

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Steve McQueen, "Steve McQueen Interviews Kanye West", *Interview Magazine*, January 22, 2014

What's there left to say about Kanye West? Certainly, West himself would have plenty to say. After all, he's the guy who, during an NBC telethon to benefit the victims of Hurricane Katrina, proclaimed, off script, that "George Bush doesn't care about black people." He's the guy who stormed the stage at the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards and announced that his good friend Jay-Z's significant other, Beyoncé, should have won the prize just bestowed upon the perpetually in faux-awe Taylor Swift. He's the guy who, in front of the large fabricated-mountain set on his recent "Yeezus" tour, has alternately taken aim at Hedi Slimane, Bernard Arnault, François-Henri Pinault, and Nike; likened himself to Steve Jobs, Walt Disney, and Michelangelo; embarked on a long and winding monologue about Lenny Kravitz (at which Kravitz was present); and asked Google head Eric Schmidt to invest in his design firm Donda (named after West's late mother)—all while still retaining the level-eyed insight to hold Le Corbusier and Q-Tip as inhabitants of similarly lofty creative planes.

A lot of it, of course, is just old-fashioned "I'm the Alpha with no Omega" hip-hop theater. But some of it seems to emanate from some deeper, less performative place for West. Let's not forget that before he was a pop-star polymath, he was an in-demand producer whose aspirations to become a rapper in his own right were thoroughly and consistently dismissed by the very people who were profiting from his skills as a songwriter and beat-maker. He's also the guy who, after a near-fatal car crash in 2002, turned the experience into a song called "Through the Wire," which he rapped while still recovering from the accident, audibly struggling to spit out rhymes with his jaw wired shut. And he's the guy who, over the last decade, has turned out six creatively diverse, distinctively classic solo albums filled with almost as many left turns as hits, from the earnest grit of 2004's *The College Dropout* ("Through the Wire," "Jesus Walks") to the lush musicality of 2005's *Late Registration* ("Touch the Sky," "Gold Digger"), from the anthemic grandeur of 2007's *Graduation* ("Stronger," "Good Life," "Can't Tell Me Nothing") to the auto-tuned poetry of 2008's *808s & Heartbreak* ("Love Lockdown," "Heartless"), the brilliantly realized rushes of bombast and vulnerability on 2010's *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* ("Runaway," "Power," "All of the Lights"), and the lean, industrial future-soul of his latest album, *Yeezus* ("Black Skinhead," "Blood on the Leaves," "Bound 2"). Over the course of that sustained creative run—an almost unprecedented one in the world of urban music, which thrives off constant novelty—West has perhaps done more than any other hip-hop artist to bring the bold experimentation and cathartic emotional energy of rock 'n' roll to rap. Along the way, there have also been, amongst myriad other endeavors, forays into film (such as the 34-minute extended video for "Runaway" that he directed) and high-end fashion (he showed two seasons in Paris), a record label (G.O.O.D. Music), collaborations with the likes of Riccardo Tisci, Takashi Murakami, and George Condo, and a joint album with Jay-Z (2011's *Watch the Throne*).

You don't have to search far in West's bio for formative moments. The car accident, his mother's sudden death in 2007 following a cosmetic procedure, and the birth this past summer of his daughter, North, with girlfriend (and now fiancée) Kim Kardashian have powerfully punctuated both his life and career over the last 11 years. The influence of his parents, who split when West was a toddler, also looms large. His father, Ray West, was involved with the Black Panthers, and went on to become a photojournalist in Atlanta,

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where Kanye was born, and his mother was an English professor. (Kanye's decision to leave school before graduating, initially a disappointment to Donda, in part supplied the overarching motif of *The College Dropout*.) After his parents divorced, Donda took an academic appointment in Chicago, where Kanye spent most of his childhood and young adulthood. It's also where he first started writing and producing before moving to New York to join Jay-Z and Damon Dash's Roc-A-Fella crew.

Yeezus, West says, marks the beginning of a new period in his life as an artist, though the events of the last year—North's birth, his engagement to Kardashian—would seem to indicate that it marks the beginning of a new period in his life in general. *12 Years a Slave* director Steve McQueen, in the midst of a life-changing year of his own, recently caught up by phone with the 36-year-old West in Los Angeles, where he was camped out briefly between "Yeezus" tour stops. They spoke not long after the unveiling of the oft-discussed video for "Bound 2," which was directed by Nick Knight and features West and a topless Kardashian writhing on the back of a motorcycle against a backdrop of orange-y purple-hued karaoke-video-style landscapes.

STEVE MCQUEEN: It's hard to make beauty. People often try, and more often than not, everything starts to feel sort of cheap or kitsch. But you express yourself in a way that's beautiful. You can sing from the heart and have it connect and translate, which is a huge thing for an artist to be able to do. So my first question is: How do you do that? How do you communicate in that way?

KANYE WEST: I just close my eyes and act like I'm a 3-year-old. [*laughs*] I try to get as close to a childlike level as possible because we were all artists back then. So you just close your eyes and think back to when you were as young as you can remember and had the least barriers to your creativity.

MCQUEEN: Let's go deep very quickly then: Talk to me about who you were and who you've become—both before and after your accident, the car crash. Who are those two people, Kanye before and Kanye after? Are they different people? Was there a seismic change in who you were after you nearly lost your life?

WEST: I think I started to approach time in a different way after the accident. Before I was more willing to give my time to people and things that I wasn't as interested in because somehow I allowed myself to be brainwashed into being forced to work with other people or on other projects that I had no interest in. So simply, the accident gave me the opportunity to do what I really wanted to do. I was a music producer, and everyone was telling me that I had no business becoming a rapper, so it gave me the opportunity to tell everyone, "Hey, I need some time to recover." But during that recovery period, I just spent all my time honing my craft and making *The College Dropout*. Without that period, there would have been so many phone calls and so many people putting pressure on me from every direction—so many people I somehow owed something to—and I would have never had the time to do what I wanted to.

MCQUEEN: So basically, it allowed you to focus, and you realized at a certain point that it was now or never—and that you had to do it now.

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

WEST: Yes. It gave me perspective on life—that it was really now or 100 percent never. I think that people don't make the most of their lives. So, you know, for me, right now it seems like it's the beginning of me rattling the cage, of making some people nervous. And people are strategically trying to do things to mute my voice in some way or make me look like I'm a lunatic or pinpoint the inaccuracies in my grammar to somehow take away from the overall message of what I'm saying ...

MCQUEEN: Well, unfortunately, that is indicative of what a lot of black performers and leaders have had to go through. People will often try to undermine them in a way to take away their power. You know, when I saw you perform, I was like, "This guy is gonna die on stage." When I saw you play, it felt like that—like it could be the last performance that you give. There's an incredible intensity to your performances.

WEST: As my grandfather would say, "Life is a performance." I'm giving all that I have in this life. I'm opening up my notebook and I'm saying everything in there out loud. A lot of people are very sacred with their ideas, and there is something to protecting yourself in that way, but there's also something to idea sharing, or being the person who makes the mistake in public so people can study that.