

Mark Lawson, 'Tracey Emin and Steve McQueen: still paid-up members of the awkward art squad', *The New Statesman*, Oct. 23, 2014

There was a time when Tracey Emin threatened to be the Susan Boyle of the 1999 Turner Prize: the runner-up who becomes more famous than the winner. But, while the Scottish singer has continued to overshadow Diversity, the street dancers who beat her on *Britain's Got Talent*, Emin's nemesis, Steve McQueen, scored a later equaliser by adding to his Turner an Oscar for the film *12 Years a Slave*.

McQueen has become a big name to people who have never seen his art, just as Emin's notoriety (from TV and party appearances and outspoken comments) has conferred a visibility far beyond her work. This past week, the *Daily Mail* made the doubly perverse move of granting its theatre critic two pages to warn readers that they absolutely must not see her latest exhibition.

"The Last Great Adventure is You" (at White Cube until 16 November) coincides with McQueen's show "Ashes" (Thomas Dane Gallery, until 15 November) and offers the opportunity to judge how their art is bearing up under the weight of extra-artistic visibility.

In interviews, Emin has accepted that she will for ever be associated with *My Bed*, on which love had been unmade, the career-shaping part of her Turner entry. And the pieces at White Cube have the feel of a sequel. While that installation hinted at the life of an absent figure through the detritus of sex, these recent gouaches and sculptures depict the figure and imply the dirty laundry.

Emphasising the continuity, Emin, in one sequence, works again with cotton sheets in such pieces as *You Never Said Goodbye*, in which the outline that has recurred in her work – a darkly doodled woman, threatened with varieties of melting – is created by embroidery on calico.

Except for a few images in which the shadow of another person hovers behind the scribbled figure, all the pieces feature a naked female alone – an isolation highlighted

by titles such as *More Solitude*, *Being Without You* and *Alone Is OK* – in poses that are sometimes possibly post-coital but more often look mid-masturbatory.

Apparently sketching the narrative of a failed relationship, the exhibition seems to have a metaphorical subtext of a woman losing her head. The gouaches show a featureless face, which, in the calico portraits, has become obscured by a swirl of dark hair matching the pubic thatch, until, in the bronze sculptures such as *Every Part of Me Feels You*, the woman is just a torso with spread legs. Recklessly candid, Emin, like Lucian Freud – but unlike David Hockney and Grayson Perry – seems at no risk of

that we may be watching a victim of tragic violence. The other work, *Broken Column*, consists of two black-coloured sculptures, shaped like a squashed lipstick, which can be read as a reference to the suppression of racial identity and history.

McQueen explored the same territory more exhaustively and accessibly in *12 Years a Slave* and – though he likes to refuse any distinction between his work in art galleries and in cinemas – this small-scale show is probably for fans only.

I suspect that if the Turner Prize clash were rerun now, Mad Tracey might beat Hollywood Steve.

Labour intensive

Although roughly three dozen plays survive that can be respectably attributed to Shakespeare, there is always a hunger for more. The RSC has just opened at Stratford-upon-Avon (playing until 14 March 2015) the unfamiliar *Love's Labour's Won*. Which turns out to be *Much Ado About Nothing*, given the name of a lost work in order to explore the artistic director Greg Doran's theory that the love-hate story of Beatrice and Benedick may at one point have been staged as a soundalike companion to *Love's Labour's Lost*.

Christopher Luscombe's new production presents both plays, as a double bill. Added to this titular twinning is a conceit that the first play takes place in an English country house in 1914 and the second in 1918: *Lost's* Berowne is a soldier going off to war, and *Won's* Benedick has come back from the front. The pairing highlights similarities between these plays that involve people pledging to live without love. Visually handsome and viscerally acted (Michelle Terry and Edward Bennett are both main squabbling couples) the production is more of a win than a loss, but the clunkingly unfunny Shakespearean light relief – Dull the constable in *Lost*, the constable Dogberry in *Won* – is a double labour. ●



Paradise lost: Steve McQueen's Ashes (2014)

being awarded the neutering media label of "national treasure".

Despite his other life in a tuxedo at the Academy Awards, Steve McQueen also seems to retain his membership of the artistic awkward squad. It must be his fame that is bringing impressively heavy footfall to Duke Street in St James's, but his two new pieces show that, even after the Oscar, you can't take the Turner out of the boy.

Ashes, a looped video, starts with an apparently paradisiacal image of a young man standing on the stern of a white boat on a sunlit blue Caribbean sea, before the idyll is undercut by an audio recording suggesting

<http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2014/10/tracey-emin-and-steven-mcqueen-still-paid-members-awkward-art-squad>