O'Hagan, Sean. 'Nothing but the truth'. The Observer. 26 January 2020.
Interview by
Seán O’Hagan
Portrait by
Gaby Laurent

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

‘It’s about seeing and being seen – so they can’t make you invisible’

Back in 2001, seven years before he directed his first feature film, Steve McQueen made 5th Nov, an installation that features in his forthcoming Tate Modern retrospective. Yet, it is in his most minimalist work, a projection of a single still photograph of the crown of a reclining man’s head, which is bounced by a long, curving piece. And yet it possesses a visceral charge that unsettles more than any other piece that will be in the exhibition. That power rests in the accompanying monologue in which McQueen’s countenance, manner, and verbal graphic detail the incredible events of the day he accidentally killed his older brother. 5th Nov can be seen in retrospect as a signal of what was to come as McQueen made the transition from artist to director, creating acclaimed feature films that merged formal rigor with a narrative style that is often unsettling in its depiction of human endurance.

May 2017, a casualty of the business, was when I asked him about 5th Nov. ‘I knew what had happened, of course, but what I knew was that coming from me, I was hearing the full story for the first time. I wasn’t told much. Nothing.’

He shakes his head furiously as if trying to erase the memory. ‘As far as I’m concerned, it’s all about the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. And, of course, you have to go into it, uncover what’s been hidden or covered up. Obviously, the easy thing is not to go there, but there’s a need to go there.’

As a feature film director, McQueen has made an art out of going there, a further evolution of the unsettling nature of Irish remembrance in his debut, Hunger (2008), sexual addiction to Shame (2011), or the long nightmare of slavery in the American South in 12 Years a Slave (2013). In the process, he has moved from a filmmaker who had not explored his reputation as an artist, which is why his imminent retrospective is timely. Through 50 carefully selected pieces, we will trace his creative arc as an artist from 1999, the year he won the Turner prize, to the present day. That means that earlier signature works such as Headpress (1997), in which he examined a famous video by idealist filmmaker Buster Keaton, and Drummer (1998), which saw him push a carrel through the streets of Birmingham, are not in the show.

There is one formative film included, Slanding, from 1992, which comprises Super 8 footage he impulsively shot of a dark alley. McQueen men he emerged carrying a frozen palm through the streets of east London. It is a low-key metaphor for work that contrasts sharply with the intensity of later works such as Western Deep (2004) and I Want You To Love Me (2003), which works at the long, dark shadow of colonialism, and End Credits (2012).

First he was the Turner prize-winning artist, then the Oscar-winning director of films like Shame, 12 Years a Slave and Widows. Now, with a retrospective due to open at Tate Modern, Steve McQueen explains why he’s still angry – and still searching.
in which he uses redacted FBI files to show the extent of surveillance of the black singer and activist Paul Robeson. For those who only know McQueen’s feature films, these non-narrative works may make for a challenging experience.

“Many young people will go to Tate Modern because it’s free, the food is reasonable and certain media art is ever-present,” says curator and social activist Paul Gilroy, who taught McQueen at Goldsmiths in the 1980s and has written one of the catalogue essays. “It is worth the effort, not least because they offer a wealth of signals and approaches that echo through the later feature films. This is someone who, from the start, had an encyclopedic knowledge of film and an almost obsessive interest in its history, and that underpins his art practice in often playful and provocative ways.”

Across the river, in Tate Britain, McQueen’s epic project, Year 3, on show until May, brings his art practice up to date. The ground floor galleries are covered floor-to-ceiling with thousands of school portraits that add up to a fascinating panoramic view of contemporary multicultural London. “It’s been incredible,” he says of the public reaction to Year 3 since it opened in November. “People have been bringing their grandparents to central London sometimes for the first time to see it. Ordinary people are being seen and seeming themselves on the walls of one of the country’s major art galleries. It’s about recognition, really. Look, we are here! That’s a powerful thing.”

It is 11 years since I last interviewed Steve McQueen. In that time, he has gone from being a Turner prize-winning British artist to an internationally acclaimed director, with an Oscar for 12 Years a Slave and a couple of Oscars under his belt. In this year’s Whitney Biennial list, he was given a high-profile exhibition to British film having already been the recipient of an OBE and a CBE. This extraordinary success may have melted him away from the margins but he is very much alive; a cut and dry energy is still evident when we meet one early morning coffee in the sunny forest community of Modern members’ homes. Once or twice during our conversation, he stunned me on the table or repeatedly shifts his head and he searches for the right words to fully convey his meaning – and the toll face of his conviction. When I ask him about his mainstay success as a director, a means that he now has to make time for his older job as an artist, he looks momentarily offended. “God no! I don’t think that at all;” he says, shaking his head. “I mean, you, you know what I don’t know what that is. With me, it’s about the work, whatever form it takes, I just want to do the work. Often it’s work that I don’t see being done elsewhere. It’s the dirty work. I suppose. And sometimes I want and welcome that burden.

