

# **Projects 62 : Steve McQueen : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, November 28, 1997-January 13, 1998**

**[Barbara London]**

Author

McQueen, Steve, 1969-

Date

1997

Publisher

The Museum of Modern Art

Exhibition URL

[www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/267](http://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/267)

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steve mcqueen

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Catch. 1997. Color video projection. Silent. 1:54 minutes

No hot buttered popcorn at our shows, the media artists declared. More than twenty-five years ago, Peter Campus, Dennis Oppenheim, Vito Acconci, and a troop of rebellious film/ video artists scrapped the silver screen and projected their images directly onto gallery walls.

These artists looked beyond narrative structure. They experimented by integrating their moving images with performance, conceptual art, installation, and other artistic concerns of the time. Though their revolutionary manifestos did little to change Hollywood storytelling, they did succeed in redefining the way viewers experience moving images. Their innovations served as a foundation for the next generation of media artists.

Steve McQueen came to New York in 1992 to study filmmaking at New York University film school. Trained in the freewheeling atmosphere of the Chelsea School of Art and Goldsmith College in London, McQueen bridled at NYU's emphasis on Hollywood conventions.

The film program taught students a "how-to" formula for filmmaking. Unwilling to accept this yoke of conformity, McQueen did not last a full year in the program. He was not interested in emulating traditional directors. He aspired to tell different kinds of stories and to use his camera in ways it had never been used before.

The installation *Catch* (1997) consists of simple repetitive shots: first McQueen standing on a patch of grass, then a spiraling blurred panorama of grass, trees, and sky, followed by a woman in the same frontal framing as McQueen, another blur of scenery, and back to McQueen, an imposing figure projected from floor to ceiling on a large wall. The two formally ordered figures sharply contrast the random streak of landscape.

McQueen keeps the work minimalist. No sound dilutes the direct impact of the images. It is almost as if he is jotting a postcard to his former instructors at NYU: Look at what can be done with a single action. Just toss a camera between two people and have them film one another.

*Bear* (1993) also consists of only one scene, projected directly onto a wall. Two nude men, McQueen and an antagonist, circle warily in a dance that could be considered a warrior's rite of passage. The men are crouched, threatening, maybe flirting at times, until at the climax their bodies clash. Or is this coming together an embrace?

To American viewers, the glistening, sweaty bodies allude to a boxing match. *Bear* seems to imitate the low-angle, ringside view familiar to fans of the sport.

McQueen claims that the work was in fact inspired by British rugby, and that the low-angle shot represents a ball's-eye view of the players.

The specific spark may have been the peculiar rugby formation known as the scrum. In this maneuver, the opposing teams square off facing one another, eight players on each side. Upon a signal from the referee, the men lock bodies together, forming a human tent that lurches back and forth as each side tries to push forward. The object of this exercise is to get control of the ball, which an official has rolled into the gap between the straining athletes.

For McQueen, when men compete, their encounter is not limited to confrontation. He relishes the erotic implications of their camaraderie.

The video/film projection *Five Easy Pieces* (1995) opens with a shot of a heavy rope snapping taut, an advisory to the viewer to remain alert. The rope is a tightrope, a highly precarious means of getting from one place to another. Shot from below



to accentuate the danger, a woman dressed in tights and sequins cautiously slides her slippered feet along the twisted fibers.

The piece is silent. The only sound accompanying the bravado feat comes from viewers mesmerized by McQueen's projection. They restrict their breathing, fearful that the slightest sound might upset the daredevil's tenuous balance.

In an antithetical sequence, a group of men whirls hula hoops, swinging their hips with the abandon of innocent children. Shot from a high angle, the men appear distant, yet their exuberance is infectious. The silent footage seems filled with the men's carefree sounds.

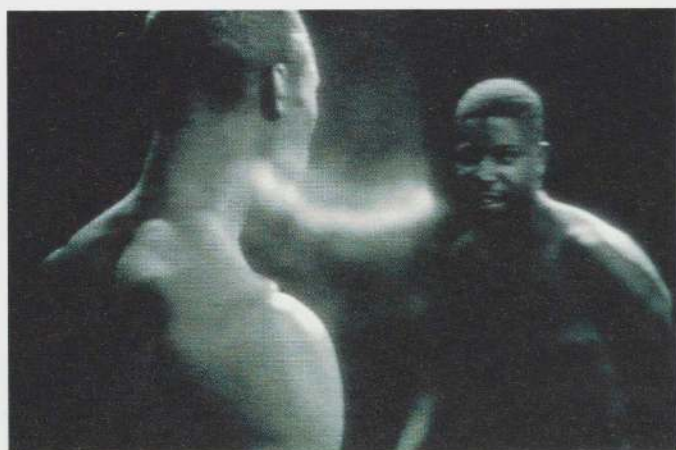
These two sequences suggest that McQueen is telling a story of opposites. His narrative emerges from the clash of formal and emotive elements—up/down, inhibited/free, woman/man, silhouette/shadow, going it alone versus group solidarity.

