Eric Magnuson, ‘Steve McQueen gets the retrospective he never wanted’, The Art Newspaper, October 2012

Steve McQueen gets the retrospective he never wanted

The Art Institute of Chicago looks back at the Turner Prize-winning artist’s films

FILM

Chicago. Three years ago, the British artist and filmmaker Steve McQueen did not want to talk about his postwork. "I’m not interested in retrospectives," he said, after garnering acclaim for his short films ‘Bear’ and ‘Endless’ in the 1990s, but before gaining wider attention for feature films, such as ‘Hunger’, 2008. "I always want to live more," he said. Yet here he is, participating in what the Art Institute of Chicago calls the first major survey of his work.

Considering McQueen’s reversal, the institute’s curator of contemporary art, James Smeal, says, "I think it’s difficult for any artist to confront his past when he is trying to engage the present and move forward." McQueen most recently directed ‘Shane’, 2011, starring Michael Fassbender as a sex addict. "But my sense of working with him on that", Smeal says, "is that he wanted to take an opportunity to look at the work and reassess his commitment to gallery-based presentations and think about what it means to present [his work] in a museum or commercial gallery, as opposed to a cinema."

The institute, which owns more pieces by McQueen than any other US museum, is presenting 13 of the artist’s works in a show organized with Basel’s Schaulager in what Smeal sees as "a generous design, mostly of Steve’s own making." One half of the installation is very open. Three of his early silent pieces — such as ‘Bear’, 1993, ‘Five Easy Pieces’, 1995, and ‘Just Above My Head’, 1996 — are to be projected onto a three-sided screen, allowing viewers to move around and experience them together.

The second half is being presented under more controlled circumstances with specific lighting and sound requirements to evoke the surroundings of a South African goldmine in ‘Western Deep’, 2003, and the dark humour of a Butler Kaman-inspired falling house in ‘Deadpan’, 1997. Showing for the first time is the eight-hour-long work ‘120 Candles’, which consists of actors reading the classified FBI surveillance file of the activist and civil rights activist Paul Robeson, who was blacklisted during the Communist witch hunts in the 1940s and 50s.

"We live in a world that’s overly saturated by moving images," Smeal says. "And I think that the core of Steve’s practice is to slow that down to understand how we can perceive beauty and unlock poetic meanings while also thinking about art history."

He’s able to spin from a very abstract approach to one rich with content. Explaining how McQueen does this across commercial and non-commercial work, Smeal points to the short film ‘Belfast’, 2006, in which the camera spins around the Statue of Liberty until it feels as if McQueen had lifted it from its pedestal. He compares it with a scene in ‘Shane’ in which Gary Mccall’s character sings ‘New York, New York’ as a blues song. "Steve used the camera to re-enact these things that we are so loaded with meaning," he says. "It’s how McQueen ‘builds bridges between the two sides of his practice’."

The show, organized by the collections Donna and Howard Stone, travels to the Schaulager in 2013.

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