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Review: Ingenious Versatility in the Whitney's 'Open Plan'

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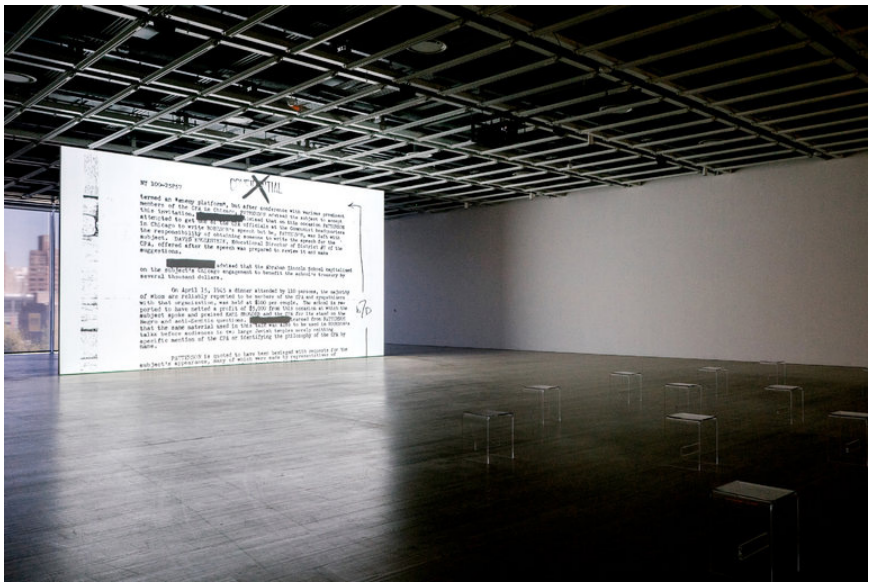

Part of Steve McQueen's exhibition, which presents the F.B.I.'s file on Paul Robeson on the open fifth floor at the Whitney. Credit Jake Naughton for The New York Times

For the last two months, the Whitney Museum of American Art has been highlighting the genius of the spacious fifth floor in its grand new downtown Renzo Piano building. The method of illumination is "Open Plan," a rapid succession of five very different exhibitions ranging from four to 17 days long. In each case, an artist, working closely with a Whitney curator or curatorial team, was given the run of the space, unfettered by interior walls.

The first four shows, now over, were by the astute Conceptualist Andrea Fraser, the young painter-installation artist Lucy Dodd, the veteran sculptor and earthwork artist Michael Heizer, and the jazz giant Cecil Taylor. Friday brings the final "Open Plan" effort: "End Credits," a double-screen video projection by the film and video artist and Oscar-winning director Steve McQueen. This searing presentation of the F.B.I.'s file on and harassment of the singer, actor and civil rights activist Paul Robeson brings an exceptional series to an extraordinary close.

Working in combinations of sound, social critique, music, spoken word, painting, dance, video and slide projection, the artists of "Open Plan" have all made distinctive use of the fifth floor's wonderfully proportioned space — never making it seem overwhelming, never stooping to grandiosity.

The Whitney has from the start been vociferously proud of the fifth floor, proclaiming its 18,200 square feet as the largest column-free exhibition space in New York City, and promoting the panoramic views of the city (to the east) and the Hudson River (to the west) from its all-glass end walls. In the cold data of Manhattan real estate, its dimensions — 269 feet by 67 feet with ceilings of 17½ feet — make the space roughly as long as the average north-to-south city block, as wide as three brownstones and taller than most double height ballrooms.

In phase one of "Open Plan," we saw the floor as is. For the audio work "Down the River" — which was organized by the Whitney's chief curator, Scott Rothkopf, and the assistant curator Laura Phipps — Ms. Fraser daringly left the space empty but filled it — loaded it really — with often frightening sounds that could suggest some form of hell: loud male voices, clanking metal, rolling carts. My first thought was of a busy dock like those that once lined Manhattan's southern flanks. But it had an oppressive indoor clamor; it turned out to be sounds recorded in the A Block at the Sing Sing prison 35 miles up the Hudson River. The piece immersed the gallery in stress and

hopelessness, creating in a space of privilege an aural, almost physiological, experience of social polarization and inequality, of our unfair justice system and its failure to rehabilitate lives.

