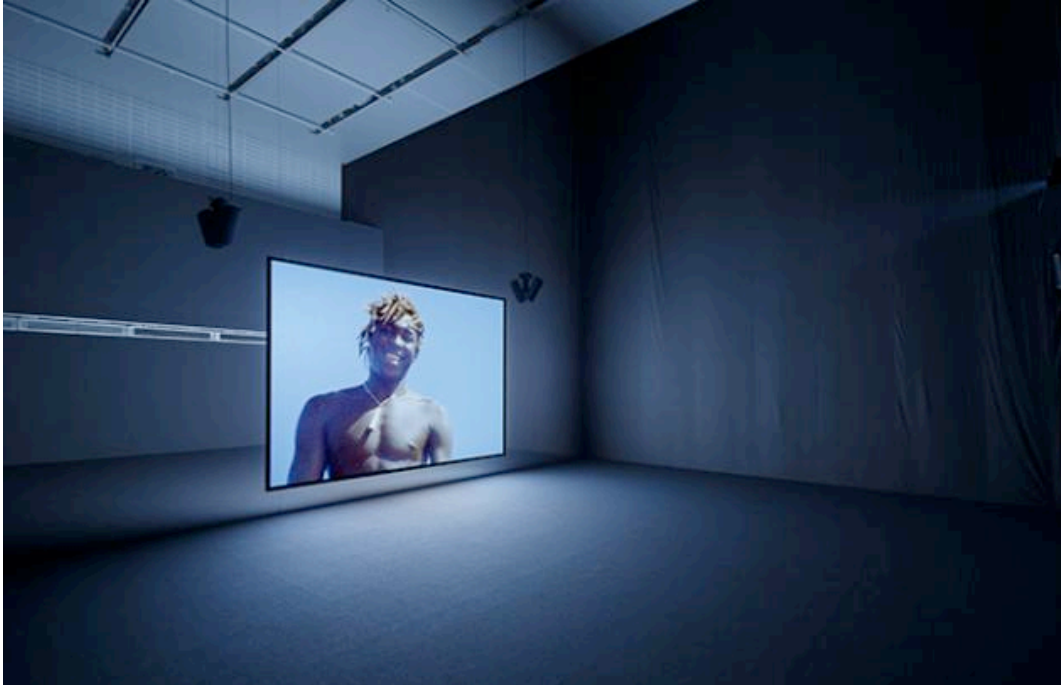


THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Paul Black, 'Steve McQueen At Thomas Dane - With Clarity And Heartbreak',
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The Thomas Dane Gallery presents a poignant and heartbreaking film by acclaimed artist and film-maker Steve McQueen. 'Ashes' is a two-part exhibition; the darkened gallery at 3 Duke Street, is filled with McQueen's short film; the on-screen image of a young black man sitting on the prow of a small boat, basking in the glory of the sun, while at 11 Duke Street a black marble column stands resplendent, but broken.

The artist's film seems quite straightforward; the work belies the current fashion for long and complex video; and in that alone it is a breath of fresh air. In the work a young black man sits on the prow of a small boat rocking on the ocean, the sun beats down as the camera looks up at him. The short super-8 film captures his youth, and vitality, as the Caribbean swell causes him to shift in the frame. The sun glints, and the spectacle is indeed serene. The young man falls into the water, and climbs out - returning to lounging on the prow and posing for his film-maker. I've climbed through the London Underground, and sheets of rain to view McQueen's work; and the Caribbean setting, the relaxed young man in his element, and the blue skies seem very inviting.

The footage lay forgotten for sometime; having originally been shot by Dutch cinematographer Robby Müller for McQueen's 2002 film 'Carib's Leap'. The artist and film-maker had forgotten about the short length of super-8 footage; which was taken in Grenada. The film 'Carib's Leap' focuses on everyday Grenadian life, and the plight of the island's primary population; that being the descendants of African slaves. McQueen also has a strong link to the location as the artist's parents were born there.

Now we come to the film's soundtrack. McQueen returned to the Grenada last year; and asked after the boy in the film. His name was Ashes. He subsequently recorded the story told to him by two locals. This short dialogue was placed over the footage that was re-discovered by the film-maker.

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Over the images of Ashes; reclining on his deck - grinning into camera - innocently enjoying his native seas aboard his boat; are the two local voices recounting a fateful story. The story of Ashes. A short tale.

Their friend Ashes, had returned to shore and discovered a stash of drugs on a beach. He decided to take a risk, he thought it was finally his lucky day. Finally he thought, he'd be rich. But not long after the sea-fairer's find, 'some guys' came looking for him.

"They shot him in the hand for him to let go of what he was holding. And when they shoot him in the hand, he let go. But he tried to run and then they shoot him in the back and when he fell one of them guys went over to him and shoot him up around his belly and his legs and thing. And that was about it."

McQueen's film is uncomplicated, requiring no 'bells or whistles', no 'cleverness' on the part of the artist and film-maker. It is a beautiful piece of super-8 film expressing the innocent vitality of youth. But as the soundtrack dialogue builds - the tranquillity and paradise falls away - trampled under foot by the real world, and replaced with that cold feeling in the pit of your stomach; a sense of shock and unease as the terrible news of the fate of this happy soul is delivered to us.

The work speaks of a young and vital life cut horribly short - and to the skill of the artist in delivering this truth to the viewer so very eloquently. A boy loving his life. A boy who is murdered.

A broken column stands in the gallery at No. 11 Duke Street; reminiscent of the broken columns that grace Victorian cemeteries. But rather than being carved from white marble; the work is cut from black Zimbabwean granite and polished to a high sheen. It stands on a temporary wooden pallet, not the permanent stone plinth of a mausoleum. The work can be shipped from the gallery as if monument to those transported slaves from McQueen's history - and a memorial to Ashes - a loaded wooden pallet to sink forever beneath the waves.

The works are both elegant in their directness, proving that sometimes the greatest art can be very simple - and quite simply gut-wrenchingly sad. When I left the gallery - and returned to climbing through those sheets of rain - it seemed quite fitting.

Steve McQueen: Ashes - at Thomas Dane Gallery - until 15 November

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