

Steve McQueen, Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London

What do Henry David Thoreau, Laurie Anderson, and Richard Long have in common? Each has dedicated at least one of their works to the simple act beautifully filmed by artist Steve McQueen: walking. *Just Above My Head* (previously screened -- and instantly well-received -- at 'life/live', Paris' recent tribute to young British art at the ARC) is a nine-minute, black and white film installation, McQueen's fourth work to date. With its polish and depth, it seems to spell a change from the homemade, streetwise art this country currently revels in.

An expanse of grey sky sweeps across a giant, wall-sized screen; along the bottom edge emerges McQueen's tiny head, while walking, filmed from just a few steps ahead of him. Bearing an expression of grand, purposeful determination, the head bobs up and down irregularly, as if the artist himself were holding the camera before him (he isn't; there's an unseen cameraman), pointing the camera upward as he strides down the street. His neck and shoulders occasionally make brief, accidental appearances; at times the unsteady camera loses its subject and McQueen's head vanishes altogether, sinking invisibly into the floor and leaving only the pale, marble-like sky. Almost instantly the head pokes back onto the screen, reflected and doubled in the smooth floor as it continues its uncharted, monodirectional journey.

Like the stoics, who took their name from the philosophical discussions along walks in the city stoa, McQueen is concentrated, relentless, determined in grasping what is, indeed, beyond him and just above his head. For centuries art has been about the artist's vision; here we are offered all that escapes the artist's eye, the infinite above, around and beyond him. McQueen's bold performance is generations away from 1970s body art, which was tirelessly obsessed with the artist's body and its potential for pain. Here, the artist is all head, bodyless, vulnerable and isolated yet intact, struggling to remain 'a part of the picture'.

Briefly, at the very close of the film, a distinctly urban species of tree is seen shadowed against the sky, as if to assert the walker's non-cyclical itinerary (McQueen, we can deduce, is not where he began) and his persistent ignorance of events and changes around him. 'Every walk is a sort of crusade', wrote Thoreau. Perhaps more than a walker, McQueen is by definition a saunterer, a word derived from the French either from *Sainte-Terre*, from the idle faithful who roamed from town to town in the Middle Ages, seeking the Holy Land; or *sans terre*, landless, rootless souls forced to wander the earth like loose kites. McQueen admits they both might be beyond him: either redemption, or simply an intellectual homeground in which to land.

– *Gilda Williams*