

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

'youth, death and sunshine in steve mcqueen's return to the art world', i-d, October 15, 2014

Still riding the universal acclaim of winning an Oscar, director and artist Steve McQueen returns to his gallery roots with his first short film and London exhibition since 12 Years A Slave. With reworked Super-8 footage of a Caribbean island boy, Ashes is a paean to youth and untimely death.

Artists don't typically win Oscars. But with 12 Years A Slave Steve McQueen blew Hollywood away, taking three academy awards, including Best Picture, and turning cinemas across the US into forums for introspection. Slavery is a subject most had laid to rest and McQueen remembers opposition to the film, but now there are plans to have it, and copies of Solomon Northrup's memoir, available in every US school. Brad Pitt produced it. Madonna invites him to parties. He effectively made Michael Fassbender's career. And yet he'd made just two unflinchingly severe features previously: Hunger on Bobby Sands the IRA hunger strikers at The Maze Prison, and Shame on the joyless void of sex addiction

McQueen is serious and sincere, even moralistic. There's a scene in Hunger, the crux of the film, a verbal shotgun-exchange between IRA man Bobby Sands and the prison's Catholic priest. Sands recalls how as a kid from the Belfast slums on a school trip to the country, he drowned an injured deer to quicken its death. The country boys were too spooked to help. And when he got a hiding from the priests for it, he didn't care because he knew he had done the right thing and won the kids' respect along the way. This sense of self-conviction is the backbone to all McQueen's work. And it's won him art world accolades and award firsts. Turner Prize winner, British representative at the Venice Biennale, OBE capped off with CBE, the first black director to win an Academy Award for Best Picture, and the first British director to win the Camera D'Or at Cannes.

All the while he says he never left art. This, from the man who only came round to calling himself an artist when he was approaching his forties. He just makes things. He doesn't think of commercial film or art as different states of mind, but expressions of the same impulse. If a movie is like a novel, he says, then art is poetry. Poetry's just a more rarefied form - enjoyed by fewer. In the rarefied gallery landscape of St James', between Jermyn Street, private members' clubs and Pall Mall, Ashes is held at the Thomas Dane Gallery (14 October - 15 November 2014). It features two pieces, McQueen's first short film since 12 Years A Slave, and a sculptural installation.

The Ashes Super-8 footage is from 2002 when McQueen was in Grenada, his father's birthplace, making Carib's Leap. He'd met Ashes, a young diver and boatman who had a star like quality, young with the thrill of possibility before him, and McQueen wanted to capture it. A simple story in some ways. Live, unimproved, a beautiful boy, with blond dreads, in sun-bleached shorts, a shell choker around his neck, sits on a boat facing the ocean. All endless blue sky meeting sea, Ashes' back rocking with the waves. Carefree. Until you follow the strands of overlaid narration recorded in 2013 when McQueen returned to the island. Two of Ashes' friends tell his tale in patois, Caribbean cadence over lapping ocean waves: "I know Ashes as a friend. All of us were young, man. We grew up in one neighbourhood. So it's like, we used to live in a ghetto. You understand. All of us dive together, going fishing, diving, you know, everything."

The boy looking out into the horizon, coy, confident, charismatic, cool, belongs to the camera. You get a sense of someone who could be from anyone's group of friends. But he is unlucky, an unremarkable victim of circumstance. Ashes found a cache of drugs hidden in a bay that could solve his money problems. Like a modern pirate treasure story, he was tracked down by its owners, and gunned down in the street. In the last shots Ashes stands poker-straight, super lean, barefoot and steady on the boat's prow as fishermen do. He's japing in the blinding sunshine, loses balance and falls off. Pulling himself up, his smile is a shot of light. "And that was about it," his friends summarise. And so the film loops.

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As a monument to Ashes, Broken Column is only McQueen's second non-lens work in his 20 year career. A block of black Zimbabwean granite sculpted into two classical columns with their tops broken off. One, in miniature on a plinth encased in perspex, matte black with sooty dust. The other, two metres high on a palette with a highly polished sheen. Typical of McQueen, there's no explanation leaving the work open to interpretative possibilities. The specific becomes universal, the literal blends with abstraction. In a moment of candour, in his acceptance speech this year for the W.E.B. Du Bois Medal, McQueen told audiences: "The only doctrine I have as an artist is to not allow the dust of the past to settle."

Leaving the show you can take a poster, the same image of Ashes reversed on each side, looking out to the ocean. His friends' eulogy is printed, letting the story travel, as McQueen says, to enter the bloodstream of the country. Like his Imperial War Museum commission Queen and Country, a series of stamp sheets printed with the images of soldiers killed in Iraq. McQueen tugs on subjects most would sooner forget or ignore and picks at the past and its lack of resolution.

Asked by the FT what he's call himself now, McQueen said: "An artist filmmaker. End of story. I don't really care."

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