
I hadn’t intended to write something about the exhibition I went to on my lunch break today but feel obliged to. Steve McQueen’s film Ashes, on display at Thomas Dane Gallery, moved me you see. The film paints a picture, a portrait really, of a young Grenadian man, Ashes, who McQueen met by chance when visiting Grenada. Subsequent to meeting, the pair went on a boating trip together, where McQueen filmed Ashes – film him sitting on the bow of the boat, bobbing up and down with the waves, smiling, playing and at one point jumping into the ocean. It’s a vision of optimism. A young man in the prime of life, enjoying the warmth of the Grenadian sun beating down on him and the view of the Caribbean Sea stretched out before him. Optimistic, that is, until you hear the voice playing over the sound of the waves. Reading like a eulogy, we hear about Ashes, what he was like (note the ‘was’) and how he came to be shot in a dispute over drugs, several years after this film was shot. Suddenly this vision of optimism becomes a sombre reflection on mortality, that in particular of the young man in shot. It’s sobering and, like I said before, moving. Death has played artist’s muse for centuries but it’s interesting to see a contemporary interpretation through a modern medium, film, and one that is so unspeakably beautiful. Beautiful and heartbreakingly bittersweet.

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By Ted Stansfield