Still, a remarkable sequence near the end of the piece belies any narrow reading of McQueen's intention. A man (the artist) unzips his trousers and urinates toward the viewer—that is, directly at the camera lens.

The immoderate nature of the bathroom antic invites radical interpretations: Maybe McQueen is nihilistic; maybe he is showing contempt for his fans, like Sid Vicious spitting god-like on his worshipers.

But McQueen's intentions go much further. The urination scene erases all complacent interpretations of the preceding material and forces a reevaluation of the work. McQueen's *Five Easy Pieces* began with the idea of such a sequence, one that refocuses all others.

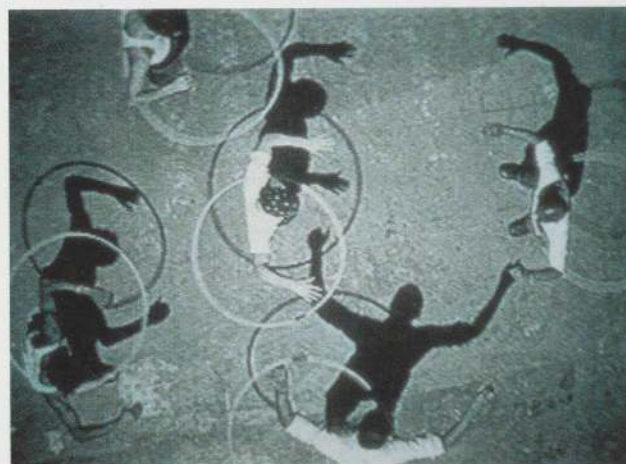
McQueen appropriated the title of the work from the eponymous 1970 feature film starring Jack Nicholson. He plays a drifter who appears fully at home in a working class milieu.



*Bear*. 1993. Black-and-white and color 16mm film/video projection. Silent. 10:35 minutes

A pivotal scene, however, reveals that the drifter was born into a wealthy family. He had been a remarkably gifted pianist when he was young, but had abandoned that upper-class world because playing beautiful pieces left him feeling empty. They were too easy for him, and in the end meaningless.

These revelations totally transform the viewer's perception of the Nicholson character. His previous behavior has to be reassessed in this different context and integrated anew.



*Five Easy Pieces*. 1995. Black-and-white and color 16 mm film/video projection. Silent. 7:34 minutes

McQueen is candid about the reappraisal intended by his *Five Easy Pieces*. Alongside its formal elegance, which bespeaks high art, McQueen's work is raunchy. The dance of the hula hoopers is not all playful modesty. At times, the men salaciously gyrate their hips, and their elongated shadows simulate ecstatic sex. The tightrope walker is more than a daredevil. She is a voluptuous beauty whose dress's jiggling sequins keep time to the rhythm of the rotating hula hoops. A close-up shot of her foot curling around the tightrope (rope is a euphemism for the male organ) underlines the kinkiness of the piece.

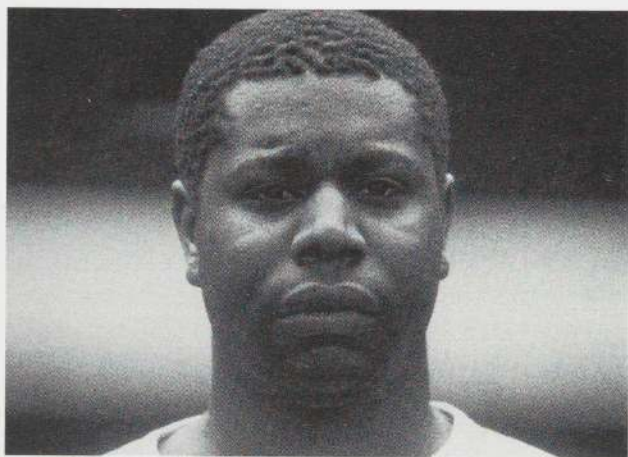
The scene of McQueen urinating maintains the allusive eroticism of the work. In *The Golden Shower*, a classic film of the deviant underground, a man and a woman undress in a seedy room and enact all the familiar details of such an encounter. The silent black-and-white film, grainy from many generations of clandestine copies, reaches a climax when the man urinates on the woman.

The transgressive quality of McQueen's projections allies him with a younger generation of artists, some of whom are loosely known as the Brit Pack. For these enterprising British artists, nothing is deemed sacred or out of bounds.

Sam Taylor-Wood, for example, re-enacts the subject of Botticelli's masterpiece, *The Birth of Venus*. In this updated, laser-printed version, Venus is a veteran of the sexual revolution. She wears jeans pulled down to her knees and a leering smile that promises raucous sex.

