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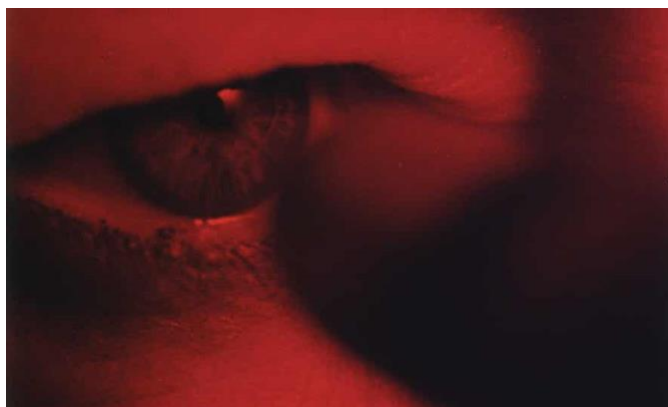
*Steve McQueen review—
don't look away*



Tate Modern, London

Whether exposing the horrors of a South African gold mine or probing Charlotte Rampling's eye, McQueen is forever unflinching in his first major UK show for 20 years

by Laura Cumming (February 16, 2020)



A still from *Charlotte*, 2004, in which Charlotte Rampling's eye is 'revoltingly probed by McQueen's own finger'.
Photograph: © Steve McQueen. Courtesy the artist, Thomas Dane Gallery and Marian Goodman Gallery

Enter through the film-house gloom and you're immediately plunged into deeper darkness. The screen before you seethes with obliterating blackness. A blurred face appears for half a second, and occasional glimmers hurtle upwards like sparks up a chimney. But other than the deafening crankshaft thrum, there is almost nothing to confirm that we're going to hell in a mineshaft.

The TauTona mine in South Africa, otherwise known as Western Deep, is the world's deepest gold mine. The miners have to descend more than three kilometres to reach the broiling depths, working the seams in the erratic light of their puny headlamps. Temperatures can rise to more than 80C.

Suddenly there is silence; suddenly a horrifying crash. The screen turns blindingly bright. A miner sits trembling, thermometer in his mouth. He speaks but we can't hear his words. Then lines of miners are performing strenuous bench jumps in blue trunks, sweating it out in some eerie decompression chamber to the crackling pulse of a scarlet light. There is no day or night.

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY



A still from *Western Deep*, 2002. Photograph: © Steve McQueen.
Courtesy the artist, Thomas Dane Gallery and Marian Goodman Gallery

Steve McQueen's masterpiece, *Western Deep* operates as a succession of sound and vision shocks. Like the mine, it deprives the eyes of light, then assaults them with inexplicable bursts of colour, just as it veers between silence and shattering drills. This is art put to the service of truth. The camera tries to grasp what is nearly incomprehensible to the rest of us – the conditions of a penal colony far below the earth.

A digital notice outside *Western Deep* – counting down the seconds like a little movie in itself – tells you when the next screening begins. You can't go in before then. For this is a narrative work. McQueen has organised his first British retrospective since he won the Turner prize in 1999 with all the fierce attentiveness of the art films themselves.

So you can walk round and round the seven-minute loop of *Static*, his 2009 portrait of the Statue of Liberty filmed in closeup from a circling helicopter. You can enter the double-sided film installation *Ashes* from either of two entrances, absorbing its complex story from different directions. *Cold Breath*, a glittering black and white film in which a nub of nipple is teased with gentleness and then unanticipated violence, is projected on a fittingly small screen so you have to come up close to be abruptly disconcerted.

Made in 1999, when McQueen was 30, this is the earliest work in the exhibition bar a one-minute fragment of Super 8 from 1992 showing two elderly West Indian men carrying potted palms from east London's Brick Lane on to the 243 bus to Wood Green, north London. *Exodus* is its subtle title. So the show's timespan misses out a lot for a younger generation. None of the short films that first made his name are here; for instance *Bear*, in which two naked black men (one of them McQueen) come together in a brief but mysterious sparring match, with every degree of sexual, political and cinematic ambiguity. Nor will you see *Deadpan*, in which McQueen reprised Buster Keaton's famous facade-falling scene, which led to the Turner prize.



