

STEVE McQUEEN "Cold Breath"

Delfina Project Space
London

Steve McQueen's work is always visually confrontational, life seen from different perspectives. *Just above my Head* (1996) *Catch* (1997) and *Drum Roll* (1998) were testament to that. *Cold Breath* at Delfina Project space is no exception, combining as it does many of the classic trope's of the artist. The especially constructed space cleverly creates an interplay between small video screen and large projection space, two different ways to view the same work. A dialogue with how our viewing experience changes when galleries screen work in different formats. The larger space is more relaxed, the screen fills the wall. The viewer is less observed, the enormous scale less disturbingly intimate.

Cold Breath when first viewed in harsh close up on the smaller screen, is almost too much to take, the work is so physical. McQueen's goose-pimpled hairless left breast fills your view. You are literally up against the moonscape of his chest, watching voyeuristically as his frenetic fingers pluck, strum, tweak and twist. McQueen's goose bumps, filmed with a macro lens, become more pronounced as the film relentlessly progresses. This is a seductive and alluring orgy of silent masturbatory action. The areole is lubricated with spit which drips down on it adding a visceral texture to the monochrome screen. The nipple is isolated and foregrounded as his chest rises and falls. His breath comes in quicker bursts as the reel progresses. I am reminded of Warhol's *Blow Job*, where the action takes place off screen and the camera focuses relentlessly on the recipient's face. McQueen's work is a reversal, the action is shown and the face omitted, but in both Scopophilia is unavoidable. There are other overtones of performance art of the sixties and seventies. Mapplethorpe's *Robert having his nipple pierced*. (1970) springs to mind. Steve McQueen claimed that he wanted to work with the nipple because it was like an eye. The metaphor is not lost, as the 'blind' eye of the nipple becomes obscured at times by the frantic actions of the stimulating fingers. McQueen is not having a polite Renaissance tweak which Gabrielle d'Estrees gives her sister in the Louvre. This is the threshold between pleasure and pain. *Cold Breath* is a powerful and evocative work.

Jean Wainwright



Steve McQueen
Cold Breath, 2000
16mm continuous projection
Courtesy Antony Reynolds Gallery