

FANTASTIC
MAN

Steve McQueen

By Emily King (Spring/Summer 2017)



Photo by: Mark Peckmezian

The ebullient STEVE McQUEEN went from being one of the most important artists of his generation to one of the most important movie directors, yet he does not particularly like to distinguish between the two realms of endeavour. It's all just work. As the first black director to have won the Oscar for Best Picture, he ends up bearing the weight of symbolism on his shoulders when sometimes he'd rather just think about his next project – which as it happens is a crime caper seemingly far removed from his previous subjects of slavery, sex addiction and the IRA. A conversation with STEVE right now, in that strange hinterland between releases, offers a rare and sweeping perspective on the incredible man.

Do you have to develop a protective armour when you're working in commercial TV?

"I am 47 years old, love. Let me move on."

Ask STEVE McQUEEN a stupid question and he will let you know about it. STEVE is a reluctant interviewee. Regarding his art, he refuses to take part in the publicity circus, and when it comes to feature films, he concedes to the odd interview only because, as he puts it, funders "need to make their money back." Our encounter takes place at an odd time. STEVE has no new film to promote, nor indeed any fresh art work to discuss. Almost immediately upon arriving at our first meeting, in the lobby cafe of the Conservatorium Hotel, the luxury establishment opposite the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, he announces: "The fact that I am here doing this interview with you – I surprise myself. Maybe I shouldn't be here." It's the kind of speculation likely to dig

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a pit in an interviewer's stomach. Yet we speak for four hours straight, and then for another hour the following day.

The unintended "scoop" of the conversation is that STEVE has finalised the cast for his new feature 'Widows' (although this information will already be in circulation by the time you read this). Based on an early '80s British TV series of the same name written by LYNDA LA PLANTE ("It was huge! It beat 'Coronation Street' in the ratings!" STEVE tells me), the film will star celebrated actors MICHELLE RODRIGUEZ and VIOLA DAVIS. The plot concerns a heist staged by the widows of a group of professional criminals, and STEVE is writing the script in collaboration with GILLIAN FLYNN of 'Gone Girl' fame. STEVE's previous feature, the Oscar-winning '12 Years a Slave', was a huge box office hit, yet the choice of source material and writing partner for 'Widows' suggest a step further into the commercial mainstream. STEVE will have none of this distinction. My musings on what might be involved in his operating in different settings are met with: "Fuck the art world, fuck the film world. It's about the work, about the content. Put my blinkers on and get on with it."

STEVE is emphatic in his speech, but not afraid of silence. Not afraid to take the time to think about questions that interest him and not afraid not to answer those that don't. At our first meeting he is wearing oversized knitwear and boots. The outfit is understated, but he wears it like a dandy nonetheless. He has presence.

Whilst he will only acknowledge the simple category of "work," the range of STEVE's output is unprecedented by any standard measure. His first widely seen piece was 1993's black-and-white 16mm art film 'Bear', a ten-minute loop of two naked men, one of them himself, engaged in an oblique physical confrontation. In 1999 STEVE won the Turner Prize for a series of films, among them 'Deadpan', a stark retread of BUSTER KEATON's slapstick that shows STEVE being narrowly missed by a falling façade time and time again. Along the way STEVE also made three-dimensional art works including, in 2007, 'Queen and Country', a display case holding sheets of stamps featuring portrait photos of British soldiers killed in Iraq, which is now part of the collection of London's Imperial War Museum. Then STEVE started making feature films: first 'Hunger' in 2008, about Irish hunger striker BOBBY SANDS, next 'Shame' in 2011, a portrait of sex addiction, and then '12 Years a Slave' in 2013.

STEVE describes the period between the outset of shooting 'Hunger' and dealing with the 2014 Oscar triumph of '12 Years a Slave' as "a crazy phase." During that time, he also made a pilot for an HBO series, 'Codes of Conduct', and worked on the scripts for the first two episodes only to have it cancelled. "It was the first time I ever had the situation where I was making something and someone said 'no'. It was very surprising to me, but it was one of those things," he says. "I think our series was marvellous. It was the best experience I'd ever had with a group of people, one of the best collaborations I've ever had, but HBO decided not to go through with it. It was tough for me, but that's something you have to deal with. In a way it was a blessing that it didn't materialise, even though, obviously, I was disappointed. Because I needed to breathe, doing three difficult films in five years, and exhibitions, and large retrospectives in Basel and Chicago, and representing Britain at Venice, and I had a child in that time, and everything else. It was impossible; you clearly can't sustain that. It just wasn't healthy."

