

# Dia:



**Steve McQueen**

September 20, 2024–July 13, 2025

**Dia Chelsea**

537 West 22nd Street  
New York, New York

## Steve McQueen

For more than 30 years, artist Steve McQueen has continually investigated the possibilities inherent in film—as a material, documentary tool, and storytelling medium—resulting in work that is formally inventive and politically pointed. Often delving into power relations, McQueen’s films and videos capture the experience of living both within and in opposition to hierarchical structures, critically examining current social issues by drawing on the histories of cinema and video art and the reduced formal vocabulary of Minimalism. He emerged as a significant voice in contemporary art with groundbreaking works such as *Bear* (1993), in which the artist engages another protagonist in a wrestling session that oscillates between aggression and camaraderie, and *Deadpan* (1997), wherein he reenacts a death-defying Buster Keaton stunt. In his art, feature films, and television work alike, he employs extended takes, minimal variations, and extreme physicality to probe histories and social realities that are simultaneously fundamental and highly specific.

*Steve McQueen* at Dia Chelsea unites three works that explore narratives of the African diaspora from across two decades of the artist’s career. The presentation centers on *Sunshine State* (2022), a two-channel, dual-sided video projection that enlists a story about McQueen’s father to examine notions of identity and racial stereotypes. In tandem with *Sunshine State*, McQueen has elected to revisit one of his earliest works, *Exodus* (1992–97), a film that follows two West Indian men through the streets of London, and has created *Bounty* (2024), a new set of photographs taken in Grenada, his parents’ place of origin. The exhibition on view at Dia Chelsea is seen in dialogue with *Bass* (2024), McQueen’s commission for Dia Beacon—an immersive light-and-sound installation inspired in part by the hybrid musical idioms that resulted from the transatlantic slave trade, one of the artist’s most abstract works to date—on view concurrently through May 2025. Taken together, these two presentations interweave the personal and political as McQueen meditates on his ancestry and the grand historical subject of the Middle Passage.

*Sunshine State* begins with footage of the menacing surface of the boiling-hot sun. In a voice-over, the artist recounts an experience of his father, Philbert, who in the 1950s had come to Florida from Grenada to work as an orange picker. McQueen details the incident in which his father and two other migrant workers ventured outside their camp. The story is repeated several times and with each retelling words are dropped, leaving at the end only fragments of the first, complete version.

McQueen intercuts this account of racial violence with scenes from *The Jazz Singer* (1927)—the first “talkie,” or film with synchronized speech and music—well known for its scenes of blackface. A film the artist had long hoped to work with, it depicts an aspiring singer, Jackie Rabinowitz, who is ostracized by his family for his pursuit of secular passions and attempts to transcend his Jewish identity, in part by performing in blackface. While McQueen’s interests here are in the racial dynamics inherent in

blackface and its long trade on negative stereotypes to denigrate African Americans, he is also seizing on the recognition offered by *The Jazz Singer* that, as Cora Gilroy-Ware observes, “the performer is undone, rather than liberated, by his crude assumption of blackness as an alter-identity.”<sup>1</sup> This proposition unfolds on-screen via McQueen’s digital manipulation of the film: wherein Rabinowitz applied blackface in his quest for a new identity, the footage has been edited by McQueen to make his face disappear.

A multiscreen structure at the center of the gallery, *Sunshine State* requires viewers to physically navigate the two sides of the installation. Both animating and expanding into the space, this work epitomizes McQueen’s use of projections “to undo the predictability of the filmed frame as image alone.”<sup>2</sup> McQueen has also edited *The Jazz Singer* to play forward in negative on the left-hand channel and in reverse but positive on the right-hand channel, with both visible from either side of the installation; the two screens portray the same moments yet are never in sync. This purposeful disruption of site and sound can be seen in other of McQueen’s works, such as in *End Credits* (2012–20) where viewers hear two voices speak words that do not entirely match the mostly redacted text on-screen. Here, the fragmentation of his father’s narrative underscores the difficulty in recuperating a story or history. By replacing the original audio of the first talkie with his own secondhand chronicle, McQueen emphasizes the ways language can be both grounding and destabilizing.

In the adjacent gallery, *Exodus* stands in distinct contrast to the multiscreen configuration of *Sunshine State*. A single-channel, silent video, it is among McQueen’s first works and also one of his most improvisational: while walking in a busy London street with a Super 8 mm camera, the artist spotted two well-dressed men from the West Indies carrying potted palm trees and immediately began filming. On a seemingly mysterious, ritualistic journey, the men deftly navigate the city as their palm trees, symbols of the tropics, sway above the crowds. In this way, although formally different, *Exodus*’s content is not unlike *Sunshine State* as it gestures toward metaphors of African diasporic migration. Solveig Nelson considers *Exodus* through the lens of another area of film history and one of McQueen’s influences, New Queer Cinema. If the men in *Exodus* might be a romantic couple—something McQueen has speculated about—the film thus “offers a way of looking that is open to the everyday possibility of queerness without feeling any need to prove it.”<sup>3</sup> Whether they are a couple, colleagues, friends, or enemies, the ambiguous pair resists categorization through a productive refusal of representation, especially of Black masculinity and intimacy, similar to that seen in *Sunshine State*.

