
Steve McQueen brings life in the raw to Tate Modern

The first thing you're greeted by on entering Tate Modern’s Steve McQueen exhibition are the eyes of the Statue of Liberty. They stare back at you, huge and blank, as part of a film that examines the monument in disconcerting detail, revealing its stains, its oxidised surface, the unruly seagulls nesting in an armpit. McQueen calls the film “Static” yet it’s anything but. Shot from a helicopter circling the statue, the film stutters and shakes as it tries to keep the monument in focus. Its soundtrack is the clatter of rotor blades. New Jersey factories and industrial estates glower in the background.

McQueen made “Static” in 2009, the same year that Barack Obama reopened the statue, ending its eight-year closure following the 9/11 attacks. The film’s unsteady footage is a striking invitation to look beyond the image of the monument and the ideals of freedom and progress it represents, and to gaze instead at the imperfect ordinary world, beautiful in parts, squalid in others, but endlessly deserving of scrutiny. The goal, says McQueen, was to encourage viewers to “look and look again”, and that exhortation is at the heart of this powerful, moving retrospective.

The last survey of McQueen’s work in the UK was in 1999, at London’s Institute of Contemporary Arts. In the 21 years since, he’s won the Turner Prize and an Oscar, been awarded an OBE, a CBE and a knighthood. Yet he remains an elusive figure. That's partly to do with the fact he lives in Amsterdam and eschews the trappings of fame. But it's also because while he's achieved mainstream success as a film-maker, his work as a visual artist is searching, profound and resolutely enigmatic. Ask an average art lover to name a favourite piece by McQueen and it’s likely they’d struggle. The recent school photo project, “Year 5”, on show at Tate Britain concurrently with this exhibition, is a rare foray into immediacy and accessibility, although it still mines complex themes of migration, memory, place and identity.
In early films, McQueen made himself forcefully visible, homaging a Buster Keaton stunt for instance, or wrestling naked with another man. At Tate, only works from 1999 onwards are on show, and in these he is largely absent from the screen. Yet his presence remains palpable throughout and the exhibition reveals him as an artist of inexhaustible visual curiosity.

In “Charlotte”, he prods and pulls at the folds of skin around the eye of Charlotte Rampling. The film is shot in extreme close-up as though in reference to that infamous eye slicing scene from Buñuel’s Un Chien Andalou. But McQueen’s work is shot under a red light. It seems to signal danger or erotic thrill; a desire on the artist’s part, as he puts it, “to go beyond the screen”, in his encounter with the iconic actress.

McQueen is eager to share his inquisitiveness with the audience. So the Tate exhibition is an expansive affair; 14 major works, predominantly films, laid out in an open plan, non-chronological structure that leaves you wandering, captivated, from screen to screen. At times, I found myself even dashing back to a film I’d just watched because I wanted to experience again the sensation of being immersed within its sensory realm.

In the breathless, claustrophobic “Western Deep”, McQueen follows miners in South Africa down into the world’s deepest gold mine. The film starts in darkness, with only the ratcheting sound of a lift in descent. Two miles down, the doors open on to a netherworld in which temperatures can reach more than 80°C and the air pressure is 920 times that of the surface. In grainy Super 8 footage McQueen tracks the miners labouring amid the heat and the roar of heavy machinery. Sometimes he cuts the sound on the film and in the abrupt silence we watch men struggling through the murk, figures far removed from their own humanity.
“Once Upon a Time” is lighter in tone but no less compelling. McQueen presents a series of slides originally sent into space by Nasa on the Voyager I and II missions in the 1970s. Images fade in and out hypnotically, accompanied by babbling voices speaking in tongues. The pictures are supposed to represent life on Earth but there are no depictions of discord and in the absence of war, poverty or religious conflict, the planet is rendered Edenic. We see people walking along the Great Wall of China; a painter at an easel in his studio; a group of Amish raising the wooden frame of a house; droplets of water on a leaf; a woman licking an ice cream cone; the UN building at night; an Asian family eating a meal at a circular table.

But death is never far in this exhibition. McQueen has often presented the black male body as a site of peril and the topic is a recurring theme here. Two films reflect on the history and lasting impact of colonial exploitation on Grenada, where McQueen has family origins. In “Carib’s Leap” a figure falls endlessly through the sky, summoning the memory of the 17th-century islanders who jumped to their death from its cliffs rather than surrender to French occupiers. “Ashes” offers a poignant elegy for a young man who, finding few chances for advancement in the island’s constrained economy, makes a rash decision that has fatal consequences.
And the title of “7th Nov” refers to the day that McQueen’s cousin Marcus accidentally shot and killed his beloved brother. Marcus relates the horrific episode in a candid, unsparring monologue. Slowly, over the course of more than 20 minutes, he comes to a tentative peace with himself. On screen, a single still image shows Marcus lying on his back. The crown of his head, which bears a brutal, unexplained scar, dominates the frame. Words and picture ostensibly bear no relationship to each other. Except, of course, McQueen is asking us to contemplate life plain and raw, as stripped of adornment as a head without a hat. Human experience may sometimes not be pretty, the artist seems to suggest. But better always to keep looking than turn away.

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