'Face like thunder, ferocious diadem': the Statue of Liberty, in a still from Steve McQueen's film *Static*, 2009.
Photograph: © Steve McQueen. Courtesy the artist, Thomas Dane Gallery and Marian Goodman Gallery

It may be that the idea of Steve McQueen as the Hollywood director of *Hunger*, *Shame*, *Widows* and the Oscar-winning *12 Years a Slave* has by now somewhat superseded his renown as a contemporary artist. If so, the inclusion here of a duff sculpture called *Weight* – a gilded mosquito net over a prison bed, made for the otherwise superb Artangel show commemorating Oscar Wilde's time at Reading jail – certainly will not help.

But connections are everywhere apparent between the films made for the cinema and those for the gallery. McQueen's primary emphasis, for instance, on bodies in motion and at rest, stressed and flailing and under duress: this is a defining characteristic. He sets forth the human figure with singular force. You see that particularly in *Western Deep*, where the dazed and exhausted miners become monuments in the final moments.

Sometimes he presses endurance to the limit. It is almost impossible to keep watching particular scenes in *12 Years a Slave*, and yet the moral imperative is upon us; witness at the very least an expression of respect. By comparison, a film from 2004 called *Charlotte* feels like a practice piece. The eye of Charlotte Rampling, immediately recognisable with its hooded lid, is touched and teased and revoltingly probed by McQueen's own finger, in a variation on the notorious eye-slicing moment in *Un Chien Andalou*. The optical horror is exaggerated and yet also veiled in blood-red light.

Look, don't look. What can a camera show? In *Caribs' Leap*, memorialising the islanders of Grenada who jumped to their deaths rather than surrender to French invaders in the 1650s, McQueen shows a man – or is it a ghost? – falling through the sky towards us and then vanishing into thin air. It is not clear if he is real or a figment. The screen is hoisted high: look upwards, and for the longest time he is not there. The other half of that film, showing a day in the life of contemporary Grenada, fishermen mending boats, children playing in the tide, is projected outside on to the front of Tate Modern: a big glowing portrait of free people. Most of the work in this show, whether political or not, has the character of a campaign.

That is explicit in *Ashes*, where a beautiful young islander is shown buoyantly alive on the prow of a boat, riding the waves, his joyful charisma filling the frame. A friend remembers him in the voiceover: "Oh, he was great on the ocean, Ashes." This lithe angel lives forever in McQueen's looping film. But on the reverse, quite deliberately, without any attempt to disguise the moral lesson, is the vision of hands slowly gilding his name on a tombstone. Ashes got caught up, found somebody else's drugs.

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY



The eponymous young Grenadian man, 'buoyantly alive' in McQueen's film *Ashes*, 2002-15.
Photograph: © Steve McQueen. Courtesy the artist, Thomas Dane Gallery and Marian Goodman Gallery

The most overtly political work here is the least effective: *End Credits*, concerning the remorseless, 30-year surveillance of the black actor, singer and activist Paul Robeson by the FBI. On screen, page after page of redacted FBI documents appear far too fast to be read. An actor recites others, equally fast and out of sync so that the cognitive dissonance is complete. Running at more than five hours, this is another form of endurance test, tripwired for failure.

McQueen has talked in interviews about his frustration at not being able to make feature films as a young man, and the opportunities art gave him instead. In a sense, the clearest fusion between them is *Static*. A thousand directors have filmed the Statue of Liberty from a helicopter, and McQueen is up there too with his crew. The sight is riveting – face like thunder, ferocious diadem, the copper rusting, cracking, spattered with birdshit. She stands out, green and grave against the industrial backdrop, the Manhattan skyline, the glowering clouds, as the helicopter sweeps round and round.

And eventually there comes a moment where Liberty is no longer static, where she herself appears to move, as if she has an independent spirit all of her own. The idea is very simple, and it would be wrong to overstate the political implications, but this film is beautifully subversive.

At Tate Modern, London, until 11 May