



Steve M^cQueen
Sunshine State

Pirelli HangarBicocca

EN

Steve McQueen *Sunshine State*

31 March – 31 July 2022
Curated by Vicente Todolí

Exhibition organized by **Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan,**
in collaboration with **Tate Modern, London**

Cultural Mediation

Cultural mediators are present in the exhibition spaces to answer questions from the public, give information and context elements that can deepen the fruition of the artworks. The dialogue between mediator and visitor should take place in compliance with social distancing policies and the norms on the protection of personal health.

Public Program

13 May: Talk and tour of the exhibition with Steve McQueen and Cora Gilroy-Ware.

10 June: DJ set by Dennis Bovell.

11-12 June: Fondazione Prada Cinema. Screening of *Small Axe* film series.

On 12 June conversation between Steve McQueen and international guests.

Discover more on our website.

Steve McQueen

Steve McQueen (London, 1969, lives and works in London and Amsterdam) is one of the most prominent artists and filmmakers working today. Over the course of his almost 30-year career, he has had a major influence on the way film is shown and understood. Taking a radical look at the human condition, its dramas and fragility, McQueen's touching and thought-provoking work asks important questions about issues such as the construction of identity, belonging, and the right to freedom.



Steve McQueen
Photo John Russo

Spanning between video, installation, and photography, Steve McQueen conceives film as a sculptural form in motion in time and space. Alongside his practice as an artist in the visual arts, he is also a major figure in the field of cinema, realizing feature and documentary films for cinema and television, and winning the Oscar for Best Picture with his movie *12 Years a Slave* (2013).

Informed by the history of film, his artworks were initially associated with the experimental cinema of the 1970s, but also with New Queer Cinema, a term coined in 1992 to de-

note the movement encompassing films, videos, and activism in the fight against AIDS. Film has always been at the center of the artist's research: he first approached the realm of moving images using a handheld camera

and Super 8 which, he observes, «has informed how I still shoot now, as Super 8 was very expensive so I would have to have an idea of what I wanted to shoot before shooting it... and this economy of means helped develop my practice as a filmmaker and as an artist.»

Born and raised in London to West Indian parents, he studied at the Chelsea School of Art (1990) and subsequently at Goldsmiths College and at NYU Tisch School of the Arts for one year (1993). Soon after, major international institutions such as MoMA in New York and Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven dedicated solo exhibitions (both in 1997) to his work. M^cQueen recounts: «Filmmaking is an evolution for me, first with a crayon, then a paintbrush and ending with a movie camera. It would always begin with perspective, even as a child, a white piece of paper is a frame. It was very much an evolution in imagery.»

M^cQueen's early pieces are characterized by an experimental and improvisational approach reminiscent of the early twentieth-century avant-gardes and silent movies, shot in black-and-white and intentionally without sound. Made with limited resources, they already express his strong interest in the act of looking and observing that is inherent in the film experience. For his first work, *Exodus* (1992–97), M^cQueen did not follow a linear narrative structure or a script, but filmed an event that caught his attention in the streets of London's Brick Lane. *Exodus* is a 65-seconds shot of two smartly dressed men, as they each carry a potted coconut palm through the crowded city streets. Following the two men, who sometimes stray out of the shot or swerve, M^cQueen was forced to pan in order to keep them on camera. The scene expresses the instinctive and spontaneous relationship between the



Exodus, 1992–97 (still)
Super 8mm color film,
transferred to video,
no sound, 1'5",
continuous play

artist's movement and the camera, giving an almost diary-like slant to the footage.

During his early career, M^cQueen employed several cinematic codes to highlight contradictions or discriminations assimilated by contemporary Western culture. For example, the duel in *Bear* (1993) in which two nude figures (one of them the artist) are shown engaged in a wrestling match, or the slapstick in *Deadpan* (1997), based on the iconic scene from the 1928 film starring Buster Keaton (1895–1966). Here M^cQueen takes the place of the character who was originally in front of a house, whose façade detaches and collapses around him. These artworks earned him the 1999 Turner Prize, one of the most prestigious awards in the field of the visual arts.



