Steve McQueen: ‘People have died to get me where I am today’

The Oscar-winning film-maker on his childhood, his education via the BBC and his Tate Modern homecoming

Arriving at Tate Modern in London to interview Steve McQueen as the museum opens, I’m told that the British artist and film-maker is running late. As he’s due a session with our photographer before me, I settle down to wait in a corner of the Members’ Room.
No sooner have I opened my laptop, though, than the man himself appears in front of me. “Wow, that was quick,” I stutter. McQueen shrugs, admires my choice of table — “It’s nice and quiet here” — and confirms that we have an hour to chat. When I say we might finish sooner, he replies, laughing, “Even better.”

Why should I be surprised that McQueen is not one to dally? From winning an Oscar for his 2013 feature film *12 Years a Slave* — the first black director to win Best Picture — to representing Britain at the Venice Biennale in 2009, not to mention a knighthood, the Turner Prize (1999) and exhibitions worldwide, he has packed achievements into his 50 years.

Our meeting is prompted by his imminent solo show at Tate Modern, which will feature 14 of his works, from the early Super 8 “Exodus” (1992/97) to the recent ongoing video piece “End Credits”, which focuses on the FBI surveillance of the black American singer and activist Paul Robeson. The only other British artists to have had a substantial monograph at the gallery are Gilbert & George, Damien Hirst and Mona Hatoum.

“It’s like my home,” McQueen says, gazing out at a silvery slice of south London sky, when I ask how he feels about the Tate exhibition. “It’s my manor. It’s where I come from. I’m grateful for the opportunity to show my work here.” He pauses. “It’s been a long time.”

He shows no sign of resenting the wait. But then McQueen himself left London for Amsterdam in 1997. “I just knew I wanted to move,” he explains. “I thought I was going to go elsewhere in the world, but I fell in love with this woman and ended up there,” he continues, referring to Bianca Stigter, the Dutch writer who is his partner and the mother of his children, about whom he requests I do not write at all.

Amsterdam, he elaborates, gave him an opportunity to discover himself, “to reflect in a way, which I’d never had the opportunity of before”.

Still from Steve McQueen's 'Ashes' (2002-15) © Courtesy the artist, Thomas Dane Gallery and Marian Goodman Gallery
The observation reveals his paradoxical nature. On the one hand, he’s a man in a hurry — intellectually, imaginatively — often speaking so rapidly he trips over his words. Yet he also pauses often, edits himself with care, as you would expect from someone who makes films that are slow, seductive, given to lingering shots that illuminate their subjects’ graceful, inner truth.

The complex strands of his personality are entwined from childhood. Having spent his early years on a tough west London estate, McQueen and his sister grew up in more comfortable Ealing, after his mother, a hospital receptionist who, McQueen says, had “other plans” for her children, bought a house with money gifted by his grandfather.

McQueen always loved to draw. He tells me, still sounding proud, that his “first exhibition” was a “massive banner” outside Shepherd’s Bush library bearing his drawing of his family that had won a children’s drawing competition in “1975 or 1976”.

At secondary school, however, he encountered little support. “They just weren’t bothered [about us].” Later, the headmaster admitted to him that the school had been institutionally racist in McQueen’s day. So how did he transcend the neglect? “My education happened mainly because of the BBC,” he says. Ardently curious since childhood, he was “fascinated” to encounter unfamiliar ideas “presented in such an interesting way”.

While his mother worked nights, McQueen watched TV into the small hours, imbibing a diet that encompassed Dennis Potter’s legendary drama The Singing Detective and documentaries such as Horizon and Arena. “All this genius stuff was entering into my house. I was like, ‘What the f***? Wow!’” he remembers, his voice crackling with the remembered thrill. “I was a sponge.”

Art grabbed him too. On a school trip to Tate, he “fell in love” with British artist Edward Burra, who painted scenes from the Harlem Renaissance, the explosion of African-American culture that flourished in the New York neighbourhood in the early decades of the 20th century.
One can imagine the impact of Burra’s work at a time when images of black people in mainstream culture were so rare that McQueen’s family and friends would ring each other up when they saw a person of colour on TV. “It was an event,” he recalls.

Today, he believes “things have changed.” But his voice is bleak as he observes that “people have died to get me where I am today.” When, naively, I ask who he means, he replies quietly: “People like Stephen Lawrence?”, then adds that the teenager — whose murder triggered overdue acknowledgment of institutional racism in the police — “didn’t die in vain.”

There’s no doubt that his own route has been Everest-steep. Even though he had *Hunger* and *Shame* already under his belt, when he revealed his ambition to make *12 Years a Slave* — which made more than $200m in box office and DVD sales — he was discouraged wholeheartedly.

“I was told films with black leads never make money” and — adopting a fake Hollywood-mogul accent — that it was an “impossible movie”.

What would his advice be to other artists? “Just be you. And f*** everybody else.” But what if you’re failing to pay the rent? “You have no choice.” He repeats this several times, then adds in a tone that is less optimistic than the sentiment: “You never know what’s round the corner. You just keep on going.”

That fierce resilience cohabits with a refined artistic sensibility characterised by subtle palettes and spare, elegant compositions. Who can forget, for example, Michael Fassbender’s Bobby Sands, the imprisoned IRA member who is the protagonist of *Hunger*, starving himself into ice-pale absence like a medieval saint?

The seed of his skill was planted, McQueen tells me, by his tutor at Goldsmiths, Jon Thompson, who told him always to carry his camera. But Super-8 film was too expensive to waste. “Every time you pressed a button, it was 50 pence.” So McQueen “trained his eye” to ask, “what do I want and not want?” As he puts it: “The limitation became freedom.”

Little Ealing Primary School children photographed in 2018 for Steve McQueen’s ‘Year 5’ project
© Tate/PA Wire
Little Ealing Primary School children are among 76,000 whose images are on display at Tate Britain.

How does he view the difference between shooting an art film and a movie? “One is poetry, one is the novel,” he responds. “Poetry is condensed, concise, fragmented. The novel is the yarn.”

In truth, his works are often hybrids. Hunger, for example, reminded me of the austere interiors of fin de siècle Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershoi, while his recent art project, “Year 3,” packs in more stories than Scheherazade. Unveiled at Tate Britain in November last year, the latter project saw McQueen invite all Year 3 primary school children in London to be photographed in the traditional class format. Not all were able to participate. Nevertheless, at the moment, there are an astonishing 76,000 children with their images on display at Tate Britain.

On the morning I visited, the galleries were bustling with families looking for their child’s face among the neat rows. To hear their cries — “Where am I, Mum?” “Look, there!” — and to witness the photographs with their rows of small faces, some solemn, most smiling, their heritages and experiences so multiple, their innocence so collective, was to experience a surge of optimism for the capital.

“I wanted the Tate’s walls to be covered with the future of the city,” agrees McQueen.

Yet he also says rather diffidently that he hopes the project’s enormous popularity won’t cloud its artistic worth. When I tell him that “Year 3” could be read as a contemporary response to the grids beloved of modernist painters like Agnes Martin, he is pleased and replies that “time will change” the way the work is perceived and its conceptual layers.

Meanwhile, he has ensured that an entire generation of London children know they belong at the heart of British culture.

‘Steve McQueen’, Tate Modern, February 15-May 11; ‘Year 3’, Tate Britain, to May 5, tate.org.uk

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