

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### The Sydney Morning Herald

#### Scottish artist Douglas Gordon embraces frightening pathology and black humour

Robert Nelson



*Douglas Gordon exhibition at ACCA. Photo: Debbie Cuthbertson*

#### VISUAL ARTS

#### THE ONLY WAY OUT IS THE ONLY WAY IN

#### Douglas Gordon

**Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), 111 Sturt St, Southbank, until August 3**

Though it's hard to come at the psychology of cruelty, reason tells you that the theme is important. It pervades art, film and literature and underlies the power relations in them.

Cruelty is so embedded in art that we hardly think of it, especially in Christian iconography, where the crucifixion is regarded as aesthetically normal and also a necessary part of a redemption narrative. By tradition, agony was unquestioned and salutary. The main choice that artists faced was only: will I make it look a little bit nice or really nasty?

With the advent of film, however, cinematic artists were tempted to invent new angles on cruelty, not to be content with traditional gore but to hatch fresh scenarios of horribleness that you'd never have thought of without their assistance. As if to satisfy your inner ghoul, the art might go on to project the dreaded moments with maximum suspense and impact.

Like a caricature of this filmic pandemonium, a large survey exhibition of the work of Douglas Gordon at ACCA concentrates in a few rooms the sensational menace of film. The most striking work is *Pretty much every film and video work from about 1992 until now* from 1999. Gathering the artist's earlier work, it consists of a mountain of old CRT monitors, each one loaded with a loop of irksome imagery, mostly appropriated and contrived to get under your skin.

Even when nothing tragic happens, the scenes are troubling, like a snake charmer handling the deadly serpents, in a way that activates your repressed unconscious fears. Other motifs are deliberately sadistic, like a wrist trodden on by a foot, that takes you to torture, to the point that hideous motives are induced upon even innocent footage, like an elephant getting up.

The installation doesn't invite you to perform film analysis of the individual clips; it asks you instead to take in the whole, this salon of shivers, this hill of hypnosis, lulling you with its very wickedness to accept the exposure. To remain any length of time in this room of groans is to feel yourself radiated by filmic spite, singed from inside by runaway internal projection, where you imagine yourself running the gamut of obsessive and torrid circumstances.

Gordon arranges much pressure around his filmic clips, sometimes by means of an ambitious installation and sometimes within the screening itself. The first gallery presents *Between darkness and light (after William Blake)* from 1997, in which two films run in overlay, where one film darkens the other, folding together the trauma of an antecedent with the menace of its successor.

There's no space between the compressed films: they collapse all distance of time and space in a sinister claustrophobia of malice.

In *Through a Looking Glass* from 1999, Gordon plunders a scene from Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* of 1976, in which the actor Robert De Niro asks threateningly "Are you talkin' to me?" But the image is offset by its equally large reflection, so that the one tough guy squeezes the confidence of his exact equal on the adjacent wall.

The bullying talk and rapid draw of the gun jams you into a corner, as if the film mortifies both you and its actor. In an interview with Hannah Matthews, Gordon confesses that "cinema is death". It's a useful byte that highlights the intense and recalcitrant morbidity of film.

Not to be outdone by the cruelty in the medium, Gordon exploits the gloom of a still installation with *30 seconds text* of 1996, where a weak light comes on and off in 30 second intervals. It's the duration over which our heads might retain consciousness when severed at the neck.

When the light goes on, a record from 1905 is revealed, describing Dr Beaurieux's conversation with the decapitated murderer Henri Languille, which you can read in your 30 seconds of empathetic grace.

Frightening pathology, black humour, the chill of history in the kiss of a guillotine: it's Gordon's portrait of the afterlife, which is also summed up in the title for the whole show: *the only way out is the only way in*.