Alastair Sooke, ‘McQueen returns with an elegiac anthem to doomed youth’, The Daily Telegraph, October 16, 2014

EXHIBITION
STEVE McQUEEN: ASHES
THOMAS DANE GALLERY, SW1

Earlier this year, the British artist and filmmaker Steve McQueen made history as the first black director to win an Academy Award for Best Picture, for his third feature film 12 Years a Slave. An adaptation of a 19th-century memoir by a free-born man who was kidnapped and sold into slavery, it was a difficult watch, full of unsparing scenes recording cruel and vicious punishments. Yet nobody could doubt McQueen’s courage in tackling such a shameful subject. There was little chance McQueen would become a creature of Hollywood – something his latest venture confirms. Having started out as a visual artist (he won the Turner Prize in 1999), he returns to those roots with a small but perfectly formed exhibition at the Thomas Dane Gallery.

One of the fascinating things about McQueen is that he sees continuity between feature films and fine art. Speaking recently on Radio 4’s Desert Island Discs, he compared film to novels, and fine art to poetry: “It’s the same thing, but saying it in different ways.”

One is narrative and linear, the other abstract and fragmented.”

His latest work, Ashes, a short piece shot on Super 8mm film, has the texture of a visual poem. Its structure is deceptively simple. We are in an orange boat off the coast of the Caribbean island of Grenada. For five minutes, the camera rocks and bobs with the swell, lingering upon a lithe young fisherman called Ashes.

Ashes doesn’t do all that much – he sits on the bow of the boat facing out to sea, or stands grinning into the lens. But he is blessed with relaxed charisma, and radiates the glow of youth – a black equivalent of the beautiful nude athletes commemorated by artists in ancient Greece.

Struck by this happy-go-lucky young man who had a reputation as a daredevil in the ocean, McQueen shot the footage idly while working on another project in 2002. Several years later, he returned to the island and asked after Ashes, only to discover that the fisherman’s luck had run out. In the new film, fragments of the chilling story that McQueen heard are presented in a voiceover delivered by Ashes’ friends.

One day, like a fairytale character coming across a pot of gold, Ashes chanced upon a stash of drugs on the beach. He took it, thinking he would become rich. Before long he was hunted down by gangsters, and murdered in front of his friends, shot in the hands, back, belly and legs. “And that was about it,” one of them explains with poignant understatement, before we watch as Ashes slips overboard into the water, while the ocean crashes in the background.

What was an innocent misstep becomes, retrospectively, a metaphor for untimely death. With hindsight, the grainy footage takes on an elegiac, nostalgic quality, turning the film into a lament. McQueen has constructed a tight, classical threnody, an anthem for doomed youth. Ashes is a version of William Blake’s Songs of Innocence and Experience, conflated in a contemporary idiom.

A second part of the exhibition, called “Broken Column”, reflects McQueen’s desire to locate universal resonance in Ashes’ story. It consists of two pillars sculpted out of Zimbabwean black granite, evoking monumental funerary art.

As the title suggests, Ashes has the sombre tone of a memorial. It is an effective, affecting work of art that commemorates lost youth, yet feels remarkably grown-up. Until Nov 15; 020 7925 2505

Song of Innocence: the film tells a young Grenadan fisherman’s story

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Alastair Sooke