Bear, 1993 (still)
16mm black-and-white
film transferred to
video, no sound
10'35", continuous play

Together with a new generation of artists, M^cQueen contributed to creating an innovative visual language, strengthening the dialogue between film and the museum context. Indeed, subsequently many of his works incorporate color and sound taking the form of video installations with projections in the space. The artist is in fact also concerned with the specific conditions in which moving images are presented. The size of the screen, the acoustic dimension and the relationship between the viewer and the film itself are all crucial aspects. By triggering a comparison that is as corporeal as it is lyrical, M^cQueen's work transfers the projection of the film from the screen to the exhibition space.

In the early 2000s M^cQueen probed themes related to identity, historical and social moments, incorporating their documentary potential into his film language, as in *Western Deep* (2002) and *Caribs' Leap* (2002). At the

same time, he focused on the tangible nature of the film experience by depicting strong physical and tactile sensations. In some of his works, such as *Cold Breath* (1999) and *Charlotte* (2004), the camera lingers on bodily details, conveying their fragility.

M^cQueen later expanded his oeuvre by turning his attention to cinema, making his first feature-length film titled *Hunger* in 2008, for which he received the Caméra d'Or award at the Cannes Film Festival. The film is a portrait of the slow physical deterioration of Bobby Sands, the IRA (Irish Republican Army) member who starved to death after being on hunger strike in the Maze Prison for 66 days in 1981 to protest the British government and the prison regime experienced by the Republican inmates.

In 2009 M^cQueen represented Britain at the 53rd Venice Biennale, and over the following years had solo exhibitions at various international museums, including the Art Institute of Chicago (2012), the Schaulager in Basel (2013), the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York (2017), and the Tate Britain in London (2019), for which he created *Year 3*, one of the most ambitious portraits of youth ever realized in the United Kingdom. Composed of thousands of class photographs of all the third-year pupils in London's primary schools, this work offers a cross-section of the future and an image of hope of a generation to come.

In close dialogue with the history of film from its origins to the present day, M^cQueen's practice prompts a unique reflection on the moving image, drawing on key moments in cinema, amongst which is *The Jazz Singer* from 1927. The movie, considered the first feature-length film with

synchronized dialogue and present in the artist's new production *Sunshine State*, is an important part of this exhibition. By focusing on historical events from the colonial past, his work also questions the deeper meaning of "the act of looking" and how it can shape our understanding of reality.

The Exhibition



Sunshine State, 2022
(still)
HD video, 30'1",
continuous projection
A Commission for
International Film
Festival Rotterdam
(IFFR) 2022
Footage from *The Jazz
Singer*. Courtesy
Warner Bros. Pictures

deep connection between corporality and subjectivity, and between experience and representation in the artist's poetics, interwoven with pressing social themes, such as racial and postcolonial issues.

Moving in the darkness of the exhibition space, visitors encounter projections on different scales that appear as portraits of stories, people, and distant places, conveying the most profound sense of the human condition, with its dramas and fragility.

The show at Pirelli HangarBicocca also presents the world premiere of the new artwork *Sunshine State* (2022), from which the exhibition takes its name. The work focuses on the transition from silent to sound film, juxtaposed to the intimate story of a personal event, thus prompting reflection on cinema's influence on the definition and perception of individual and collective identity.

1. *Static*, 2009



Static, 2009 (still)
35mm color film,
transferred to HD,
sound, 7'3"

Projected onto a large screen, *Static* depicts an unusual portrait of an icon of the twentieth century: the Statue of Liberty in New York. The film is shot from a helicopter continually circling the monument, alternating long shots that show the metropolitan skyline with close-ups of the statue revealing its greenish corroded and oxidized metal. The image judders and flickers, disturbing the act of looking. The sense of disorientation is amplified by the deafening noise of the helicopter, acoustically reflecting the circular motion of the camera. Realized in 2009, when the Statue was first reopened to the public after 9/11, *Static* poetically evokes themes of freedom, surveillance, and the construction of identity.