So, you feel there is a burden to what you do, the burden of truth-telling? “Yes. For sure. It’s about putting yourself in places that are not going to be comfortable but, by going there, you might uncover the truth of what is actually going on. Basically, my attitude is ‘we are all going to die anyway, so let’s just do it.’”

The truth-telling will continue up to late this year when McQueen unveils his short non-narrative film about the Grenfell Tower fire, which claimed 72 lives on June 14, 2017. The date and location have yet to be disclosed, but the film will be showing in the London space, he is reluctant to talk about it in any detail, but when pressed he admits, “It has been difficult, really difficult in so many ways. Until I look at it, I don’t know what it is. It is even hard to say when even after we move to Ealing, I’ll go back there to hang around. As a Grenfell Gem, in between it’s where everyone I knew would hang out. So, going back there again in the circumstances was heavy, very heavy.”

Self-sacrificing McQueen, the Grenfell project is not a personal vendetta and will never be broadcast or shown on television, instead being eventually housed in a London space with free admission so that it is accessible to all. He describes it as “an artwork that is about memory, the tragedy of the collective conscience.”

With the proviso that it would not be shown for two years, McQueen was granted permission by the local community to film the scorched shell of Grenfell Tower from a helicopter, before it was covered up with plastic sheeting. “It was very raw, but also very necessary,” he says. “It was not about being commissioned, it was about getting permission. Initially, it was the permission to talk to the people there, to tell them who I am and where I come from. I actually used to work on a stall in Latrobe Grove under the Wintergreen selling second-hand clothes. It was essentially about getting their trust.”

He praises for a long moment, “That building was like a skull after the fire,” he says, finally, “Then, as soon as they covered it up, it was almost like they were saying it never happened. So, so matter that some people might not want to deal with what happened then, I’m saying, no, no. Let’s not forget.”

Death brings like a dark shadow throughout the Tate Modern retrospective, not just in TM NUM but also the elusive Adero (2012-15), which like Centurion Loop is set in Cemada, where his father was born. It is a poignant meditation on the life and death of the charismatic young man whose nickname provides the film’s title. Using split-screen projection, it constructs footage of a vibrant, certifiable Adero, balancing on the prow of his boat, with film of two older local men labouring in the outdoors. It turns out they are painstakingly creating a headstone for his grave.

For many young Black men, not just in the Caribbean, but here as well, the choices are to limited,” says McQueen. “Adero is working on his boat catching lobsters for rich Norfolk, and he finds a big stash of weed. It’s an opportunity to earn some cash and he shaves it, because he has so few choices. Same with my cousin, the reason he gets a gun is the first piece that he doesn’t want to end up on the basics. In a way, those films are about the cost of wanting some liberty, the liberty that other people take for granted.”

In both instances, though, the cost is high. In Adero’s case, beneath the visual poetry of the film lies a cold, hard fact: he is cheap, McQueen says, “Yes. And not just in the Caribbean, but here. People’s lives are cheap.”

His voice rises in anger, “Look around you at what’s happening here – people getting nabbed every day of the month in London and no one seems to give a shit. If they did give a shit, it wouldn’t happen. It happens because it seems to be of no great importance. If it was, things would be done again to prevent it happening.”

“Through McQueen has lived in Amsterdam for more than 20 years, he still considers himself a Londoner – absolute, total London.” The son of West Indian parents he was raised in Shepherd’s Bush and Ealing, and was continually encouraged by his father to learn a trade.

“There were no examples of artists who were like me,” he said the Guardian in 2014. “When did you see a black man doing what I did?”

He describes his primary school experience as a happy one, but in our conversation his thoughts return more than once to his secondary school days at Dayton Manor in Ealing, where, at 12, he was placed in a class for children who were deemed to be not academically up to speed. In lazy eye and undiagnosed dyslexia accounted his sense of isolation.

