Steve McQueen: Year 3, Tate Britain, review: a gift to a generation

A collective portrait of a year group, drawn from every London borough, Year 3 is also a portrait of the city’s future.

What’s it like to be the tallest kid in Year Three? The first to lose a tooth? The joker? The shy one? The one always picked last for a team? Steve McQueen’s Year 3 brings you face to face with seven and eight year olds negotiating such questions within the small social structure of a primary school class. Presented as standardised school portraits, these photos capture a pivotal developmental moment, when social interaction takes on a new sophistication.

Artist and film director Steve McQueen has won both a Turner Prize and an Oscar (Best Picture for 12 Years a Slave.) A Londoner, born and raised, he would have been a smile amongst the throng had this project taken place in 1977. Could we have read that illustrious future on his face aged seven? Amid these alert and grinning (gurning, goofing, anxious) children’s faces you wonder what forces came into play within McQueen’s life that opened up that path for him.
Take a couple of steps back from the gallery wall and the photographs become an echoing patchwork of faces, classroom displays and coloured uniforms, a grid that repeats and repeats. Year 3 is a collective portrait of a year group, drawn from every borough in London. As such it is also a portrait of the city’s future. The scale is bewildering: 76,146 children from 1,504 private, state and special needs schools, even a few that are home-schooled. They were photographed by a team of nine photographers at a rate of about 80 schools a week. Stacked twelve photos high, they line the flat walls of Tate Britain’s central Duveen Galleries. Hundreds have also been put up on billboards across the city becoming an online phenomenon as children and their families encounter themselves celebrated in the public realm.

It can be easy to skim along the top of a project like this to see nothing beyond cuteness and joy, a celebration of diversity, a fillip in dark times. But, as per Greta Thunberg: “you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you!” Wouldn’t it be nice if reading challenges and times-tables were the only worries children of this age had to face? We should not look at the children in these photographs as our future hope, but to the responsibility we share to safeguard a hope for their future.

Tate Britain is an art gallery designed like a temple: all columns and loftiness. Of all its spaces, the Duveen Galleries are the most imperial and pompous. When people confess that they don’t feel welcomed into museums or that art is not for them, it is always this forbidding neoclassical structure – its do-not-touchiness, the echo that makes people “tsk” if you speak too loudly, the suggestion of sacred knowledge – that comes to my mind. For Steve McQueen to position images of an entire school year-group in this space means something. Year 3 established an important legacy of creative participation in an era when arts education in schools is under funded and under threat. These are children that need not worry about being welcomed into the museum: they are already represented in the gallery. What a gift to make a generation.
Steve McQueen, Year 3, Tate Britain, London, 12 November 2019 – 5 May 2020

Artangel on billboards across London, until 18 November

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