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## Douglas Gordon: portrait of the evolving artist

With his sublime new film installation, k.364, Douglas Gordon breaks down the boundaries between video art and portraiture



Memorable journey ... Douglas Gordon's k.364, at the Gagosian Gallery, follows two musicians travelling to Warsaw. Photograph: Mike Bruce

By Jonathan Jones, 7 March 2011

Douglas Gordon is as profound, serious, imaginative and stylistically bold as anyone could wish an artist to be. He has matured in richer, more surprising ways than any of his contemporaries. He is the best British artist of my generation and I am glad his sublime exhibition now on at London's Gagosian Gallery gives me an opportunity to say so.

The powerful qualities of Gordon's art grip you right at the start of this exhibition in a photograph of an arm holding a candle. The candle is lit and has been burning for some time, dripping great grotesque dollops of wax. With a shock, you observe how the hot wax has flowed in rivulets that

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have dried into twisting white ropes and cables on the arm that holds the light. You imagine the pain and discipline it took to hold that hand steady as hot wax poured on to sensitive skin.

Everything that is special about the art of Douglas Gordon lies in this image – the gothic interest in dark experience, the desire to provoke, and above all the deep and unpretentious preoccupation with the nature of time. The photograph is instantaneous, but the history of pain it communicates is agonising – a process of endurance frozen in one image. An act of witness, too, for the hand holds up a candle, a light to illuminate the darkness. Step through the disorientating, mirrored entrance into the expansive space that holds his film installation k.364, and you find out why he needs the light.

Artistic lives today rarely have second acts. A young artist invents a style, makes a name, starts to sell: but all too often, the rest of the story is just merchandising. Douglas Gordon had as brilliant a youth as anyone, slowing down Hitchcock's Psycho to make a monument of it, and winning the Turner Prize for another slow-motion film piece. Was he just an appropriation artist? Could he take it further? How can a modern artist evolve?

Gordon has evolved by confronting basic questions about what art is and what it does. He has returned, using film and photography, to one of the most primitive and universal purposes of art – portraiture. He called his collaborative film Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait. This new film, k.364, is also a portrait – one that reaches back from our century into the dark heart of the last.

It portrays two musicians, Avri Levitan and Roi Shiloah, travelling to Warsaw to play in an orchestral performance of Mozart's k.364. They are Israeli citizens whose Jewish family history goes back to Poland. Together with Gordon and his camera, they take a train from Berlin through Poland, past the forests that hid the murder factories of the Holocaust. They speak about what it feels like, in broken fragments of testimony, amid shards of eerie imagery. And then they take the stage to perform Mozart's glorious music.

The power of the film rests in Gordon's extraordinary super-scale close-ups of their faces, as each grimace, smile, and intense gaze transports us deeper into their hearts and their memories. The music is rapturous, their expressions shattering. It is a modern portrait that Rembrandt might have understood.

Outside this overwhelming installation is Douglas Gordon's self-portrait, formed from a constellation of postcards, children's drawings, personal stuff of all kinds. It is like meeting him for a long night's boozy and emotional chat. There is an unbuttoned reality to this self-portrait that is simply mesmerising. As he grows, Gordon has broken through a lot of boundaries – between video art and the old genres of portraiture and history painting; between mind and feelings; himself and others. He is one of the indispensable artists of our time.