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Do you admire any TV that's on at the moment?

"I don't know. TV has not touched me in the way films have. There's been a boom right now on TV. Apparently last year there were 450 new TV shows. Incredible! I don't know how – who's watching? I want to know who's watching."

STEVE calls himself a Londoner, but hasn't lived in London since the mid '90s, when he moved to Amsterdam to be with his partner, the Dutch writer BIANCA STIGTER. "I moved to Amsterdam for love. I was going to move to New York, that was the idea, but I moved here. It was good because it wasn't New York City, and it wasn't London, and it wasn't LA. I remember riding my bike in the summertime and, after about 45 minutes of cycling, taking all my clothes off and jumping into a lake. Because you can do that in Amsterdam. Before that I didn't know any other life than London." STEVE is still often in London; two years ago the BBC announced he was working on a television drama that would be set there.

Is the series happening?

"It's happening after 'Widows'."

And it's fictional?

"No, it's actually true stories, all about the West Indian community in London."

STEVE was born and grew up in west London, starting out in a Shepherd's Bush housing estate and then moving to the suburb of Ealing while he was still a small boy. His parents had moved to Britain from the West Indies. He recounts a story his father told him late in life about his own youth: "What they used to do is gather fit young men and take them to Florida to pick oranges. My father was staying in a sort of dorm, a huge space. He was with these two Jamaican guys and they were, like, 'Come on, let's sneak out.' You weren't meant to leave, but they snuck out. They found this bar in the town, so they went in. And the doors swing open, like in a Western. And the people inside turn around, mid-drink, mouths open, because three black guys have walked in. They walk up to the bar, up to the counter, and one of the three says, 'I'd like to have a drink,' and the bartender goes: 'We don't serve niggers.' Then the guy goes: 'You don't serve niggers? We'll serve ourselves then.' And he picks up a bottle and smashes it over the guy's head. And they all run out. They run off. My dad's running, running, running; then he hides in a ditch. Crouched down, Dad hears 'boom, boom!' Two shots. And he hears people looking around for him. And he's waiting, waiting, waiting. He was hiding there for, like, four hours. It felt like an eternity. Then he slowly made his way back to the camp. He never saw those two guys again. Migrant workers that go to pick oranges in Florida: the next day those guys aren't in the count and that's it. End of story. No investigation. No one's that bothered. There's more oranges to pick."

When was this?

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“It must have been the late 1950s. You tell stories, especially those kind of stories, because you want to pass that on, that knowledge, because otherwise it will be forgotten. It’s the kind of story that you’ll carry with you for the rest of your life, because you could have been one of those guys and you would have been forgotten. It’s similar to an artwork I made, ‘Ashes’, which is about a guy I met,” he says in reference to a film shown at the Venice Biennale in 2015. Footage of a young Grenadian man on a boat, taken while STEVE was working on his 2002 art film ‘Carib’s Leap’, is combined with contemporary audio recounting the subject’s eventual death at the hands of drug dealers. “I shot footage of him two months before he died, which I only found out about seven years later. He’d been buried in a pauper’s grave with no headstone. I was like, ‘Jesus!’ I wanted him to be remembered. That’s why I made a grave for him. Maybe now his memory will be upheld for, you know, 100 years. It’s almost like you’re trying to extend someone’s life.”

STEVE describes his father as having had qualities typical of someone growing up in the West Indies halfway through the 20th century. “I love my dad, but I never really had a real conversation with him,” he says. “West Indian people growing up at that time, they were very Victorian. I never had a heart-to-heart with my father, other than when he told me that story just before he died.” He remembers his father and grandmother attending an opening at the Royal College of Art, early in his career. “I was in my tweed suit, overheated, sweating. It was 1994, and I was showing ‘Bear’ at my first exhibition, called ‘Acting Out’. I am on screen with my balls dangling and the other guy’s sort of, you know, tussling and embracing me. My grandmother was, like, ‘Tch.’ It was funny for them to come, but they were happy for me; they were very excited. My father had issues though, because, basically, he was scared. He thought that, in that world, I would be hurt in one way or the other. So he would always say, ‘Get a job, get a trade.’ He was saying it because he cared for me. It was like any immigrant situation: you want your kids to be happy and safe.”

When did he die?

“Ooh, god, eleven years ago now.”

He didn’t see any of the films?

“No, he didn’t. Just because it was really the next year that I did ‘Hunger’.”

That’s a shame.

“But he was there for the Turner Prize and whatnot, and he went to Buckingham Palace and all that kind of crap.”