“What do I do as an artist? I think, to do my own life experience,” he says at one point, “I came of age in a school which was a microcosm of the world around me. One day, you’re together as a group, the next, you get split up by people who think certain people are better than you. It’s kind of interesting to observe that.”

There was a stigma attached to that experience, “Oh for fucking sure. And it was interfered by class and race and privilege. Absolutely. No in or out or maybe about it.”

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

ABOVE An installation view of Bad Credit (2012), in which McQueen uses redacted FBI files to film the surveillance of the black singer and activist Paul Robeson. Photograph by Ron Amstutz.

11 DUKE STREET, ST JAMES’S, LONDON SW1Y 6BN
TEL +44 (0)20 7925 2505 FAX +44 (0)20 7925 2506 info@thomasdane.com
before him. It is a project he has been connected with for several years over a great deal of his life in the present period. Set in London between 1938, the year of Edward Stoppard's influence from the windrush generation, and 1986, withholding over six-hour-long episodes, the series takes its title from an early Bob Dylan song. McQueen described it as a re-creation of "the journey that my parents and the first generation of black Indians went to show me here today, calling myself a black British person. Today, he learns to emphasise that it is not about the Windrush generation, but a later generation who were already established here." The opening story, which unfolds over the first two episodes, revisits a defining moment in black British engagement: the protests that erupted in West London in 1970 following the police closure of the Mangrove restaurant, a lively community meeting place on All Saints Road, and the ensuing trial of local activists disqualified the Mangrove. There is politics in there from the start and the racism that people face," elaborates McQueen. "But it is also about their everyday lives; how people met, fell in love, how they danced and enjoyed themselves, the vibrancy of their everyday lives. One episode is about the lovers' rock, another about people meeting at a blue's. So, it's about the black British experience in a very real sense, how people found themselves through all these different circumstances. Where is it on? Is it a six-part series called Last Days, in which a female character tries to uncover a great truth, a conspiracy against a backdrop of ecological disaster and the rise of Nationalism? When I ask Paul Gilroy what site Steve McQueen describes as, "It's the site that he wants to go to." In many ways, Steve McQueen has had himself an almost impossibly task, but that may be part of his extraordinary drive. His singular purpose was to revitalize the body, the grief you cannot articulate. These are the very things he wants to articulate visually. That's where he wants to be in his work."

With Swallow, a six-part TV series co-commissioned by Amazon and the BBC, and scheduled for broadcast in November, McQueen turns his attention to the London of a different time and to the lives of some of the ordinary British black people who went

Thomas Dane Gallery

The Observer 26.05.11

A top from
Asher (2002)
© Steve McQueen
Country: Thomas
Dane Gallery

Marian Goodman

Gallery

He recalls a recent meeting between himself and a woman whose young son has a major role in his forthcoming 90s series. Small Axe, which chronicles the everyday lives and struggles of black British people from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s. "She went to my school and had read some of the stuff I'd written about my time there. She told me that the exact same things had happened to her. It turns out that she had ended up doing her son's thesis so that they wouldn't have to happen to them. There is a lot of publicity about black kids underachieving, but that sort of thing goes unacknowledged."

He tells me another story about how a group of his old school friends bumped into one of his former teachers in a pub a few years ago. He told them that, back when he was a schoolboy, he had put forward the idea that the school should address the problem of underachieving black pupils. This teacher was told by his superior that, if they did so, it would inevitably mean that more black children would apply to the school. "They were in effect investing in black failure," says McQueen, shakily in despair.

There are some people, I suspect, who will read this and see his extraordinary achievements and his recent kingdom as evidence to the contrary. He shoots out the blind spot. "I am sitting here in front of you doing this interview not because of, or in spite of," he says. "I had every obstacle thrown up against me on the way up. And a big part of the reason I am sitting here is because of the people who went before me and made sacrifices. They helped clear the path for me because they made some noise and pushed back against racism - in music, in film, in writing, in debates. In music. I am sitting here because of them. That's just a fact."

I ask if he had any hesitation in accepting the honours conferred on him by the British establishment, given that the CBE and DBE are linked by name and history to the long colonial shadow cast over empire. He nods. I can see that some people would feel besmirched absolutely and, don't get me wrong, it wasn't an easy decision. It wasn't, "Oh, yeah, I'd have that! But at the same time I was like, this [inaudible] is one of the highest awards the state gives me, so I'm going to take it. Because I'm from here and if they want to give me an award, I'll have it, thank you very much and I'll use it for whatever I can use it for. End of story. It's about what you do, it's about being