Steve McQueen review, Tate Modern: poetry and profundity for those brave enough to seek it.

Steve McQueen, Carib’s Leap, video still, detail (2002) Credit: courtesy of the artist and Thomas Dane Gallery and Marian Goodman Gallery.

There aren’t many artists who achieve mainstream success while maintaining the integrity that got them noticed in the first place. But Steve McQueen, who won the Turner Prize in 1999, belongs to this rare breed. Indeed, his avant-garde films are so cussedly uncompromising that his Oscar triumph for “12 Years a Slave” – which won best picture in 2014 – was even more of a surprise.

A new exhibition of 14 works at Tate Modern, his first solo show in Britain since 1999, assembles many of his rigorous, experimental films, as well as a dreamlike, backlit still image and a sculpture. In one silent film, a hand fiddles with a nipple, squeezing, yanking, and caressing it for 10 minutes. In another, a finger probes the close-up eye of actress Charlotte Rampling.

Meanwhile, “Illuminer” (2001) consists simply of footage of McQueen lying on a bed in a Parisian hotel, half-lit by a flickering TV set that we can hear but cannot see. The work’s “drama” derives from the mechanical struggles of his digital camera as it adjusts to the low light, giving the footage a strangely grainy, ectoplasmic quality. Which, I accept, doesn’t sound dramatic at all.

This is the thing about McQueen (who is currently working on “Grenfell”, a film about the burned-out tower block near the housing estate in West London where he grew up): his art – by which I mean the stuff that gets shown in galleries rather than released in cinemas – is notoriously tricky to write about. Undeniably, it has a power, derived
from the strength of his singular vision; the sense that, as viewers, we are in the hands of someone in total command of his medium. But pinpointing that power is like trying to bottle a will-o’-the-wisp.

This is part of McQueen’s magic: at all costs, he resists, as he puts it, spectacle and instant gratification, so that his films must be experienced to be wholly understood (though not, perhaps, for 42 hours, which is the full length of the audio for “End Credits”, this show’s final work).

What, then, are his chief concerns as an artist? I’d point to two overriding, interrelated themes. One is his desire to use film – a medium associated primarily with the sense of sight – to generate bodily sensations within his audience. I’ve already mentioned “Cold Breath” (1999), starring his own nipple, and “Charlotte” (2004), which ogles Rampling’s eye. Then we have “Western Deep” (2002), a 24-min documentary about the world’s deepest gold mine, which begins, unforgottably, with darkness broken only by the occasional flash of light, as a group of workers in a lift hurtle more than two miles underground. Deafening noises off ensure that we experience this journey to the centre of the Earth as viscerally as possible. McQueen’s films generally get you in the gut.

His other preoccupation is with physical beauty – often that of young black men cut down in their prime. “Ashes” (2002-15) commemorates a charismatic, carefree youth whom McQueen filmed in Grenada before he lost his life. In “7th Nov.” (2001), McQueen’s cousin Marcus recalls the day he accidentally shot his “gorgeous” brother, while a photographic slide presents a dramatically foreshortened image of Marcus’s scarred, shaven skull. In all these works, McQueen is meditating on vulnerability and human frailty.

What this exhibition isn’t, then, is a family-friendly distraction. The galleries are dark, the layout initially bewildering and labyrinthine. McQueen’s overarching vision is sombre and melancholic, at times explicitly elegiac. While the duration of several works is short, the show demands concentration.

Yet, sometimes, the greatest pleasures are the hardest-won. Just because McQueen’s art isn’t “easy” doesn’t mean that it’s pretentious. At almost every turn, here, there is profundity and poetry – for those brave enough to seek it.

https://www.telegraph.co.uk/art/reviews/steve-mcqueen-review-tate-modern-poetry-profundity-brave-enough/