DOUGLAS GORDON: SEARCHING FOR GENIUS

Peninsula Arts Exhibition
24 Sept – 19 Nov 2016

EDUCATION PACK

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

From the skill of the international footballer, to the glamour of the pop star, the virtuosic talent of the composer and filmmaker, to the vision of the famed artist, Searching for Genius invites you to explore ideas about talent, virtuosity and genius.

This show brings together selected film and photographic work by Turner Prize winning artist Douglas Gordon alongside the spectacles of Sir Joshua Reynolds, a Plymouthian and founder of the Royal Academy.

The exhibition is made up of artworks borrowed from elsewhere. In the gallery you can explore a moving image installation *Feature Film* (1999) and a selection of burnt photographic portraits of celebrities from the series *Self-Portrait of You + Me*.

Alongside the artworks, you can see the spectacles of Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792). A famous Plymouthian, Sir Joshua was a portrait painter, art collector and writer who brought art and artists to the attention of more people by helping to start the Royal Academy, Britain’s first Art School. The Royal Academy continues today to promote the appreciation, understanding and practice of art through education and exhibitions. Each year, the Royal Academy opens up its galleries in London for the Summer Exhibition showcasing 1000 paintings selected by merit from entries from thousands of artists.

*Portrait of Miss Elizabeth Greenway* by Sir Joshua Reynolds
The curator of the exhibition has brought together the works on show to ask you to explore ideas about talent, skill and genius.

**ACTIVITY**

**Q:** How do we recognize skill?

**Q:** What do we mean by talent?

Discuss different ways talent and skills can develop.

Mind Map your thoughts.

**Q:** Does skill depend on who you are and your experiences?

Discuss ways social and cultural influences might determine talent.

**Q:** How is skill measured in different settings?

Discuss how skills are measured at school - art, maths or sports class.

Compare these skills from school with measuring skills at home: baking cakes or playing video games.
Sir Joshua Reynolds was a leading portrait painter of the Eighteenth Century; a time in the arts known as the Romantic period. His skills were of great influence to a new generation of painters who were influenced by his use of striking poses, rich colour and strong lighting.

Sir Joshua was a skilled communicator and befriended the most famous men and women of his time; actors, writers, aristocrats and military leaders. Through painting their portraits and introducing them to one another, he shaped their public profiles. Art historians claim that Sir Joshua Reynolds was the creator of the celebrity craze.

Displayed in the gallery are the spectacles of Sir Joshua Reynolds. They’re small glasses with circular shaped lenses and frames. The curator has borrowed the spectacles from the Royal Academy’s collection.

**ACTIVITY**

Make a pair of card or paper round spectacles like Sir Joshua’s and put them on. Try and imagine you are Sir Joshua painting a portrait of a celebrity of the Romantic period. Describe who Sir Joshua can see through his glasses. What are they wearing, what’s the fashion, how are they sitting, how is their hairstyle looking? Make a drawing of your imagined 18th Century celebrity.

Discuss reasons why the curator may have decided to include Sir Joshua’s spectacles in the exhibition.

**Q: What do you think the spectacles could represent?**
SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS

ACTIVITIES

Make a portrait of a person you believe is talented. Try to use one or two of Sir Joshua Reynolds’ techniques in your portrait.

Share your work in class.

Discuss the person’s talent.

Explain how you think their skill developed.
The exhibition’s main focus is on the contemporary, award-winning artist Douglas Gordon. The curator has brought together works by the artist to include a film presenting a portrait of a famous musical director and conductor and a series of portraits of celebrity actors and pop star David Bowie.

Like Sir Joshua Reynolds, Douglas is obsessed with celebrities and he creates portraits through the medium of film, video and photographs.

**ACTIVITIES**

**Q: Who is Douglas Gordon?**

Build a ‘focus table’. Spend time as a class finding out about Douglas Gordon: Who is he? Where has he lived? What artwork has he produced?

Research the mediums he uses: video, installation and photographs. Bring everyone’s findings to the table to share.

You could create a small portfolio of work to include text, drawings or even your personal responses to themes you discover.

*Douglas Gordon, Photo © Marc Lilius.*
Douglas Gordon is an artist making images, video and installation. Born in Glasgow in 1966, he studied at Glasgow School of Art in the 1980s. Douglas was the first artist working with video to be given the Turner Prize. Awarding prizes is one way of measuring skills. The Turner Prize is an award given to artists making significant impact in contemporary art in Britain.

Q: What skills do you think an artist needs to be successful?
Before Douglas left Glasgow to move to London to study at the Slade School of Fine Art, he made a series of films in his city using cine film. Cine film was a popular format for home movies in those days. The word ‘cine’ means ‘moving’ and comes from a Greek word ‘kine’ meaning motion. Douglas took his cine camera around Glasgow, making movies by pointing the lens into spaces, filming buildings and following shadows. He said he thought about an adult world of power, darkness and mirrors.

### ACTIVITIES

**Q: What’s your favourite film?**

**Q: Who’s your favourite actor?**

Find images of film actors’ faces you like and don’t like, dead and alive. Print them out and stick them on a big piece of paper.

Discuss how the character role or personality is played out in the film through the script, facial expression, make-up, costume, camera angle, film effects or music.

**Q: Where do you spend time watching films?**

Some people watch films at home, the cinema or on the train.

