This is heavy art. The deeper you go into Steve McQueen’s exhibition, the more each work seems to weigh down on your shoulders. Which won’t surprise anyone who’s seen the Oscar-winning English artist’s films. Whether dealing with sexual addiction in ‘Shame’ or the brutal history of slavery in ‘12 Years a Slave’, he likes to drop a titanic, hulking weight on you and force you to confront it.

His visual art’s no different. Each work here hits with a thud. One of the first is a slideshow of images selected by Nasa to be sent into space to represent life on earth. Sunsets, music, art, maths. No poverty, conflict, disease or pain. It’s an important opening statement, because the rest of the art here is built to totally undermine that veneer of pleasantness.

There’s a huge screen showing a helicopter’s eye view of the Statue of Liberty right after it re-opened post-9/11. You spin around it, taking in the streaked copper degradation to its serious, austere face. The liberty it once promised, the freedom and welcoming embrace, all decaying right in front of you.

McQueen’s fingers poke and prod at actress Charlotte Rampling’s eye in a video nearby, dancing between tenderness and violence. He tugs viciously at his own nipple in another closeup work. It’s all too close, too tense.
‘Western Deep’ sends you down on a claustrophobic, endless journey into the world’s deepest gold mine: it’s a grim film of grim working conditions which exist only because human greed demands it. ‘Ashes’ is a beautiful portrait of a shirtless Grenadian fisherman sat on the prow of a boat. The other side of the screen shows the building of his tomb after he was murdered. An uncomfortable depiction of senseless loss.

But, for me, the most moving work is ‘7th Nov’: a still, motionless film where McQueen’s cousin recounts the day he accidentally shot and killed his own brother. It’s a rambling, heartbreaking story that feels so intimate and raw that you feel like you’re intruding. Again, it’s all too close, too tense, too much.

There’s so much beauty in this exhibition, and so much pain and injustice too. But more than anything, there’s a whole lot of truth. McQueen’s work is a brass-knuckled punch of reality in the face of everyday complacency. He’s making you see that the world isn’t all sunsets and music and art and maths. It’s racism, violence, greed, oppression, manipulation and sadness too. You can’t have one without the other, and McQueen is brilliant at making you see that.

https://www.timeout.com/london/art/steve-mcqueen-review