2. *Cold Breath*, 1999

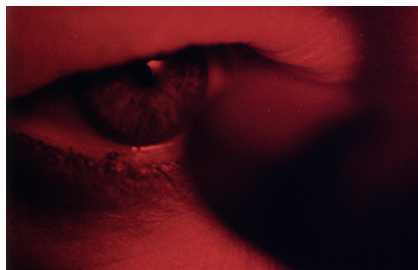


Cold Breath, 1999 (still)
16mm black-and-white
film, 10', continuous
projection

Shot in 16mm, the film shows M^cQueen's nipple as he strokes, pinches and rubs it insistently, evoking moments of intense physicality. In the silence of the film strip, punctuated by the mechanical sound of the projector running continuously, the image becomes increasingly abstract.

Cold Breath takes on autobiographical traits, leading the viewer into an intimacy transcending the boundaries between corporeality and subjectivity. As in one of M^cQueen's early works, *Bear* (1993), in which two naked men are portrayed wrestling, also in *Cold Breath* the body is raised to an "iconic presence" in the exhibition space, as noted by curator and art historian Okwui Enwezor (1963–2019). Playing on the ambivalence between impulse and desire, M^cQueen questions the deeper meaning of observing and, as he himself has pointed out: «One reason I wanted to investigate the image of the nipple was that it is like an eye, I wanted to explore the sensitivity of touch.» The focus on the act of looking, illustrated more explicitly in *Charlotte* (2004), is explored by the artist in its most physical and fleshly connotation, through a continuous reiteration of the action.

3. *Charlotte*, 2004



Charlotte, 2004 (still)
16mm color film,
no sound, 5'42",
continuous projection

ing out-of-focus moments in the shifting relationship between the 16mm camera lens and the woman's gaze.

Wavering between threat and excitement, the artist's fingertip approaches the eyelid, caressing it, moving over the folds of skin, until for an instant it touches the eyeball. In the film, the two figures are connected by an intimate bond of confrontation and resistance: their complicity reveals the analogy between the gaze and the framing of the filmic language. The work is also a tribute to the actress, one of the icons of European cinema. The silent duel evoked in *Charlotte*, as sensual as it is fragile, becomes a tangible manifestation of observation, the founding act in the cinematographic lexicon.

4. *Sunshine State*, 2022



Sunshine State, 2022 (still)
HD video, 30'11",
continuous projection
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(IFFR) 2022
Footage from *The Jazz
Singer*. Courtesy Warner
Bros. Pictures

cally expand throughout the duration of the piece. The specular structure of the display is reinforced by the inversion of black and white in the film.

This new work opens with footage of the burning sun: one frame shows a close-up while the other depicts it from a distance. As the images unfold, we hear the artist whispering «shine on me sunshine state, shine on me» superimposed onto the sound of the combustion of the sun. While the frame slowly dissolves into a new image, we hear the artist's voice again as he recounts a story about his father accompanied by footage from the musical drama *The Jazz Singer*, 1927. The first movie or "talkie" in the history of cinema to include synchronized dialogue, the film stars the famous singer Al Jolson (1886–1950).

The two screens portray the same moment but never at the same time. We observe the protagonist as he prepares to perform on Broadway. M^cQueen emphasizes the scenes in which we see Jolson applying black paint on his face by alternating footage played forward and

backward and by juxtaposing the images from positive to negative. Through this approach, the artist morphs the figure into an almost invisible and ghostly presence. *Sunshine State* concludes with the same iconic sequence framed against a continuous play of black and white backgrounds that causes a flickering effect.

5. *Caribs' Leap*, 2002



Caribs' Leap consists of two videos shot on the Caribbean island of Grenada, the homeland of Steve M^cQueen's mother and father: one of the two on an LED screen placed on the outer façade of Pirelli HangarBicocca and the second inside the Navate space.

Caribs' Leap, 2002 (still)
35mm color film,
transferred to video,
no sound, 12'6",
continuous projection
Commissioned by
documenta and
Artangel, with the
support of Heinz &
Simone Ackermans

The first of the two videos commemorates a historical event dating back to 1651, when—as a form of resistance to the French occupation—the inhabitants of Grenada (the native Caribs) jumped from the highest point on the island to their death to avoid surrendering and being captured. A catholic church now sits on the site. The first images show gray-blue monochromes turning into a sky where white clouds dissolve into the background. The scene is periodically punctuated by human figures that fall vertiginously, sometimes in the distance, like phantom apparitions, sometimes in the foreground, as if suspended in their descent.