STEVE also tells me a more recent story about his mother. “So, my mother was with my daughter in a big department store. And my mother had a new credit card and she was paying for some stuff. She went to the till and was fumbling for the number; she couldn’t remember her new number. This was a week or so after Brexit, and the guy behind the counter said, ‘It’s four numbers in this country.’ To my mother! That wouldn’t have happened before Brexit. My

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mother never mentioned it; it was my daughter who told me. She said that my mother looked at the man, remembered the number, paid, took the stuff and walked out. Why didn't my mother tell me? My daughter said, 'Granny, why didn't you say something?' and my mother replied,

'Like MICHELLE OBAMA said, when they go low, we go high.' I think she didn't tell me because she was ashamed, not for herself but about the situation."

He warns of a nationalistic drift in the Brexit/Trump era, mentioning changing establishment attitudes towards Britain's biggest celebration of West Indian culture, the Notting Hill Carnival. "Sometimes I fear picking up a newspaper, because of what I'm confronted with. In London, this whole debate about the Notting Hill Carnival, and someone high up in the police saying that they 'dread' to police the carnival. Do they *dread* to police football on a Saturday? The fact that someone would say that about carnival! Do you think they would have said that before Brexit? No! Because people vocalise what they want now."

They're trying to move the carnival to the park aren't they?

"It will die, which they want it to. They've been trying to kill Notting Hill Carnival for how long? They lose, everyone loses, we lose."

When I ask if New York City continues to exert a pull he says: "I wouldn't live in the States now because of the obvious, but I still love it. I remember as a child, all the rainy overcast days in England, and I used to look at this book – I wish I could find it – it was called 'Made in USA'. The front cover was an illustration of an American footballer being tackled. I remember turning the pages of this book and seeing the Empire State Building, seeing cab drivers, seeing hot dogs. And New York is still the same in a way – I am always so excited to go. The majority of my family live in the United States. I went to New York for the first time in '77 and stayed with my aunt when I was seven; I was there for Elvis dying, and for the blackout."

Wow! The blackout of New York in '77?

"'77 and Elvis died in '77."

Did it seem amazingly abundant?

"Unreal, unreal, unreal – it was the food, the people and it was just... It was very hot that summer; it was great."

Offering a more recent vignette of the US he remembers: "Because I am making 'Widows' in the States, I had to go to LA to get a new Social Security number. It's the only time I've ever been in LA and seen rich people with homeless people and working-class people, all in one room together. It was incredible!"

Describing his life in Amsterdam as being a kind of "isolation," STEVE insists he doesn't have many friends. "There are a lot of people I know through work, I've got acquaintances, but I don't

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have many friends,” he says. “I think I have two and a half friends. I maybe have a different understanding of friendship. For me, they’re people who pick up the phone at 3am and you can tell them everything, you know? I’m a person for whom it’s all or nothing. If it’s a movie, or an artwork, it’s all or nothing. I don’t have a second shot; I don’t do thousands of other things. I do that one thing and I give everything to it.”



STEVE was photographed on a sunny Wednesday morning in the capital of the Netherlands wearing a strappy cotton-and-wool quilt panelled jacket by CRAIG GREEN and his own glasses.

Among the most significant of that two and a half is the stylist SIMON FOXTON, who has lived near STEVE’s mother in Ealing for the past 30 years. “So I was around 18, and I was working with my friend DANNY in Camden Market, making money in selling sandwiches and stuff – DANNY’s gone a bit doolally now, maybe too much weed,” says STEVE. “I was standing there and I was spotted by SIMON – he got his assistant to come over. So I got this note: ‘Call this number if you’re interested in being shot for ‘i-D’ by NICK KNIGHT and SIMON FOXTON.’ Of course I didn’t know who they were, but I showed DANNY, and he goes, ‘SIMON FOXTON? NICK KNIGHT? Oh, you’ve got to do that!’ Then I saw that the first three digits of the number were like mine, so I realised he must live near me, and I was, like, ‘Ooh, interesting’.”

“That was the only shoot I ever did, because, you know, I was an odd model, but then we just became friends. SIMON became very important in my life. He was the person I’d never had: someone to talk to about ideas, about art, about music. SIMON is amazing on music! In fact, he helped me find a track for ‘12 Years a Slave’. He’s like a musicologist: he has this incredible, eclectic taste. To have that situation with somebody, to be able to hang out at their house and talk and be heard, I’d never had that before. He was a bit older than me, so there was that maturity, but he was also still being silly. It was wonderful. SIMON has been extraordinarily important in my life.”

