

Douglas Gordon: Tracks of my tears

Douglas Gordon's new film explores trains, chamber music and love – and stars his partner's ex

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From the football pitch to perfect pitch . . . artist Douglas Gordon. Photograph: Teri Pengilley for the Guardian

When Douglas Gordon tells me about his latest work, *K364*, which takes as its heart Mozart's glorious *Sinfonia Concertante K364* for violin, viola and orchestra, I don't expect to be told a love story. But – as he sits in a bright-white room at his London gallery, armed with a fortifying glass of white, his arms thickly inscribed with tattoos ("forever", "always", "everyday") – this is what he tells me.

Back in 2007, the 44-year-old, Glasgow-born artist – who won the Turner prize in 1996, and has long been recognised as one of Britain's major artists, best known for film works such as *24-Hour Psycho* and *Zidane*, co-directed with Philippe Parreno – contributed to a project for which artists made work for Manchester's opera house.

One of the other works, *4 Butterflies*, was by his friend, the Albanian artist Anri Sala. Four sopranos were arrayed around the space, singing Puccini. Gordon fell for the one on the stage, Ruth Rosenfeld, an Israeli who had moved to Berlin to study with Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. Gordon flew to the city – a place he had lived in. "She was dating a 26-year-old bass baritone, so that got my Scottish dander up." It worked out. Rosenfeld quickly became pregnant. They still live in Berlin, with their daughter, now two, where they each work out their different ways of being an artist. ("Left to my own devices, I would lie in bed all day and watch the same film again and again and again. She would get up, practise, practise some more, then go to bed.")

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One of the first people Rosenfeld wanted him to meet was her former husband, viola player Avri Levitan. "After four or five seconds of strange hostility, we became very close friends," says Gordon. One day Ruth suggested they take the train to Poland for a concert: Levitan and a violinist performing the Sinfonia Concertante. "She thought with my devilish interest in doubles, I might be interested – these two instruments that are somewhat the same, but not quite." Gordon's work often hovers round dualities, opposites, bifurcations: his Confessions of a Justified Sinner, for instance, consisted of two screens showing looped sequences of the transformation scenes in Rouben Mamoulian's 1932 film Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde.

And so a group of them, "four Jews and a goy", travelled on the train from Berlin to Poland, looking out on the frozen woods. The Israelis chatted in Hebrew, sometimes nervously on this loaded journey. Gordon pretended to read the paper, "but my wee tricky Scottish mind started thinking . . ."

At the end of the concert, a strange ceremony took place – the mayor made a presentation to a rabbi in the audience. Gordon found out what was going on: a kind of apology, since the synagogue of Poznań had been closed and turned into a swimming pool during the war years.

Gordon's resulting work – which is being shown in London as a two-screen installation for the first time, having been screened at film festivals – takes that journey once more. Gordon films Levitan, and violinist Roi Shiloah, as they travel to Poznań. He also films in the old synagogue, where the Polish ladies' synchronised swimming team were training. And then on to Warsaw, where he films the musicians performing the Sinfonia Concertante with orchestra.

Watching this part of the piece – standing between giant screens with sound engulfing the viewer from above and around – I realise that K364, which may have Gordon's own love story buried at its heart, is also a love story between two musicians. Levitan particularly wanted to make the film with Shiloah, whom he has known since he was five. Watching the film brings you among them as they engage in that glorious, almost transgressively intimate act that is chamber music. The way the players smile, arch their eyebrows, float towards each other and apart, is beguiling. It is a sequence of gestures that makes music not just an aural experience but a visual one. It is rarely felt by an audience, seated in rows to observe a concert platform – but is a rich and secret experience for those who play. Just as Zidane put the viewer on the football pitch, K364 brings you into the deep, beating heart of the music.

Gordon says that when he and his team filmed the concert – "two Scots cameramen and a very emotionally prone, romantic Scottish director" – they all wept. He says: "On the one hand, it is beautiful and romantic. But also somehow sad – I don't think people will come out with a smile on their face. It's as if they are doomed to replay this love story – again and again and again."

• This article was amended on 9 February 2011. The original stated that Ruth Rosenfeld was Douglas Gordon's wife. This has been corrected.