

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Rob Nelson, “Steve McQueen: “I Want to Be Useful”, *Walker Art Center website*, November 18, 2013

“I don’t think slavery has been taboo at all,” Steve McQueen told me, having just noted that his film *12 Years a Slave* is one of less than two dozen to address this painful part of US history. “[Racism has] actually been very visible and obvious in a way—the elephant in the room.”

In a Minneapolis hotel, hours before his Walker Dialogue with MoMA curator Stuart Comer, the British-African artist and filmmaker explained to me how his features explore such obvious yet inadequately examined topics—from the seven-month hunger strike that killed Bobby Sands and nine other IRA members in 1981 (*Hunger*) to Internet pornography (*Shame*) and now slavery.

With Comer, McQueen discussed how *12 Years a Slave*—a “feminist film,” he asserted—made him want to “evaporate” the frame. He described his gallery work as having always been “cinematic” and gave an impassioned shout out to the New Queer Cinema of the early ’90s, the movement having provided for him a rare sense that there could be a “reason to want to use the camera.” At least twice McQueen responded to audience requests for advice on film-making and distribution with: “There’s too much thinking—just do it.”

Our own conversation began with a question about *Portrait as an Escapologist*, the artist’s black-and-white photo installation from 2006. In it, 150 copies of a single photo appear in rows of 25 on a gallery wall. The photo is of McQueen himself, standing confidently before the camera, leaning back a touch, his legs apart and his hands firmly folded in front of his belly.

### **Rob Nelson**

*Portrait as an Escapologist* seems to deal with issues of escape and confinement—issues that would become central to all three of your feature films. Can you talk about that installation from seven years ago, about what you think it means in the context of your more recent work?

### **Steve McQueen**

It’s a remake of a natural portrait of an escapologist, a guy from Holland. It’s just a reproduction of that photograph, which I think was taken in 1926. I played the escapologist.

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

### **Nelson**

Why the many duplications in the work?

### **McQueen**

I just love the idea of posters. We got the paper from a special place in Paris. Certainly I was interested in the idea of repetition, in the printing press. And of course, there are echoes in the work of slave ships and so on.

### **Nelson**

Which is to say that you had addressed the subject of slavery before [making *12 Years a Slave*].

### **McQueen**

Yes, once. Once before. [laughs]

### **Nelson**

What was it about reading Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853) that made you decide to deal with this subject in the form of a feature film?

### **McQueen**

What happened was kind of miraculous. Before I had read the book, I'd had an idea for a film about a free man from the north who gets kidnapped and drawn into slavery. We in the audience would follow [the character] through this kind of maze as he tries to get back home. I began working with [screenwriter] John Ridley. At some point, my wife said, "Why don't you look into true accounts of slavery?" So we did our research. My wife found *Twelve Years a Slave*, which read like a finished script. It's amazing. I'd had an idea and then found that idea fully formed [in Northup's book].

### **Nelson**

Are you excited about what the great success of *12 Years* could do for your career in terms of...

### **McQueen**

No.

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

### Nelson

...giving you greater license to experiment? The reason I ask is that you're an experimental filmmaker who's also a commercial one.

### McQueen

What I'm excited about is the possibility that the book could be placed on a national curriculum, both here in the United States and in Britain. When I read the book, one of the things that struck me was how similar it is to *The Diary of Anne Frank*. When I read *Twelve Years a Slave*, I thought: This is the Anne Frank diary of America.

### Nelson

Gordon Parks, who spent his late teens in Minnesota, filmed *Twelve Years a Slave* in 1984 as *Solomon Northup's Odyssey*. It screened at the Walker some years ago. Have you seen it?

### McQueen

I haven't seen it. I knew he made it. I wish people had seen [Parks' film] when it aired on PBS in the '80s. No one was interested in it then. More people will see [an adaptation of the book] now, and I'm so pleased.

### Nelson

What do you think are some of the things that have changed since the '80s that allow *12 Years a Slave* to enter a more hospitable climate?

### McQueen

I don't know that the climate is hospitable at all. But people are interested [in the subject matter] now. There has been the Trayvon Martin killing, and this year is the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery and the 50th anniversary of the march on Washington and [Section 4 of] the Voting Rights Act, which was just revoked this year. People are reflecting on who and where they are now, as opposed to where they were in the past. They're wanting to engage with this kind of narrative.

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

### **Nelson**

The film has been very well reviewed in the press, but there are two or three US critics who have argued that it favors, as one of them wrote, the “fastidiously composed image over human emotion.” How do you address that rather curious criticism?

### **McQueen**

I would respond by saying that the most horrific things can happen in the most beautiful places. The fact is that I’m sitting here now, quite privileged, talking to you about my work, and meanwhile there’s someone else out there who’s paying for my privilege—under the same beautiful sky. When you go to Louisiana, you’re in an environment that’s quite remarkable, the plantations and so on. That’s the perversity of the world. In terms of art, it goes back to Goya, the Spanish painter who was creating some of the most horrific images of torture and devastation and war—and yet they’re beautiful paintings. Because he wanted people to look. “Look at this.” It’s about [capturing] the reality of our world, of where we live. It’s more about reality than it is about fiction. And that’s difficult, because reality is perverse.

### **Nelson**

And then the other thing is that, as I was reminded recently, there’s a good deal of beauty in the book.

### **McQueen**

Yes, there is. That’s partly because of how [Northup] writes, but it’s also because of the [beautiful Louisiana] landscape. It’s reality. That’s the haunting thing—and the difficult thing. It’s like when a child asks you, “Why is the world so unfair?” The only answer is that it just is. The world is unfair. That’s reality. So rather than fighting against the reality, you embrace it—which in turn makes it even more horrific.

### **Nelson**

You’ve been traveling a lot recently, talking with all sorts of people about *12 Years a Slave*. What would you say is the most meaningful feedback you’ve been given?

### **McQueen**

What comes to mind is a trip we took to Orlando. I think it was a black journalists’ convention in Orlando; it was the most diverse press [corps] I had come across. No one

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

there had seen the film, only clips of it. A woman stood up during the Q&A and said, “My grandfather was poisoned for teaching kids how to read.” This was the first time this woman had ever spoken about it in public. It was quite moving. She had the courage to stand up and tell us a story, one that parallels Solomon’s attempt to write a letter over 12 years. You could see that the film clips had somehow given her story further validation. That’s what has been most meaningful—the fact that the film has allowed people to stand up and talk about the recent past. I’ve said this before: The work of art can be the starting point for discussion and debate.

### **Nelson**

And that’s what your work has always been about, yes? The attempt to create that kind of starting point?

### **McQueen**

Absolutely. I want to be useful—in whatever way that one can be useful as an artist. People have said I’m controversial as a filmmaker. But I don’t think I am, because slavery is real. It’s huge, but it has been brushed under the carpet, particularly within cinema. It’s fascinating to me that only 20 feature films have been made about American slavery.

### **Nelson**

This partly explains your interest in making such a film—the fact that the subject has been taboo.

### **McQueen**

I don’t think slavery has been taboo at all. It’s actually been very visible and obvious in a way—the elephant in the room. As a filmmaker, you want to make things that have worth. *Hunger* took on the biggest story in Britain of the last quarter-century—10 men dying on hunger strike. *Shame* deals with how pornography makes up the bulk of Internet traffic. So all three of my films are dealing with the elephant in the room. It seems that what’s obvious is “controversial” now—which in a way is good.