

Adrian Searle, 'From a labyrinth of film emerges McQueen's mastery of everything', *The Guardian*, March 22, 2013

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From a labyrinth of film emerges McQueen's mastery of everything

Retrospective confirms Turner prize winner is still revelling in complication

Adrian Searle

The rooms are full of people, on-screen and off, behind the camera and in front. Here is the artist, naked, looming in the dark, wrestling with another man. Now we see him on a hotel bed. Then a house falls around him and he stands blinking in the dust. Rolling a metal drum round the streets of Manhattan, you can catch a glimpse of him in shop windows as he passes. Now invisible, he thrashes through the undergrowth in an Amsterdam park at night.

"Sometimes I want to do things that I shouldn't, and I do them," Steve McQueen recently told me. Our conversation appears in the catalogue to his mid-career survey show at the Schaulager in Basel, Switzerland, which opened last weekend but which will not be travelling to Britain. Seeing so much of the British artist's work together - more than 20 film installations, as well as other works - is both daunting and immensely rewarding.

In conversation, McQueen has the unnerving capacity to cut through the bullshit, recontextualising his work as he goes, and seeing it in new ways. He is a very reactive artist.

Rather than having long-term strategies, his art is borne of reactions. Turner prize winner, war artist and director of the prize-winning films *Hunger* and *Shame*, McQueen is currently in the final stages of a big-budget Hollywood movie, *Twelve Years a Slave*, starring

Brad Pitt, Michael Fassbender and Quvenzhané Wallis. Looking at his work is a complex business.

The Basel exhibition fills two floors with what the organisers describe as a "city of cinemas". But this is no multiplex; it is a space of confrontations.

The noise of a helicopter fills the first room. Its juddering din stops you in your tracks, an almost physical assault that crowds out thought. The helicopter is an eye, rising and turning about the Statue of Liberty.

You can see tiny people staring out from the arches in the crown on the statue's head. The noise dies away, and I have the sudden illusion that the focus is clearer, the statue more present in the silence.

For McQueen, film is about more than the visible. Is this the reason he filmed Charlotte Rampling's eye, in close-up, his finger prodding around it with a delicacy that's almost shockingly intrusive? There are moments throughout that hinge on violence and intimacy, brutality and tenderness, bare animal facts. Often, there is a sense of disclosure - and you never forget that you are seeing through the camera's dispassionate eye. Sometimes I feel like a voyeur. At one point in the early film *Five Easy Pieces*, McQueen urinates and spits at the lens. He knows we are there.

The city of cinemas is really a labyrinth. You don't know who or what you'll find in there: men cruising and kissing in Venice's Giardini in the dark. South African miners far underground, digging for gold in deplorable conditions. People armed with nothing more than a spade, who have given up everything to pan for the mineral coltan in Congo, which feeds the mobile phone and laptop industry in the west. A dead

horse, immobile in the waving grass. McQueen's cousin Marcus, talking about how he accidentally shot and killed his own brother, the camera's view fixed on the back of Marcus's static head, as if he himself were laying on the slab.

Moving from colour to black and white, noise to silence, the present to the past and back again, McQueen's exhibition is filled with disjunctions, echoes and difficulties.

But difficulties can also be pleasures. The disjunctions in his work, the surprises and disorientations - references to structuralist film-making, queer cinema and black radical film; nods to Jean Luc Godard, Gillo Pontecorvo, Yasujiro Ozu and Jean Vigo among others; a fascination with the aftermath of empire and colonialism, sexuality and questions of race - have all given us a body of work as rich and complex as any artist's or film-maker's. The works that might be

regarded as mainstream movies continue his work by other means.

A feel for the textures and materiality of the world runs through McQueen's work. I think of the floor-mopping scene in the H-Block prison corridor in *Hunger*, our intense proximity to a couple having sex against a plate-glass window in *Shame*, and the way his super-8 camera delves into a hole left by an unexploded bomb as it buried itself in a building in Basra in *Unexploded*. There is a sense of the larger story, the before and after of each moment, even in his most physical films.

And however concrete his subject, there is always a feeling of ambiguity - that what he describes is open to multiple readings.

McQueen's sense of atmosphere is even embedded in the texture of film itself. The graininess of the footage shot in the underground world in Western Deep heightens the sense of crepuscular light. The fug of skunk and Tricky's asthmatic rasp as he records the song *Girls in Girls* (Tricky), a film shot in a claustrophobic recording studio and projected in an even more claustrophobic cube at Schaulager, all give the sense that you are as much inside McQueen's films as watching them. He messes with our sense of autonomy and distance. He seduces and shoves us away, and compromises our position as spectators.

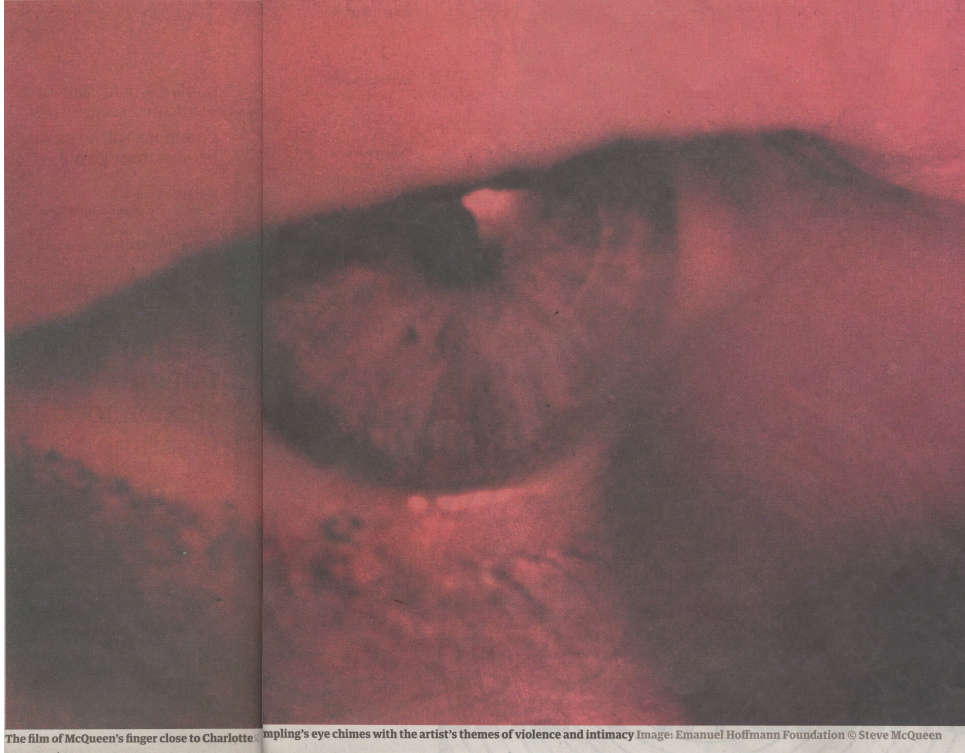
McQueen's career now spans 20 years. There is a gathering feeling that everything he has to say is everywhere, all at once, throughout his work, and that his subject is the irreducible fact of being in the world. The complications themselves are the only story there is, and the telling of it is never done.

Steve McQueen is at the Schaulager, Basel until 1 September.



'He messes with our autonomy. He seduces us and shoves us away'

THOMAS DANE GALLERY



The film of McQueen's finger close to Charlotte's eye chimes with the artist's themes of violence and intimacy Image: Emanuel Hoffmann Foundation © Steve McQueen