On the second screen, the footage starts with the sunrise in Grenada as the camera follows the movement of boats floating on the horizon. Over time, the seashore comes to life, turning into the scenery for everyday activities like fishing and children returning from school. The slowness of the filming seems to further delay the time frame until the final scenes, when the camera focuses on a setting with funereal traits at dusk.

While the first video creates a short-circuit, in which a fraction of a second is amplified into an endless loop, the second seems to reverse this conception of time, presenting an image of Grenada over the timespan of a whole day. Past and present intertwine within a cyclical motion prompting reflection on colonial oppression and the forms of resistance that still resonate in life today.

6. *Western Deep*, 2002



Western Deep, 2002 (still)
Super 8mm color film,
transferred to video,
sound, 24'12"
Commissioned by
documenta and
Artangel, with the
support of Heinz &
Simone Ackermans

Shot inside the TauTona goldmine in South Africa, one of the world's deepest, *Western Deep* opens in utter darkness as miners descend more than three kilometers underground in industrial elevators. The darkness is relieved fleetingly by the lamps on the workers' helmets, lighting their faces and silhouettes.

The film follows them in their descent into the depths and conveys the oppressive, claustrophobic feeling of the dust-saturated tunnels that rise to very high temperatures. The heat in the environment spreads through the men's bodies and their temperature is measured. The rhythmic pulsing and intermittent sound of a red alarm signal mark another scene in which miners are subjected to physical endurance exercises. The acoustic dimension alternates jarring mechanical noises, making the mine's infrastructure tangible, with stretches of silence that unfold amid the shadows along the path.

In *Western Deep*, shot on Super 8mm film, M^cQueen creates a correlation between the filmic medium and the material impact of the mine. As the artist affirmed, «I wanted to shoot on something that had grain. I wanted it to stick to the viewer. I wanted something that the viewer could hold onto, that had texture, the texture of rock, the drilling and mining. I wanted the audience to

actually feel the molecules of dust. In *Western Deep*, sound was part of the texture I wanted to capture.»

Western Deep complements another of M^cQueen's works, *Caribs' Leap*, both commissioned for documenta in 2002 and always featured together. In particular, in the exhibition at Pirelli HangarBicocca *Western Deep* is presented in the space of the Cubo inside a specifically conceived screening room that evokes the cavernous darkness pervading the film, while part of the second work is shown outside the building, in resonance with the sky and radiant brightness of the ocean, one of the principal elements in *Caribs' Leap*.

7. *Moonlit*, 2016

Two marble rocks covered in silver leaf sit side by side on the ground. The elements of reflection and form come into play. Gravity is reinforced at the same time as luminosity which infiltrate the objects and its surroundings. Like the Chicxulub asteroid responsible for mass destruction on Earth 66 million years ago, these sculptures have an other-worldly feel, but they are also connected to earth's regeneration and the richness of its mineral fabric, and instigate new life.

Exhibited Works

1. *Static*, 2009

35mm color film, transferred to HD,
sound, 7'3"

2. *Cold Breath*, 1999

16mm black-and-white film, 10',
continuous projection

3. *Charlotte*, 2004

16mm color film, no sound, 5'42",
continuous projection

4. *Sunshine State*, 2022

HD video, 30'1", continuous projection
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5. *Caribs' Leap*, 2002

Super 8mm color film, transferred to video,
sound, 28'53", continuous projection
35mm color film, transferred to video, no
sound, 12'6", continuous projection
Commissioned by documenta and Artangel,
with the support of Heinz & Simone
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6. *Western Deep*, 2002

