

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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DOUGLAS GORDON

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Reviews

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Douglas Gordon carves the title of his new show, “k.364,” into the soft, white plaster of the gallery wall. A chisel has chipped away at the surface, leaving pronounced strokes like lettering on a gravestone. A residue of paint and dust gathers on the ground below this faint incision into the architecture. Nearby, an anonymous fist clasps a burning candle from which hot wax drips onto bare skin that might indicate an act of prayer or remembrance. Both works introduce a film that Gordon describes as “a battle between history and the fleeting beauty of music,” which documents a train journey through Poland by two Israeli musicians traveling in the footsteps of relatives who survived the Holocaust.



DOUGLAS GORDON, k.364, 2010. Still from HD video. © 2011 lost but found Film Limited.

Running on two large screens placed at oblique angles, the images are echoed back by several adjacent mirrors. The protagonists describe how Poland evokes memories of survival handed down within their families. Dark forests that line the tracks are linked to forced removals while simultaneously forming sublime landscapes. Shots of railway tracks and signals allude to people shunted towards the camps along these very same lines. Subsequently, the musicians perform Mozart’s chamber work “k.364” in Poznan, where their passion for the music achieves consolation rather than cathartic resolution.

The restrained narrative leaves us in a former synagogue converted into a swimming pool in 1939, which is still in use today. Shots below the waterline of kicking legs suggest spontaneous pleasure. But can any place so associated with tragedy be free of contamination?

The difficulty remains that this is a well-worn territory loaded with problems for any creative enquiry, and the film does not take us much further in comprehending a catastrophe for mankind that took place within living memory. Where Gordon is more successful is in asserting art's indispensability to human civilization, and skillfully linking the consequences of history to life in the present. Staging this pilgrimage to ancestral roots through music gives concrete expression to sorrow but cannot ultimately remove the underlying horror. Gordon acknowledges this conundrum by framing 32 charred sheets of Mozart's musical score against mirrored mounts. Destruction and creative endurance sit in suspended tension for perpetuity.



DOUGLAS GORDON, k.364, 2011. Installation view at Gagosian, London. Photo: Mike Bruce. Courtesy Gagosian.