Do you have a sister?

“One lovely sister, yeah.”

Older?

“Yeah.”

So you’re the youngest, basically?

“Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.”

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And you just went to the local school?

“Yes, I went to the local school,” says STEVE. “My thing about education is that I had a shit one. Seeing how things operate, the elitism – people don’t want to give up the advantages they have. I want the whole playing field to be fixed, that’s what I’m after. It’s a very simple thing, putting more money into education; it’s the obvious thing to do, but it falls on deaf ears. I’ve met a lot of people, beautiful people, who could have done genius things but were... I was very fortunate, I was lucky, but a lot of people were not and had their trajectory marked out for them, and they fell off the cliff. I’m still working class. It’s a British thing, isn’t it, this whole class business? I can’t deal with unfairness. That certain people only got what they got because they’ve got what they’ve got. It pisses me off that people will not give an opportunity to others. I grabbed opportunity. I was fucking hard-headed, passionate and determined. That does not always work. I was lucky.”

STEVE received his less-than-optimal education at Drayton Manor High School, in Hanwell in west London. “When I went back to give the achievement awards, the new headmaster admitted that, when I was there, it was institutionally racist,” says STEVE. “What was great about my school then was that it was a beautiful mix. You had English, you had Polish, you had Greek, you had Irish and West Indian, you had Pakistani – that was great. But, as a dyslexic child, no one gives a shit. Also, as a working-class black kid – ‘Oh, he’s just scum.’ You are pigeonholed at such an early age. At 13, 14, your life was done. You knew your road; your path was made. There were low expectations generally of black children and working-class kids. And when there are low expectations, you just don’t bother.”

Things could have conceivably turned out differently for STEVE. “I was practising bricklaying in Southall because they thought I wouldn’t pass my A levels. I was laying bricks in a very cold warehouse, thinking: ‘What the fuck am I doing?’ I remember talking to the plumbing teacher, saying, ‘Look, I don’t want to do this. I want to do art,’ and he said, ‘Well, if you want to do it, go and do it!’ He wasn’t particularly sympathetic or anything like that, but he just told me to go and try. So I put down the tools and went back to school and they allowed me to do A-level art. That was it! I never looked back.”

STEVE was accepted onto a foundation course at Chelsea School of Art. “I got there through my portfolio – just drawings – because I didn’t pass English. It was a fifty-fifty thing whether I would get in or not, because I didn’t have the grade. But I gave them my portfolio and got an interview. The interviewer said, ‘Well, obviously you can draw.’ And that’s what I could do: draw. I loved drawing because that was my tool. That was the thing I had access to, a pencil. The possibility of putting a pencil on a piece of paper – that was wonderful! Then I got the possibility of a canvas, and, wow! Making frames, buying oils and acrylics – it was, like, ‘I can afford that!’ And now I can, obviously, afford a camera and crew. Again, it’s just about access. It’s been an evolution, but the work has always been within the frame.”

When STEVE got into Chelsea, he felt as if he’d “arrived.” “It’s almost like when you put on a pair of shoes and you feel, ‘Oh, this is me.’ It was amazing. It was freedom. It was just a marvellous situation.” But, while the artistic environment may have suited him for a time, it wasn’t going to

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contain him forever. "It was nice meeting nice people, but then you get into the work, and that's it. Then you're off," he says.

These days STEVE's relationship with the trappings of art is ambivalent. "Art has been extremely generous to me, but the wealth is an issue for me. I'm allergic to it," he says. "Don't get me wrong. I benefit from it. Absolutely I benefit from it, but at the same time, I can't not feel what I feel, you know? What I love about film is that people buy their ticket, they go in, they watch the movie. They like the movie; they hate the movie. That kind of democracy, as such, is fantastic."

Can I ask, do you still draw? Is drawing still important?

"No, no, no."

"I never did any test screenings, ever," STEVE tells me. "I never did any test screenings on 'Hunger', I never did a test screening on 'Shame'. The idea that I had to test my work – how dare you! And then I did a test screening on '12 Years a Slave' and it was the best thing that ever happened. Because I found all these little things about communication. It was like having another editor. It was just about little tweaks, like: 'Oh, if she says that before this, then, okay, I understand it.' That was fun."

What kind of information did the audience give you?

"There was a test score thing. We did three test screenings because they wanted to test with a white middle-class audience, with a black audience, and with an arthouse audience."