**Q: List the devices you use to watch films...** TV, computer, tablet, phone?

Compare your lists as a group and make a mind map collecting everyone’s answers. Discuss your findings.
Interested in the story of watching films, Douglas’s earliest memory is watching an old black and white film on TV at home. As a child, he loved movies, mostly American ones. Watching films made Douglas feel like an actor. He was obsessed with actors’ faces like Jimmy Cagney who was an American actor made famous for his gangster roles in movies. In books and interviews, Douglas shares stories of watching films as a child describing details of his Glasgow house and his parents who watched films alongside him.

**ACTIVITIES**

**Storyboards**

A storyboard is a pictorial way of telling how a story will unfold. It’s made up of a series of squares with pictures representing each shot.

Draw a simple storyboard describing the street where you live using black paint, pen or charcoal.

Swap storyboards with a partner.

Follow your partner’s storyboard sequence to make a short black and white video on a camera-phone or digital camera.
In the gallery you can see Douglas Gordon’s major work *Feature Film*. Douglas believes that anything can happen - including grasping the skills to pose as a film director!

To make *Feature Film*, he persuaded a conductor, an orchestra, a radio studio and a film crew to join up to make a film. As an artist, Douglas thought of himself as an outsider because he didn’t know all the ‘insiders’ technical film terms. He describes himself as ‘masquerading as a film director’.

Douglas uses existing material from films to make his work. In *24 Hour Psycho* (1993) he took Alfred Hitchcock’s 1960 film *Psycho* and slowed it down to change the film’s duration to exactly 24 hours.

Unlike *24 Hour Psycho*, with *Feature Film*, Douglas makes a film from scratch - it’s a film that tells the story of a film.

When *Feature Film* was first shown in London in 1999, it was described by critics as being about the strangeness, beauty and glamour that the cinema used to have.

The film is 80 minutes long and is shown in a cinematic installation, a specially built temporary construction designed specifically for watching this work. The main focus of *Feature Film* is the loud soundtrack composed by Bernard Herrman for *Vertigo*, another Alfred Hitchcock film made in 1958.

Hitchcock was a producer and director who used pioneering techniques to build tension and drama in his films. He zoomed the camera for close ups of faces and objects, pointed the camera from strange angles and used dramatic soundtracks to mirror actions in scenes.

*Feature Film* is made up entirely of close ups of the conductor’s hands and face. The conductor featured in the film is James Conlon, Musical Director of the Paris National Opera and one of today’s most respected conductors.

It may feel strange and quite difficult to sit and watch a full, feature length film in a gallery, especially as the images are made up entirely of close-ups of the conductor’s hands and face. Unlike going to the cinema, in the gallery you can choose to stay as long as you like. Douglas is interested that you may just see a snippet of work but remember it later. Perhaps you’ll remember the film when you pass by the gallery again, or back at school, or when you next hear a film soundtrack.

By concentrating focus on the film’s soundtrack, Douglas reminds us of the role of sound in films to stir feelings like suspense, romance or tension.

**ACTIVITIES**

Write down your first reactions to the work.

**Q:** Why does it make you think or feel this way?

**Q:** How do your reactions reveal your view of the world around you?
We hope you enjoyed your visit to the gallery. The exhibition asked you to explore ideas about skill, talent and genius through exploring the work of Douglas Gordon. The curator included the spectacles of Sir Joshua Reynolds to remind visitors of portraiture, celebrity crazes of the past and how Art Schools began.

**ACTIVITIES**

**Q:** Why has the curator put these works together?

Write your answers on sticky notes and stick them on the wall.

Make a mind map of other common topics or ideas that could be revealed by exploring the work of Douglas Gordon.

**Storyboards:**

Use the storyboards you made to compose your own soundtrack. Use everyday objects to make sounds using the storyboard to guide you. Think about how Alfred Hitchcock mirrored the action in the film with sounds to create drama, romance and suspense. Play back your soundtracks to each other in class. Have fun with this!
 ABOUT PENINSULA ARTS

Peninsula Arts is the wide-ranging public arts programme of Plymouth University, catering to many varied audiences, raising aspirations and enriching lives through high quality cultural experiences.

As well as hosting the Peninsula Arts Gallery, the largest contemporary art gallery in Plymouth, it also incorporates the Jill Craigie Cinema, the House with its cutting-edge performance programme, the Ten Tors Orchestra, the professional chamber orchestra for Devon and Cornwall, and a year-long series of fascinating talks that open up the world of history and contemporary culture.

Peninsula Arts are proud to be committed to supporting the arts in Plymouth, and especially to making them accessible to younger audiences – the next generation of creatives. In this spirit we welcome young people of all ages, from primary through to students in further and higher education.

Visiting the Peninsula Arts Gallery could not be easier and we welcome school groups of all ages. We are very happy to discuss your visit with you before you book, so please contact us with any queries or concerns. Please note that all school groups must be supervised by an appropriate number of staff members from the visiting school and we advise teachers to visit the gallery space before making a school visit. Peninsula Arts Gallery is fully wheelchair accessible.

Please contact us if you would like to book a school visit:

Email: peninsula-arts@plymouth.ac.uk
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Peninsula Arts Gallery Visiting Hours:
Monday – Friday 13.00 – 17.00
Saturday 11.00 – 16.00 (closed Bank Holidays)

How to find us: Peninsula Arts Gallery is situated in the Roland Levinsky Building on Plymouth University campus. It is adjacent to Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery on North Hill. Peninsula Arts, Roland Levinsky Building, Plymouth University PL4 8AA