
School gaze
A vast new project from artist and director Steve McQueen captures 76,000 primary school pupils at a crucial point in childhood

By Ellen Peirson-Hagger

On a Monday morning in Tate Britain’s Duveen Galleries, I watch as the artist, film director and screenwriter Steve McQueen greets a group of red-sweatshirt-clad schoolchildren. They are arranged in three rows and he passes between them, crouching to shake their hands and ask for their names. In the grand neoclassical hall, the group then poses for a photo.

On the walls around them are 3,018 framed photos. They are all unique but follow the format McQueen and the year four class here today have just followed: children in rows, facing the camera, with their teacher in the middle, and teaching assistants to the side. You might still own similar photos from when you were at school.

Between September 2018 and June of this year – when these students were in year three – a team of nine photographers working under the direction of McQueen visited 1,504 schools. Every primary school in London was invited to join the project, and a mammoth two-thirds did, with every borough represented. The resulting exhibition, “Year 3”, showcases 76,146 seven- and eight-year-olds and 6,000 teachers and teaching assistants. A selection of the portraits are also on show on 6,000 billboards across London. James Lingwood, co-director of Artnagel, the organisation which is staging the outdoor exhibition, predicts that at least 7 million people will catch a glimpse of these billboards in November.

McQueen, who won the Turner Prize in 1999 and is the multi-award-winning director of Hunger, Shame and 12 Years a Slave, was born and raised in Hackney, west London. He first had the idea for “Year 3” 20 years ago after the birth of his first child, when he found himself reflecting on his own school days and the lives his classmates had gone on to lead.

He chose year three students because it was around the ages of seven and eight that most children first became aware of the world beyond their families and close friendship groups. None of the photographs are labelled with a school name. “That’s partly for safeguarding reasons, but it also plays into the spirit of the project, which isn’t about ‘us’ in a small way but ‘us’ as a society,” says Lingwood.

Clare Wills, senior curator of contemporary British art at Tate Britain and lead curator on “Year 3”, calls it “one of the most ambitious portraits of citizenship ever undertaken. What I think makes ‘Year 3’ so impressive is its resistance to any overriding interpretation or commentary.”

There may be no single meaning to “Year 3”, but that doesn’t make it without social significance. Looking up at a whole generation of young Londoners, I find myself flooded with a mix of awe, curiosity, nostalgia and optimism. Though the portraits take the same general format, I start noticing the differences between them: the girl wearing a checked summer dress and those wearing woolly hats; the classes standing in gym in front of decades-old PE apparatus and those in classrooms painted a pristine white; the students in blazers and ties and those who don’t wear a uniform at all. Most of all, when whiteness is frustratingly dominant in the UK’s most established art institutions, it is joyful to see many faces from all different backgrounds fill the walls – a true celebration of our brilliantly diverse capital city.

“Every single child is looking straight ahead, a collective optimistic gaze,” observes Lingwood. “It poses a question: what is London like for these young people? What kind of future are they facing, and what kind of future will we have for them?”

Some 46,000 schoolchildren are booked in to find their class portraits hanging in the Duveen Galleries over the next 20 weeks. “We’re expecting more than 500 children per day, which is sure to shift the whole atmosphere of the building,” says Alex Farquharson, the gallery’s director. “It’s a resonant echo box in here. You can imagine the sound they’ll make.”

I hardly need to imagine. Before they’re let loose to find their own portrait, I speak with Jazziel, Zosia, Sienna, John Paul, and Shomarie from Tyeson Community Primary in Hackney, and they are squealing with excitement. This isn’t their first time at Tate Britain. “We came here in year two and three!” they tell me – but they weren’t on the walls then. What did they think, when their teachers first told them their portraits would hang here? “I thought we would be really famous,” says Sienna. “I thought Kim Kardashian might see us,” adds Zosia. They have great plans for their futures. “I want to be an architect, a chef, a hairdresser and a teacher,” lists Shomarie. “I would like to be an artist and a nurse,” says Jazziel.

With “Year 3”, McQueen hopes to inspire creative ambitions in London’s future workers. Perhaps he’s succeeding. 📛

“Year 3” runs until 3 May 2020

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