Steve McQueen on his new exhibition: ‘It's almost like my whole past has come into one cluster’

The only human being ever to have won both the Turner Prize and an Academy Award is unveiling an ambitious new art project: starring 70,000 young Londoners. Jimi Famurewa heads to the Tate to find out about it.

Steve McQueen is not widely known as a giggler. But, sitting in a club chair up in the hushed members’ eyrie of Tate Britain, his helpless laughter is springing forth. He is recounting the time his grandmother watched Bear, his silent, disconcerting 1995 short film, which happened to feature lingering shots of his… wagging genitals.

‘Oh, it was hilarious,’ he says, low chuckles punctuating his distinctive, deep voice. ‘We were at the Royal College, it was my first exhibition and it’s me, naked, wrestling with this other guy. And I just didn’t care.’

Artistic fearlessness, violence and vulnerability, a viewer presented with something they don’t especially want to see? You could say that McQueen has been chasing down variations of that encounter throughout the 26 years of his illustrious, award-studded career. As an artist, his enigmatic, unsettling films won the Turner Prize in 1999, beating
Tracey Emin’s begrimed bed. He went on to give cinema audiences unflinching examinations of political imprisonment (2008’s Camera d’Or-winning Hunger), sex addiction (2011’s deeply unsexy Shame), the horrors of the slave trade (2015’s 12 Years a Slave, which made him the first black director to win the best film Oscar) and the knotty realities of race, class and gender in America (last year’s Widows).

He is, he admits, ‘hard-headed’. And in the past, he has often come across as a brusque, uncooperative interviewee. But today — after a few early grimaces prompted by my light enquiries about his recent 50th birthday party — he is exacting but entertaining company; rapid-fire, forthright, curious. He is happy, too, to be back in the city he grew up in after spending much of the past two decades in Amsterdam with his partner, the writer Bianca Stigter, and their two children. ‘It’s been great being in London and focusing on things that are important to me,’ he says, crisply utilitarian in trademark glasses and a midnight blue Craig Green jacket. ‘It’s almost like my whole past has come into one cluster!’

Steve McQueen speaks about being back in London (Sebastian Nevols)

*A central component is Year 3, a landmark exhibition opening next week at Tate Britain. In what has been described by the gallery as his most ambitious project yet, McQueen and his collaborators attempted to photograph every year three class in London. In the works for at least three years, the shoe will feature class portraits of 70,000 pupils, their teachers and assistants, and will also be supported by a billboard campaign that, as McQueen enthuses, means Londoners can...*
‘encounter artwork in [their] everyday’. On the face of it, a large-scale, mass portrait of beaming seven and eight-year-olds perhaps jars with McQueen’s previous, more visceral body of work. But that’s not how he sees it.

‘It’s to do with the moment in a child’s life when there is complete optimism and you’re not judged on your race, gender or class,’ he says. ‘Those things are only just starting to come into play, and there are also all these opportunities and possibilities.’ McQueen visited schools, impressing on schoolchildren that ‘they have a stake in this city’. But he denies that Year 5 is overtly political. ‘I don’t want to go down that road; this is about opportunity and optimism,’ he says.

Opportunity and optimism weren’t always part of his own story. Raised in Ealing with an older sister by a Grenadian bricklayer father and a Trinidadian nurse mother, McQueen had a conflicted relationship with education. Primary school was ‘fantastic’, not least because it was on a school trip (in year three, fittingly) that he had his first mind-expanding gallery experience, in the building we are sitting in. ‘To be in an environment where there was no right or wrong way of doing something, where it was all about possibilities, was hugely influential,’ he says, still awestruck more than 40 years later.

