

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Catherine Wagley, 'Steve McQueen's *Drumroll* at MOCA Shows Why He Became a Successful Mainstream Filmmaker', LA Weekly, July 18, 2014



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK / PARIS, AND THOMAS DANE GALLERY, LONDON

To create *Drumroll* in 1998, Steve McQueen attached three cameras to an oil drum and rolled it through Manhattan.

The most impressive thing about *Drumroll* by Steve McQueen, the video artist who became an Oscar-winning director with *12 Years a Slave*, is the way in which it gives an almost omniscient view of a big city without making that city seem any less dense and unwieldy than it is.

Drumroll won McQueen the prestigious Turner Prize from London's Tate Gallery.

The video installation, on view in MOCA's Pacific Design Center location, shows three views of a New York street at once: straight ahead and both sides. When he made this work in 1998, McQueen achieved this effect by cutting three holes into an empty oil drum, one on each end and one in the middle, attaching three cameras to the inside of the drum so that they aligned with the holes, and then rolling that barrel up and down 56th, 57th and 58th streets in Manhattan (you hear him say "sorry" and "excuse me" throughout, and occasionally glimpse his jeans and red shirt). The three resulting views, shown in a row and projected against a black wall, spin in perfect unison.

In 2004, MOCA partially acquired the installation, which it co-owns with trustee Blake Byrne, and the museum showed it once in 2005. Part of the reason it chose to show *Drumroll* again now is the attention focused on McQueen of late.

Drumroll, an experimental, non-narrative project, does have a lot to offer viewers who know the artist mostly because of his movies. It also helps to explain the sensibility that allows McQueen to succeed in both museum and moviegoing worlds when so many other artists don't.

McQueen is a methodical artist who doesn't like compromise. When he was asked, during a press conference at the 2013 Toronto International Film Festival, why *12 Years a Slave*, his film about a

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free man kidnapped in New York and sold into slavery in Georgia, didn't debut at the Venice Film Festival as planned, he responded with some annoyance. "It takes a little time to get it right," he said.

Compared with other artists working in video and film, he hasn't actually made that much work, and if you follow what he did before he started making award-winning movies with well-known actors (Michael Fassbender, Carey Mulligan, Brad Pitt) in 2008, it's tempting to read his early work as a slow build to the costlier, big-screen projects.

In 1993 he made *Bear*, in which he wears no clothes and circles and then sometimes wrestles another naked man. It's black-and-white and has no sound.

His 1997 film *Deadpan*, in which a house collapses around him, has no sound either.

Drumroll is the first work he did using multiple projections, sound and color. It won him the prestigious Turner Prize from London's Tate Gallery.

He later went to Iraq as an official war artist, and made a project in which he put dead British soldiers' faces on stamps, made a video about ore production and made a video from a helicopter, in which the camera zooms in on the Statue of Liberty's flaws. He upped the ante each time, pushing himself a little further and presumably teaching himself what he needed to know to become the kind of artist-director who could shift camera angles so dramatically but seamlessly, as in *12 Years*, or frame a shot so tightly that it's hard to imagine a world exists outside of it, as he does so well in *Shame*, his stark 2011 film about a sex addict and his sister.

In MOCA PDC's upstairs gallery, curator Bennett Simpson oversaw the building of four black walls, one for the videos to play against and three to box in the artwork and its viewers. There are no seats, which means viewers are more likely to wander around while watching, trying out different angles and views. If you stay the whole 22 minutes, you'll see scenery repeat — alleyways, revolving doors, vans with phone numbers on the side — as McQueen rolls his oil drum back along a route he's past earlier.

It's extremely hard to keep track of the route, because of the spinning and the fact that, when McQueen turns, landmarks previously on the right turn up again on the left. But the rhythmic synchronization of the three projections as they slow down, speed up or stop for a second gives you enough of a sense of purpose and momentum that you might be more comfortable staying than you would in a more intentionally strange video artwork by, say, monotony-obsessed Andy Warhol or flamboyant Jack Smith.

Many artists who established themselves in the world of white-walled galleries have made feature films. Some who did so successfully, such as Julian Schnabel (*The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*),

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were less successful as artists and seemed to find their niche in film (Schnabel's broken-plate paintings have been targeted as evidence of 1980s excess).

Cindy Sherman, deservedly adored for the work she's done in photography, made films that were too slasherlike to catch on in a big way, even though her *Office Killer* had relatively well-known cast members including Molly Ringwald.

Japanese artist Takashi Murakami recently told *L.A. Weekly* that he doesn't think people in the art world understand why he wanted to make his first feature-length children's film, *Jellyfish Eyes*, whereas, he pointed out, everyone understands why McQueen had to make a mainstream film dealing with the harsh history of slavery: McQueen, a serious artist, was dealing with a serious issue clearly deserving of widespread attention.

Like his mainstream films, McQueen's *Drumroll* is the serious effort of someone who has become good at taking complicated, chaotic subjects — in this case, the experience of moving through a gritty, bustling city, which is definitely not as dark as the subject of *12 Years* but still knotty — and framing them so that grappling with them becomes more manageable. This approach makes *Drumroll* a great entry point into video art, but hopefully one that will whet novice viewers' appetites for something a little stranger. There's a lot to be said for unmanaged chaos, too.

STEVE MCQUEEN: DRUMROLL | MOCA Pacific Design Center, 8687 Melrose Ave., W. Hlywd. | Through Sept. 21 | moca.org

<http://www.laweekly.com/2014-07-10/artbooks/steve-mcqueens-drumroll-at-moca-shows-why-he-became-a-successful-mainstream-filmmaker/>