The cavernous central gallery of Steve McQueen’s Tate Modern show carries two free-hanging screens: video works made monumental as sculpture.

On the left is Static (2009): the Statue of Liberty, held in a continuous circling shot from an elevated perspective. Occasionally, the agitated sound of helicopter blades intrudes on the otherwise serene, silent progress of the camera, as it takes in the stains like tears, blood or sweat, streaking the statue’s face and underarms.

On the right is Once Upon A Time (2002), 116 slides playing on a 70-minute loop, illustrating human conception, foetal development, family structure, and physical and mathematical principles intended to communicate something of the Earth to alien life forms. They are the images sent up with the Voyager I and II spacecraft, launched in 1977, and still relaying data from deep space.

Each offers a version of humanity idealised. Since the early twentieth century, Liberty has stood for the welcoming egalitarianism evoked by Emma Lazarus’s poem The New Colossus, affixed to the statue in 1903. Lazarus imagines Liberty as the Mother of Exiles: “Give me your tired, your poor/ Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free…” In fact, this gift from the people of France to the people of America originally marked the abolition of slavery.
The Voyager images are equally idealistic: humanity excised of brutality, cruelty and exploitation. In *Once Upon A Time* they are accompanied by heartfelt exposition, or perhaps storytelling, in a strange language. These are recordings of glossolalia – speaking in tongues – episodes of mysterious vocalisation that have all the trappings of significance and hidden meaning, but remain incomprehensible. Like the images, they are earnest but impotent attempts at communication.

*Static* was shot in 2004, shortly after Liberty was reopened after the 9/11 attacks. The Voyager probes were launched two years after the fall of Saigon and the end of the Vietnam War. Showing both works in the same space floods them every so often, with the sound of the circling helicopter, hideously close. It's a sound we know well from a different kind of film, most famously Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979.) It suggests a very different – horrifying – vision of humanity, and our capacity for cruelty.

Tate's exhibition roughly covers the period between McQueen's 1999 Turner Prize win, and his Oscar for Best Motion Picture for *12 Years a Slave* in 2014. As an opening gesture, *Static* and *Once Upon A Time* provide a highly charged context for an exhibition otherwise overwhelmingly concerned with the human body: its vulnerability, its resilience, its relationship to the camera and to the observing eye.

Two works, roughly paired in the space, suggest the fine line separating affection and aggression. The black and white *Cold Breath* (1999) remains fixed on McQueen's exposed nipple, which he rubs, strokes, pinches, pulls, spits on and agitates continuously on a ten minute loop. A gesture that at first seems auto-erotic, then performed as alluring display, gradually becomes doggedly obsessive, as though he is punishing flesh that refuses to comply.

Flooded with red light, *Charlotte* (2004) instead remains fixed on a single eye and a finger. The eye belongs to Charlotte Rampling, famous for what Luchino Visconti termed “The Look”: a seductive, intelligent, leonine, exposing gaze. The finger is McQueen’s. He softly pokes the skin around Rampling’s eye, pulling the rim, palpating the wrinkled and inelastic lids. His finger points directly at her unblinking eyeball, drawing backwards and forwards like the focus on a camera. In a moment that makes you wince, he slowly and deliberately touches her iris. Rampling is an actress taking direction: nevertheless, McQueen’s treatment of her hired body feels cruel.
Overwhelmingly, the bodies that concern McQueen here are of black men – often young – and their vulnerability within systems that fail to value them. Each of three works from 2001 focuses on a single male subject. 7th Nov. shows a dramatically scarred man’s head photographed from above. The image accompanies the horrifying story of McQueen’s cousin Marcus, who, in a single, long, rush recounts the circumstances surrounding his accidental shooting of his own brother, and the anguish that followed.

In Illuminer, the body is McQueen’s, lit by a TV screen as he lies in bed watching a report on Marines, Navy Seals and Gurkhas being deployed for combat in Afghanistan. His naked body, half glimpsed among the soft crumpled sheets, seems far from the world of hardened combat described in the voice over.

Girls, Tricky finds McQueen crammed into a tight recording booth with the Bristolian musician as he records an intense vocal. Filmed up close, Tricky’s body twitches and contorts, tense and emotional. Unable to fully hear the musical track playing through his headphones, all we get are his unamplified vocal gymnastics, alien out of context.

The long imprint of Empire, slavery and apartheid on the human body are explored in the works Western Deep and Caribs’ Leap (both 2002, and originally shown paired.)

Western Deep carries us to a subterranean hellscape: 3.5km down the mineshaft of the TauTona goldmine in South Africa. McQueen shoots with what light he can: often only the beams from the miners’ helmets, sometimes, nothing at all. Always precise in his use of sound, he leaves most of the film silent. When the audio springs to life, it’s like a jump scare: a shocking claustrophobic cacophony of drills and water jets. Deep underground, the men – all but one black – are submitted to a sequence of physical tests after their shifts, horribly reminiscent of the grotesque scientific studies carried out in the name of eugenics.
Caribs’ Leap (2002) recalls an uprising against the French occupiers on the island of Grenada in the 1650s, in which the islanders threw themselves off a cliff rather than submit. A screen within the gallery shows bodies slowly falling through the air. Another, on the exterior of Tate, shows the island today, shot dawn to dusk. It is projected directly opposite St Paul's Cathedral, built in 1675 as Britain was starting acquire colonial wealth. (Grenada itself was ceded to Britain in 1763.)

During the making of Caribs’ Leap, McQueen filmed a young man known as Ashes who was later brutally murdered after discovering drugs stashed on a beach. Ashes (2002-15) is McQueen’s memorial. One side of a suspended screen shows Ashes on the prow of the boat, aware of McQueen’s camera moving slowly over his body, smiling and goofing a little, flirtatiously. The other documents a monument and stone being erected over his grave. The story of his death is recounted in a few matter-of-fact sentences – a casual, uncaring, incidental murder.

In Ashes, McQueen refuses to allow his subject to be just another young black man whose violent death goes unremarked. His ongoing work End Credits (2012-) is a reminder that observation cuts both ways. Based on the FBI’s records relating to the American singer, actor and activist Paul Robeson, the audio recording currently runs for 42 hours, accompanied by scanned images of the heavily redacted documents.

McQueen rarely blinks, or so it seems. These works all involve long steady periods of looking, often uncomfortably so. In their restrained clarity, they are tremendously powerful, definite in their voice, disconcerting.

‘Steve McQueen’ is at Tate Modern, London, Thursday to 11 May

https://inews.co.uk/culture/arts/steve-mcqueen-tate-modern-review-powerful-disconcerting-exhibition-1461281