

Dia:



Steve McQueen

May 12, 2024–April 14, 2025

Dia Beacon

Riggio Galleries
3 Beekman Street
Beacon, New York

Steve McQueen

For more than 30 years, artist and filmmaker Steve McQueen has continually investigated myriad properties of film—as a material, a documentary tool, and a storytelling medium—resulting in work that is formally inventive and politically pointed.

Beginning his career in London in the 1990s, McQueen realized video and film works that critically retrieve the histories of cinema and video art and the reduced formal vocabulary of Minimalism through the lens of contemporary social issues. He emerged as a significant voice in contemporary art with groundbreaking works such as *Deadpan* (1997), in which the artist reenacts a death-defying Buster Keaton stunt. Working like a sculptor, McQueen situates his projected images within installations that resonate on multiple levels and go beyond the conventional frame of cinema. As in his artworks, so too in his feature-length films and work for television, McQueen employs extended takes, minimal variations, and a close attention to the body to address historical events such as slavery in the United States, hunger strikes in Northern Ireland prisons, and West Indian immigrant life in London, as well as contemporary topics like sex addiction in New York.

For this commission, McQueen selected Dia Beacon's lower level to create a site-responsive work. With no representational or moving-image component, *Bass* (2024) is an environment comprised of the most basic, structural elements of film: light and sound. The work consists of 60 ceiling-mounted lightboxes emanating a shifting spectrum of visible light and three stacks of speakers transmitting bass sounds from different points in the gallery. Unlike RGB, which constructs all colors from a mixture of red, green, and blue, and is used in most screens and projectors, the lights for *Bass* utilize LED technology to expand the available color spectrum. As the light changes color slowly, almost imperceptibly, it floods the subterranean space and pillared architecture, while the sound that is broadcast from the strategically placed speakers reverberates off the gallery's concrete surfaces. Bass is among the lowest types of sound in music and operates at a sub-frequency; the impact is embodied, that is, more felt than heard. With *Bass*, McQueen uses these two elements—light and sound—to effectively sculpt the lower level.

McQueen has used color in a highly distilled manner to create a mood or effect in a number of works. *Charlotte* (2004) is a 16 mm film projection of an extreme close-up of the British actress Charlotte Rampling. Shot through a red filter, it is intimate and erotic but, as McQueen's finger moves to touch her eye, also conveys a sense of impending danger. *Bass* also has roots in the more recent *Blues Before Sunrise* (2012), the artist's first public-art project in which he fitted blue filters to the 275 streetlamps lining Amsterdam's Vondelpark. Unconstrained by the limitations of the camera, people performing everyday activities beneath these blue lights, such as bicycling, gathering, or even cruising, become the cast of the work. Linking the color to a sonic and lived experience, the work borrows its title from Leroy Carr's blues standard of the same name, first released in 1934.

McQueen has frequently employed sound as a device to portray the spirit of the persons or places represented on screen. Departing from the strategies of Andy Warhol's iconic film *Empire* (1965), which is a long, silent take of the Empire State Building, McQueen's *Static* (2009) is a 35 mm film shot from a helicopter circling another New York landmark, the Statue of Liberty. Though the statue itself is static, the circling of the camera destabilizes the image as well as this most democratic of symbols, while the booming sound of the whirring helicopter blades overtakes the gallery and the body of the viewer, thus collapsing the boundaries of context and content.

For *Bass*, McQueen chose to focus exclusively on the titular bass, bringing this frequency that typically operates in the background of a song to the foreground. To create the music, McQueen worked with the renowned bassist Marcus Miller to assemble an intergenerational group of expert Afro-diasporic musicians. In January 2024, they came together at Dia Beacon to record a musical improvisation that collectively responded to the changing light, resonance of the space, and one another, with McQueen as conductor. Made with acoustic and electric bass instruments, including the Malian *bass ngoni*, the composition reflects the hybrid musical idioms that resulted from the transatlantic slave trade between West Africa, the Americas, and the Caribbean—important early references for this work. With no clear beginning nor end, the music acts as an anchor to and echo of the past while reverberating into the future, acknowledging that, as scholar Paul Gilroy writes, although the terrors of the Middle Passage were “unspeakable, these terrors were not inexpressible.”¹ In this way, the subterranean gallery suggests a liminal space. At the same time, it can be seen to evoke the basement dwelling in Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man*. The title character describes his space as a “hole” that is “full of light,” in which he listens to his music on a radio-phonograph to “feel its vibration, not only with [his] ear but with [his] whole body.”²