Commercial film not only implies a different relationship to the audience, it also involves collaboration with a host of others. "I could never have been a painter," says STEVE. "Me in a fucking studio with oil and turps and a massive white canvas for hours, no way. I need to have conversation. I need to have interaction. It's like playing tennis against a brick wall versus playing tennis with someone else." For 'Hunger', STEVE worked with the writer ENDA WALSH. "With ENDA's work, I like the idea – like this conversation now – of not knowing what you are going to say. You never know how you're going to get to the end of a sentence. I chose him because he's a brilliant playwright. With screen writers there is always an end point, they go to the end before they get to the beginning, but with a playwright there's a meandering." Talking about mainstream film's tendency to over explain and to fill in backstory with flashbacks, STEVE says, "Maybe people don't trust themselves. There's a line in 'Shame' which is beautiful. A situation needed to be solved. I was pushing and we were thinking, thinking, thinking and talking, and ABI MORGAN came up with the line: 'We're not bad people; we just come from a bad place.' Boom! It came out – fantastic! That's gorgeous, beautiful. For me it was the solution and that was that."

To what extent is such a joint venture the product of a single artist?

"It's what you want. At the end of the day, if I'm making something with someone, it's what I want. It's like being in a band. The MILES DAVIS QUINTET: is that not MILES? I'm not stupid

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enough not to realise that people can help you with what you want or actually give you more than you knew you wanted. Also, you can bring out things in them that they never thought they had. That's the whole idea." STEVE's regular collaborators include MICHAEL FASSBENDER, the star of both 'Hunger' and 'Shame', and SEAN BOBBITT, the cinematographer who has worked on STEVE's films since 2002, when they collaborated on 'Western Deep', about gold-mining in South Africa. "I could never do what MICHAEL does or what SEAN does, but I know what I want from them. Or they surprise me and do things even better than I could ever imagine without prompting. That's the job; that's the whole idea."

And if collaboration is so important, what do you do on your own?

"What do I do on my own? Masturbate! Come on! But seriously, a lot of thinking, a lot of research and a lot of reading, and again a lot of thinking. I think that's where all the work happens, isn't it? When you're on your own. And then you come to the table and you've got to produce. It's, like, your ears never stop listening. I'm working all the time. I am working now. I never had a studio. I didn't like the idea of going to work every day. The idea of me going to a studio – I'd fucking freeze."

Are you sensitive about film, the medium?

"Projection?"

Yes.

"The first film I saw digitally projected was 'Into the Wild' and I knew something was up."

Who's that by?

"SEAN PENN. It was the first movie that I saw that was digitally projected, and I saw that image and I thought... It was great, it was fine, but I knew something was up. It was odd. It was a bit odd."

But do you shoot digitally now?

"No, I've always shot on film. I think 'Widows' is going to be the first film that I will shoot digitally because now I can't – we're shooting in Chicago and now the only labs are in LA, so you have to wait two or three days to get your rushes back, and you can't have that. You need them the next day. You need to see your rushes. So this is the first time I'm actually shooting digitally. So I don't really care, but... I'm not bothered."

"Can I name drop?"

Yeah, of course you can.

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"I recently met TERRENCE MALICK. He's got to be 70-something, hasn't he? And in the same week I saw FRANK OCEAN, who's just turned 29. And they're very, very similar. They're both still experimenting. I don't know why I say 'still,' as if at some point you stop. It was interesting seeing them within days of each other, and realising that they're both trying things out, and they're both unsure. At 29 or 70, it's the same damn thing. It doesn't stop. It's not like you end up knowing or being secure."

This endless state of striving, and of reinventing, suits STEVE just fine. "I would rather take the hard route than the easy route, for sure. That's just the kind of person I am. I don't give a damn about film. I don't give a damn about art. I only give a damn about what it is that this contraption of a camera and boom can make visible. To me these things are magnifying glasses, butterfly nets," he says. "I'm very proud when I walk the streets in London, or the streets of New York, and sometimes people, black people in particular, acknowledge me. It touches me because I know where it comes from. There are people who will stop, you know, nearly crash their car in the middle of the street, to come and hug me. People, white, black, whatever they are. I suppose it's because of the Oscar: 'we won!'"

We have been speaking for hours. I ask STEVE how many more films he might make. He offers seven, but doesn't claim that as an ambition. "Love and freedom," he says. "Love and freedom, end of story, they are the two most important things. The great thing about love, I think, is that you risk. If you don't risk, you'll never experience love. You have to throw yourself at it. You make the child, you give that love fruit. It's a huge risk, but it has huge, huge gains. At least I've loved. It sounds corny, but I don't give a shit. At least I've loved. That's the only thing worth living for."