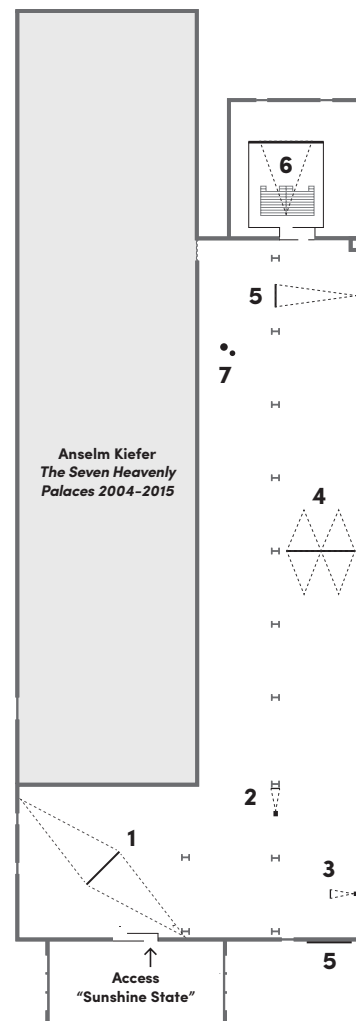
Super 8mm color film, transferred to video,
sound, 24'12"
Commissioned by documenta and Artangel,
with the support of Heinz & Simone Ackermans

7. *Moonlit*, 2016

2 marble rocks and silver leaf
90 x 60 x 40 cm
90 x 80 x 45 cm

Navate

For all artworks: Courtesy the artist, Marian Goodman Gallery, and Thomas Dane Gallery



Selected Exhibitions

Many internationally renowned institutions have presented M^cQueen's works in monographic projects, including Tate Modern, London (2020); Tate Britain, London (2019–21); MoMA Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (2017); Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2016); Schaulager, Basel (2013); Art Institute of Chicago (2012); National Portrait Gallery, London (2010); Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead (2008); The Renaissance Society, Chicago (2007); Fondazione Prada, Milan (2005); ARC – Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (2003); Museu Serralves, Porto, Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona (2002); Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, Kunsthalle Zürich (1999); Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam (1998); Portikus, Frankfurt (1997).

M^cQueen has participated in two consecutive editions of documenta in Kassel (2002 and 1997), and four editions of the Venice Biennale (2015, 2013, 2007, and 2003), where he also represented Great Britain in 2009. He has been the recipient of numerous awards and honors, including the Johannes Vermeer Prize (2016), Harvard University, W.E.B. Du Bois Medal (2014), CBE (Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire) (2011), OBE (Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire) (2002), and the Turner Prize, Tate Gallery, London (1999). For his feature films, M^cQueen has won the Caméra d'Or award at the Cannes Film Festival (2008) for *Hunger* and the Oscar for Best Motion Picture for *12 Years a Slave* in 2014.

This publication accompanies the exhibition “Sunshine State” by Steve M^cQueen

Lenders

Steve M^cQueen, Thomas Dane Gallery, Marian Goodman Gallery

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HD video, 30"1", continuous projection

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Footage from *The Jazz Singer*. Courtesy Warner Bros. Pictures

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Pirelli HangarBicocca is a non-profit foundation, established in 2004, which has converted a former industrial plant in Milan into an institution for producing and promoting contemporary art.

This dynamic center for experimentation and research covers 15,000 square meters, making it one of the largest contiguous exhibition spaces in Europe. It presents major solo shows every year by Italian and international artists, with each project conceived to work in close relation to the architecture of the complex, and explored in depth through a calendar of parallel events. Admission to the space and the shows is completely free of charge, and cultural mediators are on hand to help the public connect with the art. Since 2012, Vicente Todolì has been the foundation's Artistic Director.

The complex, which once housed a locomotive factory, includes an area for public services and educational activities, and three exhibition spaces whose original twentieth-century architectural features have been left clearly visible: Shed, Navate, and Cubo.

As well as its exhibitions program and cultural events, Pirelli HangarBicocca also permanently houses one of Anselm Kiefer's most important site-specific works, *The Seven Heavenly Palaces 2004-2015*, commissioned for the opening of Pirelli HangarBicocca, while the exterior area hosts *La Sequenza* (1971-81) by Fausto Melotti.



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