Steve McQueen gets in your face at the Schaulager

The transformed space hosts a major mid-career survey before the release of his next film

By Anny Shaw. From Art Basel daily edition
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McQueen first appeared in his own work by accident in 1993 when he made Bear (still shown here). © Steve McQueen
After a two-year break from exhibitions, the newly revamped Schaulager in Basel reopened to the public in March with “Steve McQueen” (until 1 September), a show of more than 20 film installations as well as photographic stills and other works. The organisers describe the mid-career exhibition, which is an enlargement of a show that opened in Chicago last autumn and fills two floors of the Herzog & de Meuron-designed building, as a “city of cinemas”, where films are installed cheek by jowl rather than in separate rooms. “It’s like you never really come out of the darkness,” says Heidi Naef, the senior curator at the Schaulager. “You don’t lose the connections between the works.”

McQueen himself looms large in several of the films on show. In one, Deadpan, 1997, he stares straight ahead while a house falls down around him (the film won him the Turner Prize in 1999); in another, Five Easy Pieces, 1995, he urinates on the camera lens. In Charlotte, 2004, he prods and probes the eye of the actress Charlotte Rampling. McQueen’s first appearance in his own work came in 1993 with Bear, his first major video. Featuring two naked men wrestling, it veers between homoeroticism and violence and is also on show at the Schaulager. But, it turns out, McQueen’s acting career began accidentally. “I wasn’t meant to be in Bear; the other guy didn’t turn up,” he explains. “I thought: ‘Oh fuck, let’s get my kit off and let’s go.’ So I ended up behind and in front of the camera.”

McQueen no longer features in his videos (he hasn’t appeared in his own work since the late 1990s, with the exception of a solitary finger in Charlotte), preferring instead to direct others. In 2008, he moved into feature-length films with Hunger, an award-winning movie about the slow death of the IRA hunger striker Bobby Sands.

The actor Michael Fassbender pushed himself to the physical limit in his portrayal of Sands (the actor lost 16kg for the role). In McQueen’s second feature film, Shame, 2011, Fassbender played a sex addict, Brandon. Unlike Sands, however, who was incarcerated in the Maze prison near Belfast in Northern Ireland, Brandon’s prison of neuroses is of his own making. Both films are being screened in the Schaulager’s auditorium during the exhibition’s run.
Fassbender also stars in McQueen’s third movie, *Twelve Years a Slave*, which is due to be released in December and has already been tipped as a potential Oscar-winner. It is based on the memoirs of Solomon Northup, an African-American from New York who was kidnapped in 1841 and enslaved on a cotton plantation in Louisiana; McQueen simply says it was “time to make a film about slavery”.

When he conceived the project, Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained*, 2012, had not been announced. “The funny thing was, I bumped into Quentin when I was filming in New Orleans,” McQueen says. “He said to me: ‘I hope it’s OK to have two films about slavery.’ And I said: ‘Yes, of course. We have more than one Western, or film of any other genre, don’t we?’ Sometimes these things are just in the air. Like with *Hunger*—it was the first time that the British establishment accepted that atrocities happened at the Maze. Slavery is one of those things that has to be investigated.”

*Lynching Tree*, 2013, is a photographic still that McQueen made specifically for the Schaulager exhibition. Shot while he was filming in New Orleans, it shows a tree that was used as a gallows for slaves; the lynched victims are buried in graves beneath the tree. Exhibited on a light box, the saturated green of the leaves and grass leap out at the viewer; the violence of the site’s history is belied by the tranquility of the woodland today.

Whether it’s about slavery, police brutality or sexuality, McQueen is not afraid to have those conversations (he says he “makes fear his friend” and that he often “dares himself” to do things). It’s just a shame that there are no plans yet to bring the exhibition to the artist’s native Britain. It seems that few institutions have the budget and time to install such a large show of time-based works. “Steve had very precise specifications, and as we don’t have one show following the next, we had time to sit down and work it out,” Heidi Naef says, adding that the Schaulager’s foundation owns ten videos by McQueen and has been following his career for several years. “For this exhibition to work, it had to be done in a certain way,” McQueen says. “But I hope in the future that it will be able to travel to London, because it’s important to me to show the work in my home town.”

*Film screenings: Hunger, 29 August and 1 September; Shame, 4 and 7 July, 15 and 18 August. For more details, see www.schaulager.org*