Steve McQueen
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PROJECTED CLOSE AGAINST A WALL in a large, dark gallery, the saturated red of Steve McQueen’s 16-mm film Charlotte, 2004, produced an intimacy with the viewer every bit as charged as the contact that occurs between the artist’s finger and Charlotte Rampling’s eyeball. McQueen’s insistently probing, with occasional pauses to explore the sagging skin of the actor’s closed eyelids, alternated with handheld pans over fragments of Rampling’s face that read as both explicit and abstract. The film’s overspill of color onto the floor and surrounding walls gave the moving image a sense of physical presence, a feeling of depth, allowing for a haptic encounter that materialized again and again in this midcareer retrospective of fifteen works from between 1992 and 2012.

Museum exhibitions of film and video art are susceptible to myriad difficulties, from shaky projectors and overloud sound to claustrophobic black-box galleries and washed-out images. This show would have none of that. Brilliantly designed by curator James Rondeau in collaboration with McQueen; exhibition producer Larry Smallwood; the artist’s video technician, Sue MacIvor; and exhibition manager Léaht Wattler, the installation displayed the works with enough isolation to invite sustained attention, letting audiences experience each piece as they might a painting. Yet the exhibition also offered an innovative staging of contact, with controlled seepages of light and sound productively inflecting surrounding works; while each projection retained its individual headspace, this show was all about the bleeds.

One effect of this commingling—coupled with a non-chronological layout—is that it facilitated new imaginings of McQueen’s oeuvre. (The show, the artist has explained, is designed to be capable of “looking back, reinventing itself again.”) Importantly, the decision to highlight works begun while McQueen was still a student in the early 1990s—such as Exodus, 1992–97, a lyrical Super 8 film, shown on a television monitor, that follows two men of West Indian descent as they carry potted plants through a London street—in the exhibition’s central galleries opened up a vantage point from which to consider the rarely noted impact of New Queer Cinema on the artist’s work. Although McQueen will readily admit to the influence of this disparate group of film and video practitioners, which was named by B. Ruby Rich in 1992 and includes figures such as...
as Derek Jarman, Tom Kalin, and Sadie Benning, among many others, their influence has been little explored since McQueen’s early feminist critics pointed it out in the mid-1990s. In part, the hesitancy to read the artist’s work in those terms may stem from the way in which McQueen’s formally experimental practice refuses to cohere around themes of identity (as, in fact, did much of New Queer Cinema). McQueen has been less interested in figurations of queerness than in what artist Isaac Julien called New Queer Cinema’s “difference in stance—a militantly confrontational attitude.” As Julien noted, this moment in practice was less about a queer or a black aesthetics than about a mode of address: an ACT UP-era immediacy—what McQueen himself calls an urgency—at once formalist and political without resolving the friction between the two.

Here, this urgency came across most clearly in three early films screened with old-school CRT projectors on the sides of a monumental triangular column. (This unconventional installation design put the works in dialogue, as if they were “leaning on each other,” the artist notes.) In these works, McQueen pictures various kinds of confrontation: from the shot of the artist passing downward toward the camera, and thus at the viewer, in the luminous Five Easy Pieces, 1995, to the handheld shot of his face as he strolls through the English countryside in Just Above My Head, 1996, to the playful tension between McQueen and a second black male figure in Bear, 1993. The last shows the two men, naked, as they “wrestle,” a hypnotic interplay of glances and grabbing arms shot with striking Dutch angles and light flares, the camera speed
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was ultimately less about eroticism than about love, a love in which the question of whether one is “black or white, gay or straight,” is “simply not interesting.” (As James Baldwin once noted, “love is where you find it.”) McQueen’s reading of love, informed by the art practices that emerged as cultural responses to AIDS, might also be described as the urgency to produce images, or a sense of possibility, in the midst of overwhelming constraints.

Yet the directness in McQueen’s works is often paired with obliqueness. Take, for instance, the first work encountered in the show. In the 35-mm Static, 2009, McQueen’s camera circles the Statue of Liberty from a helicopter, framing, in close-up, her raised hand grasping the torch, her armpit stained with pigeon shit. By zooming in on this contested national symbol, Static holds it at an
uneasy distance. Such a dialectic might also emerge in works such as McQueen’s *Illuminer*, 2001, a video shot from the top of a television of the artist lounging on a bed in a hotel room. The television plays a French news broadcast—the epitome of “live transmission”—about the mobilization of troops to Afghanistan, yet it is only heard, not seen. The hidden screen acts as a lantern, flooding the room with lamplight.

Polished floors in the main gallery space reflected and thus dispersed the projected image, a strategy of installation that redoubled the fragmentation already modeled in the works themselves. In *Current*, 1999, for example, five rear-projected slides picture a semihidden underwater bicycle. Dissolves between two projectors approximate the movement of ripples on the water’s surface while reflected sunlight at once highlights and obscures the putative subject. Likewise, in *Girls, Tricky*, 2007, the artist’s handheld camera intimately circles a musician’s upper body in a darkened recording booth during four live takes of a performance, hovering for long periods behind his head. The glass walls between the booths reflect the outer surroundings to create a paradoxical sense of privacy, an entrapment that simultaneously offers a glimpse of some way through. This self-reflexivity is ultimately about rhetoric: The subject is forced to consider what it means to look.

Elsewhere, McQueen complicates transparency by withholding documentary’s framing devices. In the masterly *Western Deep*, 2002, which takes the viewer on a descent by elevator into the world’s deepest gold mine, the prominent film grain shrouds the landscape in an unvarnished, Courbet-like roughness of detail, a stark symbol of the mine’s brutal labor conditions. In this and other pieces, McQueen works against the constraints of a particular format. Often, he does so by showing one medium as one would another: Super 8 as digital video, 16 mm on drywall, art on TV.

The exhibition also switches between national contexts. *Queen and Country*, 2007–2009, for instance, displays facsimile stamps of British citizens who lost their lives in Iraq in an oak cabinet with vertical drawers, professing a nondidactic critique of the legacy of empire. Shifting to America’s Cold War networks, *End Credits*, 2012, features scanned documents from the FBI’s exhaustive files on musician and civil rights activist Paul Robeson, marking the artist’s first foray into text-based work. These papers, appearing one after another and filled with black redaction marks, allude to modernist abstraction, while “actorly” voice-overs narrating the remaining text offer a vivid sense of the state’s unremitting paranoia. Yet since *End Credits* pairs six hours of video with some eleven hours of audio, the two synchronize differently in each viewing. The work is thus structurally unfixed, ever mutable. There is a sense of irony, then, in the title—that linear, authoritative summation—indeed, it is the logic of end credits that McQueen’s important show, demonstrating little interest in completeness or the uniformity of medium, so eloquently militates against.

*Stone McQueen* was co-organized with Schaulager, Münchwilen/Basel, where it is currently on view through Sept. 1.

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