

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Turner Prize winner Douglas Gordon targets Melbourne

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Douglas Gordon is a leading Scottish artist, having his first major show at ACCA. Photo: Jason South

As a youngster, Douglas Gordon was forbidden from getting tattoos, and he wasn't allowed to watch *The Exorcist*. "Look what happened!" he cries.

Here he is, a Scotsman with tats all over the place and an exhibition featuring that head-turning piece of cinema projected onto a huge scrim, along with another film, *The Song of Bernadette*. Linda Blair spouting obscenities is one of the first things we might see when entering this voluptuous survey of Gordon's work - an exhibition so dense that one room features an eye-shattering 101 television sets, all showing various films he has made over the past couple of decades.

It was a work that had its first iteration more than a decade ago when he had to exhibit in a small room: rather than show one filmed work, he gathered a huge batch of tellies and showed the lot. He has been adding to it since.

To make their way to this extraordinary TV lounge at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, visitors must first pass through other challenging spaces, including a hall of mirrors. The room's vertical surfaces brim with mirrors, large and small, and photographs of various sizes. There are 180 mirrors and 180 images arranged around the 360-degrees of the room, and the atmosphere is much like the artist himself: intense, humorous, full of ideas, and unpretentiously happy to be human, warts and all.

Or, perhaps, tats and all: on his right arm, back-to-front so it can be read in a mirror, is the word "always". It is a reflection and it is reflective, like the art.

Gordon, 1996 winner of the Turner Prize, is best-known for *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), which is not in this show. As a kid, he was banned from watching that film, too, even though Alfred

Hitchcock's 1960 masterpiece was a bit long in the tooth by the time Gordon was old enough to see it (he was born in 1966) and had been overtaken by more explicit horror-fests such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). Or William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973).

Gordon's take on *Psycho* - shown before in Australia - plays the film in excruciating slow motion over 24 hours. A few people have watched it through but most have found themselves quietly contemplating virtually still, silent images of Janet Leigh's face in various poses; the Bates Motel sign; the gothic house, or the plughole (with or without blood). All in black and white and all likely to send us into a reflective mood because, rather than being swept away in plot and the spectacle of cinema, we become aware of being complicit, active viewers. Without us watching, its screening is meaningless.

This face-off between observed and observer is one of Gordon's many themes. Bearded, tatted and T-shirted, he stands briefly amid these mirrors and pictures, and then moves between the five spaces at ACCA containing his work. It is effectively a round-up of what he has been up to over the past 20 years. He's an engaging man and terribly funny. This morning, he has been horrified (and very amused) to discover that the apt title of the show "The only way out is the only way in" is in fact the title of a naff, jingling Cliff Richard song from 1982, the film-clip for which he shows us on his phone with a mixture of uproarious laughter and embarrassment.

The sugary tone of that song couldn't be further from what we experience at ACCA, full of good versus evil, light versus dark, stillness versus action, and reflection versus reality.

The final work is in a pitch black room that lights up every 30 seconds to reveal some disturbing text on the wall. Visitors could be forgiven for feeling a bit dizzy afterwards. Gordon, after all, isn't into making pretty things to make us feel good, even though much of his imagery - photography, moving-images and text - is achingly beautiful. Rather, he likes to slap us around a bit: there's no way to look at his work without being personally involved.

This is perhaps because he likes to get down and dirty during the actual making of a work. He's working on a project at the moment that involves wolves - he's worked with cobras, elephants and other beasts in the past - and the research took him earlier this year to visit some arctic wolves near Hamburg.

Wolves, he soon discovered, like to jump up and go face-to-face, or stand threateningly behind your shoulder. What he didn't know was that they don't like being massaged on the back of the neck like dogs do.

So there he was in the cage with two males and a pregnant female and a wolf-handler when he did the neck ruffle and the wolf turned on him. It grabbed his hand in its jaws and locked eyes with him; the handler yelled at him to stay still - which he managed to do. Eventually it let go but Gordon has no doubt what real fear feels like; and he still feels the pain of the wolf's grip.

Little surprise Gordon describes some of his work as being like "a slow-motion bomb going off".

Essayist Margaret Morgan captures this feeling in the catalogue for the ACCA show, in which she writes that his imagery reverberates in a dreamlike way: "the child's gesture, the popular

song, the movie that traumatised generations, the ordinary life, the poems we learned by heart, the big themes, flight and falling, a tender kiss, stigmata, clouds'' and so on.

The hall of mirrors is actually called "Everything is nothing without its reflection: a photographic pantomime", which Gordon says contains "certain images that are deliberately banal" and others that are pretty dark. There's a photo of some potato au gratin, another of his baby son's first erection, a landscape, a field of beets. Light, dark, serious, glib, all reflected in mirrors.

Standing in front of the TV installation, with pretty much every film and video work from about 1992 until now, he points out one film of his arm with a woman's foot pressing on it and laughs, saying only he knows what else was happening off-screen. Other films show a Muslim man charming a cobra, or billowing cinema-screen curtains in black-and-white or rich, vibrant red: they do not part and we must imagine what is behind them. The anticipation, the feeling we invest in these images, is everything.

We can't help but be confronted. That's especially so in the work in the middle of it all - "Through a looking glass" - which consists of two big screens facing each other, each showing the climactic scene from Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*. There, looking straight at us from either side of the room, is Robert De Niro's Travis Bickle, punching the air and saying: "You talkin' to me?"

Someone is, powerfully.

Douglas Gordon: The only way out is the only way in is at ACCA until August 3.