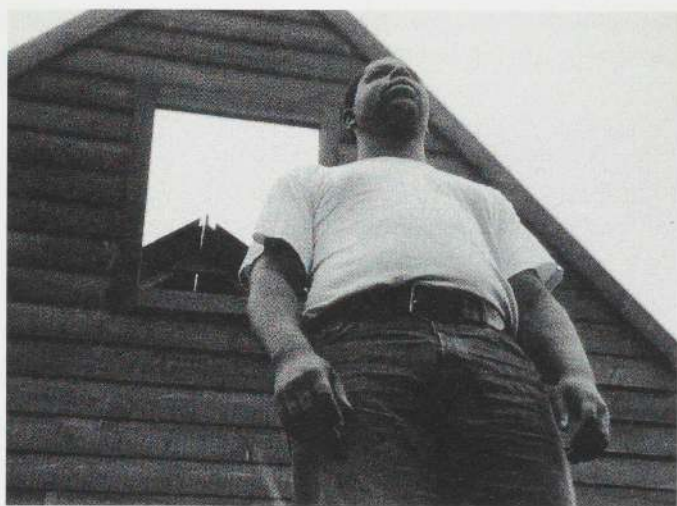
Sarah Lucas, another of McQueen's compatriots, enlarges salacious photos lifted from tabloids. One of her collages stars a topless dwarf in a kiss-o-gram. Her appropriation of media images and popular culture is characteristic of the new generation of British artists.

McQueen's most recent work, *Deadpan* (1997), was inspired by an image of Buster Keaton. In the 1928 silent film *Steamboat Bill Jr.*, Keaton stands in front of a dilapidated house, unaware that its walls are buckling and about to collapse. Shingles and beams crash down around him, but he remains tranquil, unperturbed by the enveloping chaos. The moment is vintage Keaton, conveying simpleminded wonder at what happens in an ordinary day. His innocence protects him like a shield, a theme that has recently resurfaced in a spate of dumb and dumber films.



*Deadpan*. 1997. Black-and-white 16mm film/video projection.  
Silent. 4:03 min.





*Deadpan*. 1997. Black-and-white 16mm film/video projection.  
Silent. 4:03 min.

*Deadpan* reenacts the Keaton episode with McQueen in the main role. Unlike Keaton's *Everyman*, a small figure in a large landscape, McQueen is imposing. His image stretches dramatically from floor to ceiling in a video projection that covers an entire wall. More like a Samson than a Keaton, he seems equal to any task short of withstanding a temple collapsing on his head.

On all sides of McQueen, a house falls apart. The deconstruction is carefully orchestrated, as if McQueen were chronicling the evolution of his persona. The old skin peels away and a raw nature emerges. McQueen has shed his inhibitions, and he challenges his viewers to do likewise.

Barbara London  
Associate Curator  
Department of Film and Video

The **projects** series is sponsored by Peter Norton.

The projector has been loaned by Electrohome, Ltd.

Photographs are courtesy Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London, and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

Cover: *Deadpan*. 1997. Black-and-white 16mm film/video projection. Silent. 4:03 min.

Editor: Rachel Posner. Designer: Raul Loureiro. Production: Claire Corey

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## biography

Steve McQueen was born in London in 1969. He studied at the Chelsea School of Art, London; Goldsmith College, London; and Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, New York. In 1996 he was awarded the Institute of Contemporary Arts Futures Award. He lives in London and Amsterdam.

## selected exhibitions

- 1994 *Acting Out the Body in Video: Then and Now*, Royal College of Art, London
- 1995 *Mirage: Enigma of Race, Difference and Desire*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London  
*X/Y*, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris  
*The British Art Show*, Manchester and traveling exhibition
- 1996 *Spellbound*, Hayward Gallery, London  
*Timing*, De Appel Foundation, Amsterdam  
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago  
*Life/Live*, ARC, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris  
*Just Above My Head*, Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London
- 1997 Portikus, Frankfurt am Main  
Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, the Netherlands  
Marian Goodman Gallery, New York  
*Documenta X*, Kassel, Germany  
*2nd Johannesburg Biennale*, Johannesburg

## complete list of works

- Exodus*. 1992-97. Color Super-8 film/video projection. 1:50 min.
- Bear*. 1993. Black-and-white and color 16mm film/video projection. Silent. 10:35 min.
- Five Easy Pieces*. 1995. Black-and-white and color 16mm film/video projection. Silent. 7:34 min.
- Stage*. 1996. Black-and-white 35mm film projection. Silent. 6 min.
- Just Above My Head*. 1996. Black-and-white 16mm film/video projection. Silent. 9:35 min.
- Catch*. 1997. Color video projection. Silent. 1:54 min.
- Deadpan*. 1997. Black-and-white 16mm film/video projection. Silent. 4:03 min.

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