

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Jen, Alex. 'A Steve McQueen Video Ponders the Vulnerability of a Young Man's Life'  
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### A Steve McQueen Video Ponders the Vulnerability of a Young Man's Life

The artist and filmmaker's two-channel video piece "Ashes," having its US debut at the ICA in Boston, forces the viewer to reconcile disparate scenes projected onto either side of a suspended screen.



Steve McQueen, "Ashes" (2002–15), installation view at the 2015 la Biennale di Venezia (courtesy the artist, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London; © 2016 Steve McQueen; photo by: Francesca Buccaro)

BOSTON — Steve McQueen's "Ashes" lingers. Never dramatic or overdone, the two-channel video installation, created between 2002 and 2015, pauses on ordinary details to consider feeling at its purest — raw and not yet fully understood. Projected on both sides of a suspended screen at the Institute of Contemporary Art, one half of the piece shows a blithe young fisherman named Ashes perched on the prow of his weathered orange boat, while the other reveals his eventual fate. Both sides play simultaneously on loop, and there's no indication given to which should be seen first — McQueen effectively submerges viewers into either narrative, leaving them to deduce how they are related. "Ashes" is visually striking, but also felt and experienced physically; its single-channel soundtrack meshes diegetic noise and dialogue from both narratives to confuse the viewer's sense of time and place.

It's hard to stay focused on Ashes as he bounces up and down and slides back and forth, but cinematographer Robby Müller — who filmed but never used these scenes for McQueen's two-channel film "Caribs' Leap" (2002) — tries. The shots are long and the camera is steady; it's the ocean that rocks, making the entire frame lurch and stagger with broad sweeps and deep drops that make the gut swirl. Contrasting with this erratic sway is a flat, brilliantly blue,

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

hard-edge horizon line between sea and sky, the thickly saturated colors emphasized by the Super 8 film's grain. The lack of depth creates a haze that evokes a languid, sultry summer day — fitting, as Ashes repeatedly smiles coyly over his shoulder at the camera.

The installation's soundtrack only sporadically fits with the visuals. Certain sounds are pointed and almost identifiable, but their visual correlative is often located on the other side of the screen, temporarily beyond view. There's the sound of what might be dulled metal grating against silt, the soft thumps of footsteps on a hollow floor or the hull of a boat, and wood cracking — which feels ominous, as the boat dips into the ocean. The mismatched soundtrack makes Ashes's insouciance feel foolish at times — but, given his boyish and charming demeanor, not for long.



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One shot begins with a closeup on Ashes's feet and slowly trails up his figure. He pinches his fingers together and laughs out loud, as if to suggest how small Müller looks. The sun hits his eyes and he stares down before a startled look flickers across his face and the camera wobbles, losing Ashes. The boat has been pulled out from under him, but it's not long before Ashes swings his elbow over the hull and clammers back onto it. He looks sheepish, like he deserved it for trying to stay precariously balanced on the boat's edge. We grin with him; the connection is distant, but it's intimate enough for us to feel flustered and melancholic when we learn of the character's death. McQueen doesn't prepare the viewer for Ashes's death, but he doesn't try to make a point of or exaggerate it either; it is revealed very matter-of-factly. As we watch Ashes, a deep, magnetic voice cuts through the gentle, rhythmic bobbing of his boat: "I know Ashes as a friend. All of us were young, man." The man's voice sounds barely hardened, as if he's still processing his grief. The friend's voiceover reveals that Ashes came across some drugs that did not belong to him, and was shot and killed for trying to sell them. But "Ashes" is not about the shock of the title character's death; rather, it is most poignant in its gentle, careful handling of how he's buried, presented on the other side of the screen from the boat footage. Those were not footsteps on a hollow surface, it turns out, but a worker peeling the stenciling off Ashes's grave marker, stretching the rubber until it snaps with a muted thud; the wood cracking was the sound of workers breaking away the plywood frame of his grave after the concrete has set.

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY



Steve McQueen, "Ashes" (2002–15), installation view at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, 2017 (photo by John Kennard; © Steve McQueen)

Moving to the other side of the screen, we never see Ashes again; his absence stresses the sudden permanence of his death. His friend sounds bitterly sad: "he tried to run and then they shoot him in the back and when he fell one of them guys went over to him and shoot him up around his belly and his legs and thing." He tells Ashes's story as his tombstone is being made. McQueen brings the camera close, filming the blows that scoot a chisel forward to chip at and refine each letter. With each hit, the focus blows out, forcing the lens to refocus and momentarily disorienting us. The camera is low, almost on the granite, so we get a bold reflection of a worker gently, tenderly, but surely pushing the sanded dust out of each letter's groove.

The murder isn't shown, but McQueen allows the violence of Ashes's murder to surface inadvertently in small, mundane details — like when the cemetery workers stab and loosen the mound of dirt where he'll be buried with a broken pitchfork, or when his gravestone slides off the wet cement and they have to quickly catch it, realign it, and bluntly beat it with their fists to make the granite adhere. The action evokes the beating of a defenseless victim, and of Ashes's words right before he's murdered, as recounted by his friend: "When they came for him they said 'come let's go.' He says, 'I'm not going anywhere with all you if you have to kill me, kill me here in me people's presence for them to see, I'm not going anywhere,' and then they shoot him..."

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY



Steve McQueen, “Ashes” (2002–15), installation view at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, 2017 (photo by John Kennard; © Steve McQueen)

It’s almost as if Ashes faced death like he faced the ocean before he fell off the boat – nonchalantly, boldly, embracing the rush of the risk. He looks knowingly abashed after he loses his balance, but what about when he’s shot in cold blood? Did he “deserve” that too?

“Ashes” is not specifically symbolic, but that’s what makes it so enduring. It definitely articulates political and historical ideas, but subtly so. It can be about premature black death, but doesn’t have to be. Trusting that message follows feeling, McQueen carves out a vulnerability in Ashes that is refreshing in its intimacy. In a final scene on the burial side, the camera zooms out and pans over dozens of white concrete graves marking the hill. We knew Ashes was being buried in a graveyard, but there’s something about seeing the care put into one burial that makes us realize each grave and each death might have a similarly poignant story that might just go unheard, unnoticed. McQueen makes the desensitized visceral, if only to make the drop back to numbness that much more acute.

Steve McQueen: Ashes continues at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (25 Harbor Shore Drive, Boston, Massachusetts) through February 25, 2018.

<https://hyperallergic.com/380316/a-steve-mcqueen-video-ponders-the-vulnerability-of-a-young-mans-life/>