Steve McQueen has returned to London with new works. When his new solo exhibition was announced, the art world and media leapt upon the news with voracity. The excitement was palpable, and understandably so, the exhibition is McQueen’s first in London since winning his Oscar. At the night of the private view, the crowds were packed into the cozy spaces of the Thomas Dane Gallery, itching to see and be seen with the new art works.

In true Steve McQueen style, the works were unflinching. The exhibition is spread over the gallery’s two locations in Duke Street. In the first space McQueen presents us with a broken black column, which is formed of Zimbabwean black granite. The column stands in the middle of the room, controlling and dominating the space as an obelisk or monument dominates its environment and provides a focal point for attention.

In the next space, a little further down the road, is the new video work. Entitled Ashes the film is a blend of new and slightly older work. The visual element of the installation was filmed in 2002 and features the eponymous figure, Ashes, on a small boat at sea. The visuals of the film are highly evocative, instead of a steady framed image, the camera moves with the boat and the sea, bobbing up and down, undulating with the waves. The colours of the Super8 film are crisp and create a glorious combination of the orange boat with the blue of the Caribbean sky. Ashes, the only figure in the film, is happy and smiling at the camera and audience, which makes the sound element of the installation even more heartbreaking. Recorded quite recently in Grenada, two of Ashes’ friends describe his death. The audience learns, whilst staring at Ashes’ jubilant face, that Ashes found some drugs on the beach and thought he was going to be rich, but was hunted down, found and mercilessly shot. When they found him, they shot him in the hand so that he would let go of the drugs, when he ran they shot him in back, and then finally in legs and stomach. Ashes died.

The film hits you like a punch in the gut. Ashes, who is so full of life in the film, is dead, killed in a horrific way. Ashes does live on, in some respects, he now becomes a monument. Ashes lives on in the memories of his friends and in McQueen’s installation. New ‘Broken Column’, situated in the previous space, reconstructs a monolith. It is a memorial for Ashes, it is a memorial for all those who lost their lives prematurely and it is a memorial for those whose lives have been wasted.

http://www.hungertv.com/feature/steve-mcqueen-ashes/