

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Vanessa Thorpe, 'Steve McQueen paves way for artists to break the boundaries', *The Observer*, March 8, 2014

The Oscar-winning director of 12 Years a Slave has pushed back the boundaries of film because of the fearlessness that comes with a background in art



Steve McQueen with his Oscar after winning best picture award for *12 Years a Slave*. Photograph: Xinhua/Landov /Barcroft Media

When the director Steve McQueen was an art student learning basic film-making skills at Goldsmiths College, London, he joked he was already aiming for the time when his name would eclipse that of his glamorous namesake, star of *The Great Escape* and *Bullitt*. "One day," he told his collaborator, Professor Will Brooker, "when people talk about Steve McQueen, I am going to be the first person they think of."

Now, with an Oscar for his film *12 Years a Slave*, the transition from Turner prizewinning artist to celebrated director has been made in style. It is a path to cinematography also taken by the British artist Sam Taylor-Wood, nominated for a Turner prize in 1998 and now editing her high-profile film of the erotic bestseller *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

Next month will see a further reminder of the link between the film industry and the rarefied contemporary art world, a link that has existed since the Lumière brothers first projected images on to a screen. Julian Schnabel, the American artist and film-maker, is to stage his first art exhibition in Britain for 15 years.

"The connection between visual artists and film might seem obvious, and Schnabel is successful in both, but it is amazing how many good artists there are who have not made good films," said Tim Marlow, who was appointed head of exhibitions at the Royal Academy of Arts last week.

Back in the 1920s Jean Cocteau, the toast of bohemian Paris, put away his paintbrush and typewriter in favour of the motion camera, creating surrealist classics of the cinema such as *La Belle et la Bête*, while his compatriot Jean Renoir, son of the painter Auguste-Pierre, made ceramic pots long before he made his film *La Grande Illusion* in 1937. Since then many influential directors, including the late Japanese master Akira Kurosawa, have started out as painters or sculptors.

But does an artist really have to choose? Is it possible to keep a reputation going in both fields? Schnabel certainly thinks it is. Before his show, at the Dairy Art Centre in London, he says he still

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regards himself as "primarily an artist", despite the critical success of his films *Basquiat*, *Before Night Falls* and *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*.

McQueen could find such a trick hard to pull off. Last month he quietly withdrew his name from consideration for the \$100,000 2014 Hugo Boss prize, administered by New York's Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, due to the demands of promoting *12 Years a Slave* in Los Angeles. He had been unable, it was announced, to fulfil the requirements of making a large contribution to the prize show catalogue.

Now it looks as if McQueen, who lives in Amsterdam, will have little time for fine art. Although he has dropped his planned biopic of the musician Fela Kuti, he is developing major television series for both the BBC and the American network HBO. The HBO show is to tell the story of a young African-American man who enters New York high society, while the BBC has commissioned a new drama about the lives of black Britons.

Each of these TV projects will reach a larger audience than the video installations that first made McQueen's name. In his 1993 black and white silent film, *Bear*, two naked men exchange meaningful glances in the gloom, while in *Deadpan*, a work shown in his winning 1999 Turner prize show, he restaged a Buster Keaton stunt in which the film-set facade of houses collapses around an unscathed lone figure.

McQueen has said he sees no division between his work in cinema and his fine art. It is all part of what he wants to do creatively, he argues. And if anyone can straddle these two worlds then it is McQueen, according to Gregor Muir, executive director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts, in London. "He is an extraordinary man," said Muir. "He was not just an artist who became a film director, he was one of the best artists of his generation. He has surprised us throughout his career."

To underline McQueen's value, four days ago a leading Dutch museum acquired two of his artworks. The pieces – a lightbox containing a photograph of a boy on a beach and footage of a dead horse lying in a meadow – will go on display in December at the Stedelijk in Amsterdam, a museum that already owns *7th Nov*, his 2001 short film recounting the events of a fatal accident. Commenting on the purchase of these works, the BBC's arts editor Will Gompertz saw a false distinction between art and showbiz that assumes that the art world represents "a refined elite above the vulgarities of consumer society", while, in fact, "it is just as intoxicated by the razzledazzle of celebrity culture as the readers of *Grazia*. Fame in the art world has the same effect as fame in the rest of society: it raises the value of an individual's stock."

Muir, who evangelised about the importance of video art when he worked at the Lux Gallery in east London and then at the Tate before he ran the ICA, thinks there is another false distinction at work. "We shouldn't assume that fine art is always going to be less popular or entertaining than a commercially made film," he said, citing the example of Christian Marclay's acclaimed 24-hour montage, *The Clock*.

