Steve McQueen’s Photos of Thousands of London Third-Graders Have Triggered a Flood of Field Trips to Tate Britain

The artist and filmmaker’s new project involves more than 3,000 schools. For two beneath the shadow of Grenfell Tower it is especially poignant.

Portrait of Steve McQueen in Year 5 at Tate Britain. ©Tate. Photo Jessica McDermott.

Steve McQueen, the Turner Prize-winning artist and Oscar-winning filmmaker, has filled the vast Duveen Galleries of Tate Britain with a monumental collective portrait of more than 76,000 young Londoners alongside their classmates and teachers.

Titled Year 5, the London-born artist has created a giant snapshot of a generation of seven- and eight-year olds. He chose third graders because it is a time when many children begin to develop self-confidence in all areas of life, and to understand more about their place in the world beyond their immediate family, according to a press statement. The result is an extraordinary portrait of the city’s cultural diversity.

And many of the schools are due to visit over the next three months. For two of the 5,000 schools that are taking part, the project is especially poignant: They both lost pupils in the Grenfell Tower fire two years ago. For the children, parents, and teachers of the Avondale Park and Thomas Jones primary schools, in North Kensington, memories of the disaster are still raw. The first of two planned public inquiries into the fire recently found that many deaths were preventable and of the 71 people who died, 19 were children.
The Grenfell disaster is close to McQueen’s heart. He grew up in West London, where tower blocks of social housing are familiar landmarks, and filmed the blackened ruin of Grenfell from a helicopter in December 2017, shortly before it was covered up.

A website for the film, which has a working title Grenfell Tower, notes that McQueen is self-funding the project as a memorial for the community. “The aim is that it lives on in the mind of the nation and the world long after the covering has gone up,” it states. The site stresses that the project is non-commercial, will only be shown in a museum, and will be accessible in London for “the whole community to attend and view.”
In the meantime, the Year 5 Project shows how those schools are part of a larger community. Clarrie Wallis, the Tate’s senior curator of contemporary art, who has overseen the project, says that Year 5 aimed to reach as many of London’s primary schools as possible. She thought that 40 percent of schools might take part, and is delighted the eventual figure is 70 percent, and that they include ones from North Kensington and West London.

McQueen’s installation also means Tate Britain will have to cope with more school groups in the next 20 weeks than ever before. The first arrived this morning, with more due this afternoon. “We have had to install Portakabins in the staff carpark, so they can have their packed lunches,” Wallis says. She adds that the sight of so many school children filling the Duveen is “unbelievable.” She is thinking about recording the sound. (Photography is not allowed.)

The Year 5 Project carefully protects the identities of the children taking part. The ethical and legal challenges were considerable, so the group portraits have no names or titles in Tate Britain. Visiting schools will be able to find their portraits with assistance by Tate gallery staff. (Eagle-eyed children and parents will probably spot their own images first.) A Tate spokeswoman explains that the schools will also get to see their class photographs close up with the help of magnifying glasses on a sliding structure, as well as a digital version.

Wallis pays special tribute to the team of nine freelance photographers who visited the more than 3,000 schools to take part in the workshops resulting in the class portraits. She reveals that all the images had to be printed and framed in-house at the Tate, again as a child-protection precaution.

A second part of the Year 5 project has taken the class photographs into the streets of London, where they appear on more than 600 billboards across the city’s 33 boroughs, including in tube stations and on railway lines, through November 18. The ambitious outdoor exhibition, which came with its own set of ethical and legal challenges, has been organized by the commissioning agency Artangel. Together, the projects form a memorable overture to McQueen’s major survey, which is due to open at Tate Modern in February 2020.