s vote to leave the European Union — the process known as Brexit. People will pile political meaning onto the artwork, he acknowledged, but that happens with any undertaking. “You can’t avoid that, it is what it is,” he said.

The project has taken a long time to prepare, partly because it involved getting permission from every school and parent. Eventually, 30 photographers will work on the project; six have already been recruited and will start work immediately. Mr. McQueen will brief each one, but he will not take photographs himself. “I’ll leave it to the professional photographers,” he said.

Mr. McQueen is well known as an artist in Britain, having won the Turner Prize, the country’s major contemporary art award, in 1999. In 2007, he created “Queen and Country,” a project aiming to put the face of every member of the British military who died in Iraq on a postage stamp. The Royal Mail did not commission the stamps, so the piece exists as a cabinet-like installation, with drawers that pull out to reveal sheets of stamps.

Mr. McQueen said he would not have a hard time explaining his latest project to the children involved if he had to. “I think people often think they’re insignificant,” he said, explaining that the photographs were a way of making a different point: “You’re important — I want to take a photograph of you.” Young people will also grasp the significance of the project when their photographs go on display in one of the world’s leading art institutions, he said. “I remember well when I was 5 and I had a painting of mine exhibited in the local library.”

Maria Balshaw, the Tate’s director, said in an interview that she thought Mr. McQueen had seen in the project a “sense of showing future creative potential which is there in every class.” She said she hoped the work would highlight the importance of arts education in Britain, which has been suffering because of government funding cuts.

“In the 1970s, I was at an open-plan, arts-centered primary school that allowed every lesson to have the arts in it, and I’m certain that set us on a road where a sense of creative agency was part of our lives,” she said.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/18/arts/design/steve-mcqueen-art-children.html>

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