Secondary school, at Drayton Manor in Hanwell, was a different beast. Struggling with undiagnosed dyslexia (‘You were just expected to get on with it’), McQueen was put in a lower set with other children encouraged to pursue a career in manual labour. He has said in the past that he ‘wasn’t good at [school] because no one cared’. When he returned to Drayton Manor in 2000 to hand out some achievement awards, he was informed by the apologetic incumbent headteacher that the school had been ‘institutionally racist’ during his time there. ‘It wasn’t particularly progressive for black children or white working class kids,’ he says, softly. He has previously described what happened as ‘disgusting’ and ‘divisive’. Does he think that things are generally better now for children from different backgrounds? ‘I don’t know,’ he says. ‘But I hope so.’
Despite his obvious aptitude for drawing, his late father, Philbert, was equally keen that he learn a trade. He notes that his father’s wariness has been misconstrued in the past. ‘A lot of middle-class people — or certain people — don’t understand that my father was scared for me,’ he explains. ‘He knew the obstacles and obstructions that could come in my way. He wasn’t discouraging, but he was fearful and protective.’ It was his ‘brave’ mother, Mary, who encouraged his talent as an artist.

Such issues of race and immigrant legacy will be key to Small Axe: a six-part, intensely personal BBC and Amazon series that has been forming in McQueen’s mind for at least five years. Starring John Boyega and Letitia Wright, it charts the West Indian immigrant experience in London from 1968 (and Enoch Powell’s ‘rivers of blood’ speech) to the early 1980s.

‘I wanted to look at the real roots of first and second generation [black immigrants]; how they changed British culture and [what they] achieved in a hugely hostile environment,’ he says of the show, which will air on BBC One next year. ‘Racism is,’ he says, ‘live and kicking and healthy’. But there is a gratefulness that ‘people are now questioning things’ like police treatment of black communities. ‘Before, you used to be shouting it from the rafters and no one was hearing it,’ he adds. ‘It took a few deaths and unfortunate situations but now people understand.’

For a man who started his career decidedly out of the mainstream, infiltrating it now has become something of a McQueen obsession. Yet such forays haven’t always gone to plan. Last year, he released Widows, his most accessible film yet. It was critically acclaimed — an unexpected excursion into the world of the blockbuster heist movie fronted by Viola Davis, Elizabeth Debicki, Cynthia Erivo and Michelle Rodriguez. And yet it disappointed at the box office and received almost no recognition at the awards ceremonies. That must have been disappointing, I say.

‘I think we’re in a different time now,’ says McQueen, after a studied pause. ‘It’s almost like the Depression era where audiences wanted to see rich people tap dancing in something like Top Hat.’ Needless to say, Widows — centring on mob wives carrying out a score planned by their deceased husbands against a backdrop of violence, sex and a Trump-like racist political dynasty — was fairly low on jazz hands. ‘We’re in this moment of escapism where audiences are not interested in reflecting and they find it hard to look at themselves,’ he continues, sounding more mystified than angry. ‘I often wonder if the movie had been made in the Obama administration, how differently it would have been received. When things are good you can actually look at yourself. But when things are bad you somehow want to shun the mirror.’

And yet, McQueen is determined to keep on holding up his giant, confronting mirrors. Upcoming is a tribute installation about Grenfell Tower, filmed with a helicopter in December 2017. There is a Tate Modern retrospective of his work in February as well (his first major exhibition in the UK for 20 years, running concurrently with Year 3) which means McQueen’s view of the world will loom large in the capital for much of next year. Indeed, I get the sense that he has never been more focused or fired-up when it comes to his work, and you have to wonder if the experience of Widows forced him to take stock. ‘Not at all,’ he says, quickly. ‘You’ve got to make what you believe in. With Widows I was extremely excited and happy about it. And don’t forget, you have a dark-skinned, black, middle-aged woman who’s the lead [Viola Davis]. I imagine if I had a white, middle-aged male in that role, there would have been a slightly different response to it as far as box office. But guess what? I don’t care.’

And there is that laugh again — loud, defiant and perhaps not quite as rare as this visionary artist’s quarter century of uncompromising work would have you believe.

Steve McQueen’s #Year3Project is at Tate Britain 12 Nov – 3 May. Billboard exhibition across London organised by @Artangel until 23 November tate.org.uk
A map all of billboards locations can be found at artangel.org.uk/year-3-project

https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/esmagazine/steve-mcqueen-on-his-new-exhibition-it-s-almost-like-my-whole-past-has-come-into-one-cluster-a4280201.html