
The Guardian

Steve McQueen: Year 3 review – skewed ties, missing teeth and hope

‘A collective portrait of our past and future’: four of the classes in Steve McQueen: Year 3. Photograph: © Steve McQueen & Tate

Tate Britain; National Gallery, London

By photographing 76,000 of London’s year 3 pupils in all their endless variety, Steve McQueen allows each and every one of them to single themselves out.

Their shining morning faces cover the walls of the Duveen galleries from floor to ceiling: beaming, laughing, awkward, exuberant. Who could not love them, all these eager young children from primary schools across London? Seventy-six thousand year 3 pupils, aged seven or eight, arranged on the diminutive wooden benches of our childhood in thousands of class photographs. This is a collective portrait of both our past and our future. Face to face with all this rising hope, which of us could not be moved?

Year 3, Steve McQueen’s new project with Artangel, is unassailable in its emotional immediacy and grandeur. At first it thrives on the impact of its sheer scale. Walk into Tate Britain and you can hardly take in the spectacle of so many school photographs stretching into the distance, and all of them so regular in their lineup and format: the benches at
identical range from the camera, the children symmetrically arranged around their teachers, the colours of the school clothes – red, grey, purple, royal blue – regularly repeating. They are all of them, so to speak, uniform shots; at least until the eye homes in.

Skewed ties, missing teeth, the wild child, the double act fooling about in the back row: perhaps one looks for the familiar at first. But then there is that tall boy in a turban leaning so slightly out of line, as if he wanted to break free; the baffled girl with the amber eyes stretching out her hands; the nervous anxiety of the child squeezed into the front row at the last moment, not quite sitting on the bench.

Sheer scale… Year 5 at Tate Britain. Photograph: Guy Bell/Rex/ Shutterstock

Some classes break into laughter at the shutter’s click, delighted by the photographer’s rival smile, or perhaps by the whole surprise of the occasion (few primary schools organise these all-together-now group portraits any more). In at least one shot, a child is jubilantly singing while the teacher tries to maintain the conventional silence. And, sad to say, an entire class of grey-clad children looks fearful and tense. Looming top left is the grim overlord of discipline.

There are schools with 32 pupils to a class, and schools with five children in a Georgian salon. There are home schools and sports academies, free schools and pupil referral units, although not a single image is captioned. This is surely crucial, a principled egalitarianism. No seven-year-old is to be pigeonholed according to the kind of school their parents chose for them. You will see the same exuberance in the salon, with its parquet floor, as the run-down gymnasium where the uniforms are reflected in the lino’s dull gleam. And it is the children themselves who defy social prejudice.

Clearly nobody can take in the stupefying numbers. Perhaps skip the odd photograph, you think, anxiously trying to do them all justice. But then some child stands out with a quizzical frown or a fetching smile and you have to give their classmates your full attention too. This is the lovely paradox: a mass observation project (two-thirds of London’s primaries took part) that allows each and every pupil to single themselves out. It is no overstatement to say that you
could spend hours with these children, in all their curiosity and innocence, straining to see the little images skied high on the wall – like children overlooked, yet again, for this year’s school nativity.

But McQueen has a plan for these invisible faces. A special giant magnifying glass on wheels will be provided to view photographs on the top rows. And every one of the pupils involved will visit Tate Britain. Children who may have never left their borough, let alone set foot in a gallery, can come and behold themselves on the walls of a national museum. Perhaps they might look at the art around them too and become the next generation of artists.

Outside the gallery, a selection of these school photographs appear on 600 billboards throughout the city. You can see the twins in Miss Smith’s class in pleats of laughter on an underground poster, or the contemporary pupils from Steve McQueen’s own primary school on a gigantic street billboard. Here they are, out in the open – free from art world associations, and from McQueen’s own reputation as a prize-winning artist and film director: standing for potential and liberty, representing nothing but their own unique selves.