
Steve McQueen

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Art, Contemporary art ★★★★★

After his successful transition into Hollywood director, McQueen puts his art hat back on with new work that mines intimacy and violence.

Forget about '12 Years a Slave', forget about Steve McQueen's Oscar win. You have to come to 'Ashes', his latest film, with fresh eyes, because it really is a quite different sort of work from his more mainstream, cinematic releases. Apparently more simple and open-ended, it demands more of you as a viewer.
'Ashes' is a short piece, clocking in at just over ten minutes. And for all of it, the camera stays trained on one subject: a young Grenadian man on the prow of a fishing boat at sea, initially sitting with his back to you but later standing, smiling, larking about. The Super 8 film captures an atmosphere of ease and Caribbean sunniness: the powerfully blue sky; the bright orange prow; a verdant island on the horizon, appearing to roll and pitch with the motion of the boat. Meanwhile, voiceovers by two of the man’s friends briefly describe his life. They talk about how they knew him from childhood, how they fished and dived together, and how his chance discovery of a drugs cache on a beach set off events that culminated in his brutal murder.

The piece thus functions as an elegy – both for the man in the film, whose nickname was ‘Ashes’, and perhaps for other poverty-stricken, young black men, for their burnt and damaged futures. Because, although Ashes was a real person, in McQueen's piece you get a palpable sense of him slipping precariously towards abstraction, becoming a cipher for something larger than himself. The film ends with the boat turning towards the sun, his body shimmering into silhouette, transformed into a sort of archetype.

This process of abstraction continues in the second gallery, up the road, where McQueen has installed a sculpture of a classical column, black and broken. Here, unfortunately, the symbolism feels forced, as opposed to the languid, exquisite ambiguities of McQueen's moving images.

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