

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

McQuaid, Cate, “At the ICA, two shows that embrace the body in many forms”. *The Boston Globe*, 24 February 2017



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At the ICA, two shows that embrace the body in many forms



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A screen at the ICA shows Steve McQueen's video installation "Ashes."

All seems charmed, at first, in “Steve McQueen: Ashes,” the artist and film director’s new video installation at the Institute of Contemporary Art. A lithe fellow in swim trunks bobs on the orange prow of a narrow boat. His grin beguiles. Sunshine soaks the screen.

But the soundtrack doesn’t fit. There’s no lapping of water against the hull, no young man’s laughter. Instead, we hear heavy footsteps on rocky earth, the scrape of concrete.

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McQueen is best known for directing the Academy Award-winning “12 Years a Slave,” but he came to film from the art world; he has been making short art films for nearly 25 years, and won Britain’s Turner Prize in 1999. “Ashes” returns to that form.

The installation is on view concurrently with the 2017 James and Audrey Foster Prize exhibition, the ICA’s biannual spotlight on Boston-area artists, and the two make exceptional companions.

Both shows are about the body. We could get into art theory about “the body” — how it’s an object of societal projections, or what it communicates as it occupies space, or disappears, or multiplies. But let’s not. Far more important is how you feel when you spend time with work like this: Your gut clenches, your heart drops. You sense it in your flesh.

Brutality marks McQueen’s feature films — such as the prison violence and starvation in “Hunger,” beatings, lynchings, and rape in “12 Years a Slave.” “Ashes” likewise revolves around a violent plot point, this time off screen. It’s shocking, but merely serves to precipitate the real theme: the palpability of loss.

Two videos project simultaneously on a double-sided screen. The sparkling portrait of the young man on the boat — he’s Ashes, a Grenadian fisherman — unspools on one side. McQueen filmed it in velvety Super 8 back in 2002. When he returned to Grenada eight years later, he learned Ashes had died — shot in the back over drugs he found on the beach and buried in a pauper’s grave. The video McQueen made in response to the news screens on the other side.

In it, workmen build a monument over Ashes’s grave. Theirs are the sounds we hear, interspersed with the young man’s friends telling the story of his murder. The high-definition video zooms in on small notes: the slurry of wet concrete, hands as they pour it, fingers as they clean and smooth grooves.

The young man’s ebullience on the other side of the screen now seems cautionary, his absence on this side penetrating. The slow, deliberate crafting of his grave marker plays like a requiem. McQueen’s loving attention to the body — the quickening perception of its mortality, the lyrical details of hands and faces, and finally, the cutting impression of its absence — finds deep resonances in the Foster Prize exhibition.

There are gravity and clarity of focus to this year’s show, organized by senior curator Dan Byers with help from curatorial associate Jeffrey De Blois. It’s more succinct than the 2015 Foster Prize show, which, highlighting performance art and artist collectives, was freewheeling and at times chaotic. The work here refers to bodies, but usually only by implication. In Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel’s exquisitely visceral video “Leviathan,” projected on a large screen in a small gallery, the implied bodies are our own.

“Leviathan” brings us aboard a New Bedford fishing vessel. Fixing GoPro cameras everywhere — on the paddle of an oar, on the side of the boat, along the trough where fish are gutted — Castaing-Taylor and Paravel slap us with waves, rinse us in fish blood, and heave us up against rusty steel. Installations are often described as immersive; this one nearly drowns us, and it’s exhilarating.

The other works are quieter. Jennifer Bornstein’s fondly elegiac installation “New Rubbing and Psychological Tests” remembers her father, who died in 2013. It also marks time’s passage: Isn’t it odd, and miraculous, and sad, how everything changes?

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Bornstein fills the walls with rubbings like those made in a graveyard: of her late father's clothing, of old technology, and of the walls and floors of the old Dia:Chelsea art center before it moved. All gone, or outmoded.

The artist's father, biochemist Paul Bornstein, genetically engineered mice to have extraordinary flexibility. She fills the center of the room with plaster structures — a maze, a high wire, a wheel — modeled after those made to test the mice, and she projects videos of the little critters at work on these sculptures. Like the artisans building Ashes's tomb, Bornstein makes something tangible to mark a space left hollow.

Sonia Almeida is an unfortunate outlier in this show. Her paintings, many jutting from the wall on hinges, explore how we process visual information, finding connections among text, pictographs, and abstract imagery. They're smart, but their many conceptual strata interfere with the kinesthetic response the hinged format might evoke if we were allowed to touch and move the art.

But then come Lucy Kim's paintings — or wall sculptures — which look like death masks of torsos and faces multiplied into patterns. A plastic surgeon, a fitness trainer, and a geneticist — each with his or her own approach to manipulating bodies — are the subjects.

Kim made molds, then casts, which she joins in layered and interlocking grids into reliefs. The patterning and posture of "Dr. Melissa Doft, Plastic Surgeon 2," in shades of green, recall Egyptian friezes of female mourners.

These works teeter between two dimensions and three, between the eerie sense of shed skin and people vanished, and the reassuring regimentation of pattern. That pattern works like DNA: It seems to assure that we'll go on, somehow, despite change, despite loss, despite the horrors and tenderness of the flesh.

STEVE McQUEEN: ASHES
THE 2017 JAMES AND AUDREY FOSTER PRIZE

At Institute of Contemporary Art, 25 Harbor Shore Drive, through July 9.