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Douglas Gordon in Ibiza: why I'm giving the party island a gay makeover

The controversial artist is punking up Ibiza by filling its streets with voyeuristic films. He necks some wine and talks about how soulless and super-rich the ravers have become – and why they need his films of men having sex

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Porn to be wild ... 0002. neiR euqserP, ztihsfiL neitsabéS, 2015, by Douglas Gordon, which is being publicly projected in Ibiza. Image: © Studio lost but found/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2015

“I’m Scottish, I don’t do sex,” says Douglas Gordon. He takes a sip of wine then bursts out laughing, because we both know this could not be further from the truth. Not only are we meeting in Ibiza, an island with sex running through its veins, but Gordon is wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the words Nobody Knows I’m a Lesbian. It’s something of a relief that we are chatting on a balcony, having reluctantly vetoed Gordon’s first suggestion that we do the interview while naked in the pool.

Indeed, the 48-year-old may be from the dour climes of Glasgow but he seems completely at home on this Mediterranean island, whose history of hedonism and free-thinking stretches all the way back to the Carthaginians in 654BC. Having won the Turner prize in 1996, Gordon has long established himself as one of the UK’s most important artists, known for video pieces like 24 Hour Psycho, where he slowed down Alfred Hitchcock’s film so it lasted an entire day, and a feature length film about footballer Zinedine Zidane. His recent stunt at the opening of Home, Manchester’s new culture centre – where he lobbed an axe into the wall then drew an illustration round the dent – has also sealed his reputation as something of an enfant terrible of contemporary art (an incident he decries was blown “massively out of proportion – it was a boring building and I thought it could do with some patina, that’s all”).

Yet despite having shown his work in most of the world's major galleries, including representing the UK at the 1997 Venice Biennale, it is this tiny island – where nightclubs outnumber art galleries 100 to one – that Gordon has personally selected for his latest, and possibly quirkiest, exhibition.

The show, called *After the After*, is his first collaboration with his friend of two decades, German sculptor Tobias Rehberger, 49. It's an exploration, through a series of films, sculpture, tile painting and even a billboard, of that unique moment after the after-party, when the music dies and the rush fades. For some is it a moment of calm, for others extreme melancholy – but for the thousands of partygoers who flock to Ibiza every year, it is an inevitability.

“The show talks about that something you only find in the after after,” says Gordon. “We both like parties, we like the after hours, but there's always that moment where something comes back in – and we thought it was an interesting and unexplored place, where people can be very exposed.”

It was not just the history of the place that appealed to the pair, but a sense that something was lacking. While the music created in Ibiza was born of this hedonism, spilling from the clubs on to the streets and the beaches, the island's contemporary art gallery, Museu d'Art Contemporani d'Eivissa (MACE), sits as an isolated bubble from both the crumbling beauty of Ibiza town and the debauchery of the island's nightlife. As the pair observe, art seemed oddly isolated in Ibiza, if there at all.

“On the way here last year, I was reading the biography of Syd Barrett, and I realised that he and Roger Waters and Dave Gilmour and so many others all spent time here,” says Gordon. “I grew up with that music, so I had some immediate kinship with this place. But the connection between this world of spirituality, the nightlife and our world seemed relatively little. I'm more punk than hippie, and I think we just thought, especially as we walked past the museum, that it was time to punk it up, bring a bit of punk to Ibiza.” Rehberger chips in: “Maybe give it a little edge, contribute some spice that we feel is missing.”

While it was never intentional, Gordon and Rehberger's desire to create a show that responded not just to each other but to the island at large has manifested itself in artworks that sit either on the edge of the museum or outside it entirely. The clubbing crowds, who may never set foot in the gallery, can still interact with their artworks.

A huge billboard on the road from the airport to the city, which usually advertises Cocoon nightclub, has been graffitied by the duo. A picture of their beaming faces has been comically plastered in the corner – a tangible meeting of the clubbing world with the art world. Rehberger's vast pixelated mosaic of two naked men kissing sits on the outside wall of MACE, while Gordon's film, which shows the thrusting legs then entwined necks and hands of two men having sex, is projected outside all night for passersby to see. The footage makes you feel as if you are looking voyeuristically through a large peephole, yet he succeeds in making it anything but seedy.

It is a film that inevitably nods to Ibiza's history as a place for sexual liberation, particularly as a haven for the gay community during the Franco regime and more recently in infamous club nights like *Manumission*. However, the idea first came to Gordon as a response to Rehberger's pixelated mosaic, which he interpreted as a sign of his friend's repressed sexual desires.

“Tobias did the tile piece and I thought it was interesting that it was very homosexual, so I wanted to do something equally homosexual in response,” says Gordon, as we look at the video projection later that evening. “So we went on gay porn sites to look for footage, but that’s all masturbation and stuff. But then a friend in Paris told me about this film-maker, who makes films of men having sex that are not pornography. Tobias and I thought this was interesting, particularly because everyone sees this kind of film – especially if it’s two gay guys – as porn, but actually it’s not.” Pausing, Gordon stares at his film, as the faceless hands in the footage grab the neck of their partner in an urgent, lust-filled embrace. “I think it’s beautiful,” he says after a minute.

Having been brought up a Jehovah’s Witness, I ask whether a defiance of his upbringing is ever a factor in his art? Gordon shakes his head. “No, I don’t think so. Though I am guilt-ridden – that’s obvious from all the work I do.”

Talking to the pair, it is clear that Gordon and Rehberger’s own fluid approach to sexuality, and the close nature of their relationship, is as central to the exhibition as the sexually charged context of Ibiza itself.

“Douglas and I are pretty explicit friends, let’s say that,” adds Rehberger. “People might say, why should two heterosexual guys make a show about an erotic homosexual movie? Well, this show is about how we work together, how we respond to each other’s work, and that this relationship does have some erotic moments. So yes, there’s something of that in the show. But that doesn’t just mean fucking each other.”

Far from being an in-your-face confrontation of sex, the show is remarkably restrained and filled more with melancholy than depravity. A bar covered with a cloth stands in the corner, described by Gordon as a “corpse that needed covering” and videos of Rehberger laughing and Gordon crying play opposite each other. Another work – a white muslin curtain that Gordon has chucked a bottle of red wine at – hangs limply at one of the gallery doors, blowing in the breeze. Stand close enough and you can smell the old wine as the sounds of the street below waft into the gallery.

The considered nature of their show, say the pair, was a response to the decadent “soulless” hedonism that has taken over Ibiza in recent years. Driven by wealth, it is gratuitously symbolised by enormous yachts and palatial villas owned by oligarchs and billionaires. The only other major exhibition in Ibiza is a retrospective of Takashi Murakami, an artist known as much for his commercial collaborations as for his multimillion-pound artworks.

“Ibiza has this tacky-but-expensive cheap side that feels soulless,” says Rehberger. “It might be Murakami, or it might be David Guetta DJing on a Sunday afternoon at this Miami Beach-style event, with all these people dancing round a pool, where the music is terrible. But then you go to an after-hours party at a club like Amnesia, and it’s a completely different thing and that spirit of Ibiza is still there. We cannot let this bad side of Ibiza take over.”

Indeed, Gordon is optimistic that After the After could be a catalyst for a wider cultural renaissance for this clubbing mecca. “I think this show is just the beginning of our relationship with this island.”