"In the early 1990s artists began to explore film because suddenly they had access to camcorders and digital film-making. They could deconstruct film as never before, whereas in the past artists had to form co-operatives to make videos together."

Muir points out the ICA's role at that moment. In 1999 the institute was the venue for McQueen's first big solo show, although some of his work had been shown by a London dealer. Tracey Emin was one of the first to jump into film with her short biographical pieces. "Tracey received a lot of support for her early films, both in the world of art and of film," recalls Muir. "Some of those early films were truly touching vignettes."

But it was McQueen and Taylor-Wood, now known as Sam Taylor-Johnson following her marriage to actor Aaron Johnson, and acclaimed for her debut feature *Nowhere Boy*, who were to

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head for the big screen. "Sam saw a path for herself and she has taken it. But Steve and Douglas Gordon, the artist who made a film about the French footballer Zinedine Zidane, were both influenced by the artists Bill Nauman and Bill Viola and wanted to expand on their ideas. It was clear they wanted to test the way in which narrative film could exist as an art form. They had quite a different route from Schnabel, who just suddenly surprised us with his rare talent in film." First to spot McQueen's thirst for cinema may have been Will Brooker, who worked alongside the artist at Goldsmiths and who is now a Kingston University professor of film and cultural studies. "McQueen uses a sustained long take as a motif in his work – he won't cut away and is committed to shooting difficult and sometimes unpleasant scenes, which ties in with my sense of him from 20 years ago," Brooker said. "He's brought a fine art sensibility to cinema and film is the tool for his art."

For Muir, the key consideration is the fearlessness the right artist can bring to cinema: "This is the route, we should remember, that gave us not only the first black director to win the best film Oscar, but also the first woman to win an Oscar. Kathryn Bigelow, who won in 2009 for *The Hurt Locker*, was a painter and conceptual artist before she made *Strange Days* and *Point Break* with Keanu Reeves. She was one of the first artists to cross over into narrative film. Both these artists have pushed things in film because that is what artists do."

Muir also has a claim to have predicted the influence of video artists on the film industry. In an article for *Arena* in the 1990s he suggested some stars of the art world might go on to make the big films of the future. "At least I don't need to eat my hat on that one," he said.

• This article was amended on 10 March 2014. An earlier version said that Professor Will Brooker was Steve McQueen's tutor at Goldsmiths. They were fellow students and worked alongside each other.

CREATIVE CROSSOVER

STEVE McQUEEN

Born London, 1969.

Came to fame In 1999 McQueen received the Turner prize and in 2006, after working as a war artist in Iraq, he produced *Queen and Country*, portraits of dead British soldiers shown as a sheet of stamps.

Cinematic highlights *Hunger*, about the 1981 IRA strike and starring Michael Fassbender, won the debut directing prize at Cannes in 2008. His second major release was *Shame* in 2011. This year he won the best picture Oscar for *12 Years A Slave*, becoming the first black director to win.

Artist or director? McQueen represented Britain at the 2009 Venice Biennale and believes films belong to art practice: "You've got to go beyond the breaking point and then you catch it."

SAM TAYLOR-WOOD (NOW SAM TAYLOR-JOHNSON)

Born Samantha Taylor, Croydon, 1967.

Came to fame Nominated for the Turner prize in 1998. In 2002, she filmed David Beckham sleeping for the National Portrait Gallery and is also known for her work *Crying Men*, weeping images of Hollywood stars including Robin Williams, Sean Penn and Paul Newman.

Cinematic highlights Her 2008 film *Love You More* and, in the same year, her John Lennon biopic *Nowhere Boy*.

Artist or director? Concentrating on film; shooting on *Fifty Shades of Grey* completed last month.

JULIAN SCHNABEL

Born Brooklyn, New York, 1951.

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Came to fame His first solo show in 1979 won him recognition in the art world. After the 1980 Venice Biennale, he was seen as a key member of the neo-expressionist movement, receiving global attention for his plate paintings, made with broken ceramic plates.

Cinematic highlights *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* in 2007 was nominated for four Academy Awards. A festival favourite, he won best director at Cannes, a Golden Globe, a Bafta and two nominations for the Golden Lion at Venice.

Artist or director? Schnabel says he is primarily a fine artist and is to exhibit again in London next month.

<http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2014/mar/08/steve-mcqueen-artist-big-screen-oscar-12-years-a-slave>