Both *Exodus* and *Sunshine State* are complemented by *Bounty*, a photographic work featuring flowers found in Grenada for which the artist journeyed to the country in summer 2024. Descended from parents who migrated to London from the Caribbean,

McQueen has contemplated Grenada in many past works, including *Ashes* (2002–15) and *Caribs Leap* (2002), which were both filmed there. As he explains, *Bounty* considers how, over centuries of colonial rule by the French and British in Grenada, “what has been a constant in the landscape has been the beauty of flowers. These plants have been a thing of wonder within a landscape which has been traumatized by colonialism and slavery.”<sup>4</sup>

The three works at Dia Chelsea, together with *Bass* at Dia Beacon, come together to form a loose series of journeys to both real and remembered places, past and present. In *Sunshine State* in particular, McQueen’s narrative travels from the secondhand account of his father’s experience in Florida to the very real bedside at which he heard the tale. McQueen’s decision to share this story (while using his own voice in his art for the first time) pushes *Sunshine State* into an overtly personal territory, while speaking obliquely to histories of colonialism and racial politics, as many of his works do; in his words, “It’s a personal story, but at the same time, it’s not. It’s a very classic story, unfortunately.”<sup>5</sup>

—Donna De Salvo with Emily Markert

## Notes

1. Cora Gilroy-Ware, “In the Dead of Night: Steve McQueen’s *Sunshine State*,” in *Steve McQueen: Sunshine State*, ed. Vincente Todolí (Milan: Pirelli HangarBicocca; Venice: Marsilio Editori, 2022), p. 84.
2. Okwui Enwezor, “From Screen to Space: Projection and Reanimation in the Early Work of Steve McQueen,” in *Steve McQueen: Works* (Basel: Laurenz Foundation, Schaulager Basel; Heidelberg: Kehrer Verlag Heidelberg Berlin, 2012), pp. 20–21.
3. Solveig Nelson, “Steve McQueen and New Queer Cinema,” in *Steve McQueen: Sunshine State*, p. 59.
4. Steve McQueen, artist statement on *Bounty*, 2024.
5. Steve McQueen, “Steve McQueen offloads some ‘heavy shit’ in new artwork *Sunshine State*,” interview by Thom Waite, *Dazed*, February 2, 2023, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/58095/1/steve-mcqueen-heavy-shit-new-artwork-sunshine-state-rotterdam-film-festival>.

## Further reading

De Salvo, Donna, Isabel Friedli, Elsa Himmer, and Emily Markert, eds. *Steve McQueen: Bass*. Basel: Laurenz Foundation, Schaulager Basel; New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2024.

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

*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.

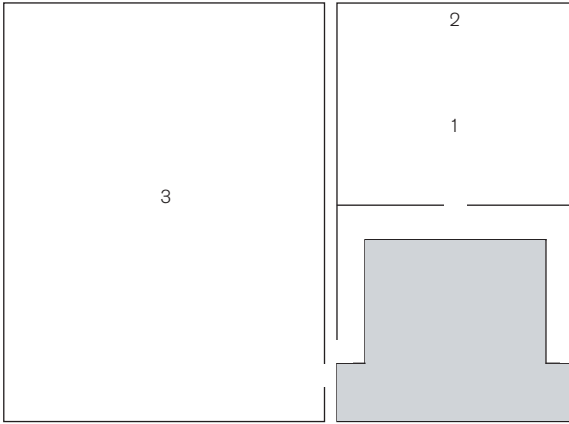
van Noord, Gerrie, ed. *Steve McQueen*. London: Institute of Contemporary Arts; Zurich: Kunsthalle Zürich, 1999.

## 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

### 1. **Bounty**, 2024

Inkjet prints on aluminum composite, edition 1/4 and 2 A.P.

### 2. **Exodus**, 1992–97

Digital video transferred from Super 8 mm film, color, silent, 1:05 min., looped; E.C. 1/1, edition of 4 and 1 A.P.

### 3. **Sunshine State**, 2022

Two-channel HD video projection, color, with sound, 30:01 min., looped; E.C. 1/1, edition of 4 and 2 A.P.

All works courtesy the artist, Marian Goodman Gallery, and Thomas Dane Gallery

*Steve McQueen* is curated by Donna De Salvo, senior adjunct curator, special projects, with Emily Markert, curatorial assistant.

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A concurrent presentation of McQueen's *Bass* is on view at Dia Beacon, New York, May 12, 2024–May 2025. The publication accompanying *Bass* was made possible by the Laurenz Foundation. Additional support provided by Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Paris, and Los Angeles, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London and Naples.

Cover: Steve McQueen, *Sunshine State*, 2022. Installation view, International Film Festival Rotterdam, 2022. © Steve McQueen. Footage: *The Jazz Singer*, courtesy Warner Bros. Photo: Studio Hans Wilschut/IFFR, courtesy the artist, Marian Goodman Gallery, and Thomas Dane Gallery