Ms. Dodd's "B.O.V." (Birth of Venus, abbreviated), organized by the Whitney's associate curator Christopher Y. Lew, added abstract paintings, comfortable seating and, periodically, live music creating four days of sweet oblivion that turned the space into a vast bohemian living room. Hanging ceiling to floor at the gallery's center, three immense abstract paintings formed a kind of altarpiece of amorphous pours and splashes. They were Color Field gone organic, artisanal, made with various teas, powdered iron, mica, sea snail dye and water from the East and Hudson Rivers. Several smaller, irregular canvases were propped up about the space like sharp outcroppings in a landscape. At times, musicians performed behind the big paintings, so they seemed to sing.

For Mr. Heizer's presentation – organized by the museum's deputy director Donna De Salvo and its associate director Carol Mancusi-Ungaro – the windows and elevator bank were shrouded in heavy velour curtains, like an old-time movie palace. Inside, "Actual Size: Munich Rotary," a grainy black-and-white six-camera projection felt like a relic from another time. It documented "Munich Depression," a concave earthwork excavated by Mr. Heizer in Munich in 1969 that sloped gently to a center point 16 feet deep. From there, this 360-degree panorama was shot. The blurry, gritty, nearly vertical plain of dirt and gravel almost reached the Whitney's ceiling, extended 220 feet along the wall and may have come as close as a museum can get to the power and desolation of a real earthwork. It also felt like a wall-to-wall version of one of Roger Fenton's dour, sepia-toned early 1850s photographs of Crimean War battlefields.

Although Mr. Taylor was the series' only musician, his stint was most like a conventional exhibition, a highly effective one. Overseen by Jay Sanders, the museum's curator of performance, and Lawrence Kumpf, artistic director of Blank Forms, it honored six decades of piano improvisation during which Mr. Taylor took jazz to new heights of subtlety, complexity and, ultimately, accessibility. Walls displayed album covers and concert posters. Vitrines offered concert programs, his dazzling free-form scores, handwritten poems and glimpses of him in photographs and on magazine covers. Videos and listening stations gave access to performances and recordings. A large screen showed Mr. Taylor in a white room, warming up, then losing himself in his music.

The floor's Hudson River half accommodated a stage, chairs and bleachers where Mr. Taylor, who is 87, performed on opening night, his improvisations mirrored, interpreted and even anticipated by the avant-garde dancer Min Tanaka, one of his longtime collaborators. This concert was the experience of a lifetime, as was wading into the exhibition with it echoing in your ears.

Mr. McQueen's "End Credits" circles back to the spatial austerity and the aural immersion in political reality of Ms. Fraser's opener, "Down the River," but it is more powerfully disorienting and scathing. Organized by Ms. De Salvo, the work presents the F.B.I.'s file on Robeson – whose passport was revoked during the McCarthy era because of his activism and Communist sympathies – as sight and sound. Its many documents scroll dramatically up two large facing screens, glowing floor-to-ceiling surfaces that are the only light source here. The same material also pours from speakers, as two voices – male and female – take turns reciting numbers, dates and words, redactions noted. Basically the history of the McCarthy era – the paranoia, the agency's sinister yet amateur machinations, local politics, informants, the suppression of civil rights – is thrown at you as raw, inchoate data, as enveloping, exasperating minutia. You read, you listen scrambling to grasp it all, but the meaning is nonetheless clear. The F.B.I. had nothing on Robeson. It needlessly broke his health and ended his career. Mr. McQueen provides a taste of the period's madness, which in many ways continues.

"Open Plan" justifies the Whitney's fifth-floor preening, demonstrating in five ways its ingenious versatility through the use of space as artistic material. It also introduces a greatly improved form of event space: a beautiful, receptive multifunctioning gallery, not a yawning lobby or atrium whose effects end just inside the front door.

"Open Plan: Steve McQueen" is on view through May 14 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 99 Gansevoort Street, West Village; 212-570-3600, whitney.org.

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