In keeping with how McQueen describes his artistic approach, *Bass* “[puts] the public in a situation where everyone becomes acutely sensitive to themselves.”³ In addition to the sound, the diffused light from the lightboxes is such that anybody moving through it is bathed in light but casts no shadow. For McQueen, shadow translates to things that are hidden or feared. He is interested in the unflinching quality of light to illuminate and reveal traumatizing experiences, while also offering possibilities for recuperation and transcendence. The intersection of sound and light key to *Bass* is mobilized by McQueen as a material metaphor, embodying the spaces in between. As such, *Bass* offers an experience that both speaks to the past and to new ways of being.

—Donna De Salvo with Emily Markert

Notes

1. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 73.
2. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952), pp. 4–6.
3. Steve McQueen, quoted in Charles-Arthur Boyer, "La pulsation de l'image / The Pulsation of the Image," in *Steve McQueen: Speaking in Tongues*, ed. Laurent Bosse (Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 2003), p. 56.

Further reading

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Jaji, Tsitsi Ella. *Africa in Stereo: Modernism, Music, and Pan-African Solidarity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Kim, Clara, and Fiontán Moran, eds. *Steve McQueen*. London: Tate Publishing, 2020.

Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016.

Steve McQueen: Works. Basel: Laurenz Foundation, Schaulager Basel; Heidelberg: Kehrer Verlag Heidelberg Berlin, 2012.

Todolí, Vicente, ed. *Steve McQueen: Sunshine State*. Milan: Pirelli HangarBicocca; Venice: Marsilio Editori, 2022.

About the artist

Steve McQueen was born in London in 1969. Surveys of his work have been held at the Art Institute of Chicago and Laurenz Foundation, Schaulager Basel (2012–13); Tate Modern, London (2020); and Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan (2022). Recent solo presentations include those at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2016); the Art Institute of Chicago (2017); Museum of Modern Art, New York (2017); Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester (2017); Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (2017–18); Pérez Art Museum, Miami (2017–18); Tate Britain, London (2019–21); and Serpentine Gallery, London (2023). McQueen has participated in Documenta X (1997) and XI (2002), as well as the Venice Biennale (2003, 2007, 2013, and 2015), representing Great Britain in 2009. He is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Turner Prize (1999); W. E. B. Du Bois Medal, Harvard University (2014); and Johannes Vermeer Award (2016). He was declared Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire in 2002, Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire in 2011, and Knight Commander of the Most Excellent Order in 2020.

McQueen directed the feature films *Hunger* (2008), *Shame* (2011), *12 Years a Slave* (2014), and *Widows* (2018); as well as the series *Small Axe* (2020), an anthology of five films shown on the BBC and Amazon; and *Uprising* (2021), a three-part documentary series for the BBC. His documentary *Occupied City* (2023) is based on the book *Atlas van een bezette stad: Amsterdam 1940-1945* (Atlas of an Occupied City: Amsterdam 1940–1945, 2019) by Bianca Stigter. McQueen won the Caméra d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival for *Hunger* in 2008 and an Oscar for Best Motion Picture for *12 Years a Slave* in 2014.

McQueen lives in Amsterdam and London.

Checklist

Bass, 2024

LED lightboxes and sound

Courtesy the artist, co-commissioned by Dia Art Foundation and
Laurenz Foundation, Schaulager Basel

Music:

Concept, producer, and arranger: Steve McQueen

Bandleader, producer, and arranger: Marcus Miller

Composed and performed by:

Steve McQueen, conductor

Marcus Miller, electric bass

Meshell Ndegeocello, electric bass

Aston Barrett Jr., electric bass

Mamadou Kouyaté, *bass ngoni*

Laura-Simone Martin, upright bass

Recording and sound designer: Paolo Brandi

Recording assistant: Jonny Taylor

Steve McQueen is co-commissioned by Dia Art Foundation and Laurenz Foundation, Schaulager Basel.

Steve McQueen is curated by Donna De Salvo, senior adjunct curator, special projects, with Emily Markert, curatorial assistant, and Randy Gibson, manager of exhibition technology.

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A concurrent *Steve McQueen* exhibition is on view at Dia Chelsea, New York, September 19, 2024–January 2025.

Cover: Steve McQueen, *Bass* (detail), 2024. © Steve McQueen. Photo: Don Stahl