

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Art: Douglas Gordon has created a powerful and unforgettable film on music and the Holocaust

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By Ben Luke

OVER the past two decades, Douglas Gordon has created numerous unforgettable film installations. He slowed down Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* so it evolved mesmerisingly over 24 hours, each frame suspended in time.

He doubled Robert De Niro's seminal "You talking to me?" mirror scene in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, so it appears that De Niro's Travis Bickle confronts himself, sparking a game of endless reflection. And, together with French artist Philippe Parreno, Gordon captured Zinedine Zidane's every move over the course of a football match.

These tense, compelling creations have produced a big reputation. At 44, Gordon has won the Turner Prize and the Guggenheim's Hugo Boss prize. He has displayed major solo exhibitions at the National Gallery of Scotland and at the Hayward Gallery in London, and remains the only British artist of his generation to have had a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin may be household names in the UK, but Gordon is by far the more respected artist internationally.

Now, in his latest show at the Gagosian in North London, he has reached a new peak. The exhibition comprises numerous works, including a photograph of Gordon's hand holding a burning candle and a large installation of the artist's ephemera which acts as a kind of self-portrait. But the exhibition's centrepiece - and it is a masterpiece - is his new film installation *k.364* (2011).

Set in the Gagosian's largest space, the installation features two vast screens surrounded by several mirrors, which reflect the images and complement the film's shimmering plays of light and shade. A simple story underpins the film: two Israeli musicians of Polish descent, Roi Shiloah, violinist, and Avri Levitan, violist, travel by train from Berlin to Poznan in Poland, where they join the Amadeus Chamber Orchestra to perform Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante for Violin, Viola and Orchestra (1779), also known as k.364 in the Köchel catalogue of Mozart's works.

The journey of two Jewish people from Germany to Poland by train immediately conjures the spectre of the Holocaust, and the first half of the film is preoccupied with this loaded background. It begins with impressionistic fragments of imagery relating to the musicians' journey, which loom out of long pauses of total darkness. These are accompanied by a soundtrack capturing the clang and rumble of the train interweaved with passages of Mozart's music.

The legs of a figure thrash in a pool, a reference to the Nazis' conversion of Poznan's synagogue into swimming baths. Train track, girders and cables catch glimmers of light. Headlights gently pulse from the gloom.

Expertly using the two screens and mirrors to augment our disorientation, Gordon ensures that these sequences are powerfully evocative of memories and dreams, a sense which he enhances with long shots focusing on the musicians - Shiloah deep in thought, or asleep; Levitan's hands with fingers enmeshed.

Later, Shiloah talks about his family, as grainy passages of trees and landscape whizz past the train window on the other screen. Subtitles tell us how these forests are "just trees" and yet they are ominously evocative of Shiloah and Levitan's relatives' journeys to the death camps. As the episodic passages stack up, and the Holocaust associations become more insistent, the film grows increasingly disquieting - a lone worker shining a torch under a train carriage becomes an image potent with threat.

But then Gordon makes the spirit soar, as k.364 begins to celebrate the music after which it is named and Levitan and Shiloah take to the stage at the Warsaw Philharmonic Concert Hall. The intimacy with which Gordon captures their performance has echoes of two of his previous works: *Feature Film* (1999), in which he filmed conductor James Conlon in close-up as he takes an orchestra through the soundtrack to Hitchcock's *Vertigo*; and Gordon and Parreno's *Zidane*, among whose chief delights were its capture of the Frenchman's balletic off-the-ball movements.

In k.364, this close camerawork is employed to tremendously stirring effect as it captures Levitan and Shiloah's musical kinship built up through a lifelong friendship, and their rapture in playing the music. There are wonderful moments of complicity between them - glances, smiles and looks of admiration as one of them takes flight with Mozart's score. Gordon picks up, too, on the connections between conductor Agnieszka Duczmal and the soloists. It is a picture of complete concentration and precision. Beautiful incidental moments punctuate, as cameras zone in on the musicians' rocking onto their tiptoes as they play.

Gordon is clearly in awe of Shiloah and Levitan's craft, and there is a palpable sense of one artist paying tribute to others. Lingering shots reflect the texture and colour of the viola and violin under the spotlights with an almost painterly richness. Underlying everything is the reverence of everyone involved for the *Sinfonia Concertante* itself, and Gordon's film is a love letter to Mozart's work.

In looping the film, so that we return immediately to darkness and confusion after the soaring performance, Gordon stresses that the beauty of the music is fleeting compared with the tragedies of the history he evokes in the opening sequences. Gordon told me he felt the film was ultimately bleak. But I emerged from seeing k.364 not with a feeling of gloom but a real sense of uplift. The best of humanity, here expressed through great art, outlives tyranny and violence.

In other hands, k.364's themes and ambitions might have led to triteness and pretension.

But Gordon has created a work as moving, beguiling and exhilarating as any I have seen in recent years.

- *Douglas Gordon: k.364 is at Gagosian, Britannia Street, London, until 26 March.*

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