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INTERVIEW: Juliana Engberg on Douglas Gordon at ACCA, Melbourne

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“Everything is nothing without its reflection: a photographic pantomime, 2013” (ACCA)

“The Only Way Out Is the Only Way In” at Melbourne’s Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) is the first major Australia survey of Berlin-based Scottish artist Douglas Gordon who is best known for appropriating images from popular culture and other sources to create his signature videos and photographic installations.

The exhibition, which is on show at ACCA until August 3, was curated by ACCA Director Juliana Engberg, a name that will be familiar to many thanks to her role as Artistic Director of the 19th Biennale of Sydney (2014). One of the highlights of the Biennale was Gordon’s intense installation “Phantom,” 2011 which the Biennale catalogue described as “a room brought to the brink of emotion.”

“The Only Way Out Is the Only Way In” features six works from 1992 to 2013, including: the two-channel video installation “Through a Looking Glass,” 1999; “Everything is nothing without its reflection: a photographic pantomime, 2013,” which consists of 180 framed images, each with its own mirror; and a survey of all his video works created since 1992 on a collection of 101 television monitors, aptly entitled “Pretty much every film and video work from about 1992 until now,” 1999.

To find out more about “The Only Way Out Is the Only Way In” and Douglas Gordon’s intriguing practice, BLOUIN ARTINFO got in touch with Juliana Engberg and asked her a few questions. Read what she had to say about this significant exhibition below.

Douglas Gordon is known for his diverse practice. What was the curatorial approach to his complex practice that resulted in the ACCA exhibition?

Over a number of studio visits Douglas and I discussed the works that might be included, aware that this would be the first time Australian audiences would see a number of works brought together. The spaces of ACCA provide unique opportunities for creating itineraries for viewing and that became a clear way forward. Douglas was immediately interested in the idea of a journey returning back upon itself ... a nice metaphor for a kind of retrospective.

“The Only Way Out Is the Only Way In” is the first major survey of Gordon’s work in Australia. What does the exhibition reveal about his career and practice in terms of its nature, development, and history?

The exhibition shows in a very complete way the development of Douglas’ practice through his engagement with film, the photographic, the choreographic. It demonstrates his interest in shifting the viewer’s body through states of confrontation, it also shows his use of his own body as a site of inscription and witnessing. Embedded in the exhibition is the consistent dialogue Douglas has created between himself, precursors and peers - there are homages and there are heists. Certain constants can be observed – the use of doubles, the shadowing of self, the ecclesiastical and the sinful – life and death. These are the themes that remain at the centre of Douglas’ practice. The consistency of his practice, the certainty of his visual language is very clear in this gathering of works – the sheer seriousness of his artistic and personal endeavour is tremendously compelling.

The title of the exhibition refers to the layout of the exhibition. Could you explain the reasoning behind the layout and its significance?

As usual Douglas uses a title to suggest a couple of things. Yes, the itinerary (but that is a basic idea), but more importantly, and philosophically, a moral journey where one returns through a route of self-exploration detoured by doubt, sin, guilt and darkness in search of light, revelation, salvation and redemption. These are the essential propositions explored in Douglas’ works and in this very particular ensemble exhibition.

Douglas Gordon first came to prominence in 1993 with the work “24 Hour Psycho.” What was the significance of this work, and how does it read in the context of current contemporary art practice?

The significance of this work was manifold ... durational, appropriation, tempo, the junction between the moving image and still, the photographic and film, the activation of the gaze in a very obvious way, the “event” of such work, the lozenge screen, the taking of a movie into an art context, the iconic status of the original and the creation of a new icon ... in many ways 24 hour Psycho is like Warhol’s “Empire” 1964 ... a re-looking at something we think we know, that is common in our sight, slowed to reveal a whole new work within ... and of course it indicated the constant themes that preoccupy Douglas ... sin, the gaze, the eye, the struggle between good and evil and the duality within the self.

“Phantom” was one of the highlights of the Sydney Biennale. What led you to exhibit this work?

Well I was already in process with Douglas for the ACCA exhibition when the Biennale gig came a long and I really wanted to include Phantom ... happily not part of our ACCA thoughts ... mainly I wanted to set up a dark liquidity with Douglas and then bring people around to the light

liquidity of Roni Horn's breathtakingly, heartbreakingly wonderful glass sculptures. The viscous liquid released in the tearful eye of Phantom, gathered and made still in Roni's liquid incidents. Douglas was ecstatic when I told him he and Roni were the journey from darkness to lightness – twins in the double space on the MCA level 3.