From a labyrinth of film emerges
McQueen's mastery of everything

Adrian Searle

The rooms are full of people, so quiet and calm, and in front of the artist, naked, looming into the dark, wrestling with another man. Now we see him as a hotel bed. Then a house falls around him and he stands blinking in the dust, holding a metal frame round the streets of Manhattan, you can catch a glimpse of him in shop windows as he passes. Now invisibly, he brushes through the undergrowth in an Amsterdam park at night.

"Sometimes I want to do things that I shouldn't, I do it then," Steve McQueen recently told me. Our conversation appears in the catalogue to his mid-career survey show at the Schaulager in Basel, Switzerland, which opened last weekend but which will not be traveling to Britain. Seeing so much of the British artist's work together for the first time, many of his film installations, as well as sculptures, will be on display for the first time in Britain. It is an extraordinary event.

In conversation, McQueen has a remarkable capacity to cut through the bullshit, recontextualizing his work as he goes, and seeing it in new ways. He is a very reflective artist.

Rather than having long-term strategies, his art is borne of reactions. Turner prize winner, multi-media artist and director of the peer-reviewed films Hunger and Shame, McQueen is currently in the final stages of a big-budget Hollywood movie, Twelve Years a Slave, starring Brad Pitt, Michael Fassbender and Quvenzhane Wallis. Looking at his work is a complex business. The mid-career exhibition fills two floors and is perhaps the most comprehensive of his oeuvre to date. It is a city of scenarios, but it is not a city of space. It is a city of movement.

The noise of a helicopter fills the first room. Its ponderous din stops you in your tracks, an almost physical assault that crowds out thought. The helicopter is one, rising and falling about the Statue of Liberty.

You can see tiny people standing out from the arches in the crown on the statue's head. The noise dies away, and I have the sudden illusion that the focus is clearer, the statue more present in the silence.

But McQueen's film is about more than the visible. In this the reason he filmed Charlotte Rampling's eye, to close up, his finger pressing against it with a delicacy that's almost shockingly intimate. There are moments throughout that have violence and nobility, brutality and tenderness, with same facts, often, there is a sense of disclosure - and you never forget that you are seeing through the camera's dispassionate eye.

Sometimes I feel like a witness. At one point in the early film Five Easy Pieces, McQueen writes and giant at the box. He knows we are there.

The city of cinema is really a labyrinth. You don't know where you are and you feel in there; there is a sense of something to be found, of there being a place to be found. The city of cinema is really a labyrinth.

He messes with our autonomy. He seduces us and he shows us away.