

Q&A: Janice Kerbel, the Canadian artist up for this year's Turner Prize

Toronto-born artist's 'Doug' is a song cycle, but she's not a musician. Is it art?



Mike Doherty · CBC Arts
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Janice Kerbel's 'Doug' is performed during the 2015 Turner Prize Exhibition at the Tramway art space on October 5, 2015 in Glasgow, Scotland. (Jeff J Mitchell/Getty Images)

Q: What do you call a man with a shovel in his head?

A: Doug.

Sure this is a sick joke, but Janice Kerbel has turned it into art. *Doug*, her song cycle for six voices, subjects its titular spade-in-the-cranium victim to nine further catastrophic, darkly funny accidents, from being attacked by a bear to slipping on a banana peel; it's being performed daily at the

Tramway arts centre in Glasgow, where the works nominated for this year's Turner Prize — including *Doug* — are being exhibited. And while some critics were irked to find a piece of music shortlisted for the most prestigious art award in the U.K., given annually to a British artist under 50, Kerbel is sanguine — she has made a career out of challenging people's expectations.

"Can you have a visual experience without having a visual experience? Can you hear a shape instead of see a shape?"

- Janice Kerbel on her interest in creating 'Doug'

The Toronto-born, London-based artist imbues her conceptual work with a sense of fun and daring. Her first major work, *Bank Job*, 1999, made her notorious: it was a "masterplan" for robbing a private London bank. "There was a lot of press around it at the time," she recalls. "Dumb stuff like, 'Is this an act of public irresponsibility?' Clearly it's not.... The moment when I presented the work, it became immediately obsolete."

Her art focuses on impossibility and absence: *Ball Game* is the radio announcement for an imaginary baseball game; *Deadstar* is a map of a nonexistent ghost town; *Kill the Workers!* is a play for lights on a stage, with no actors. And *Doug* is a piece of music that isn't to be recorded, or performed in a concert hall as part of a typical recital.

Kerbel knew nothing about writing music when she started work on *Doug*; with the help of two composers and a notation program, she translated her ideas into deadpan songs that evoke classical music but unfold with their own curious logic. In her small studio in east central London, Kerbel reflects on her love of learning and contradiction.

Why call the piece "Doug"?

I thought it was funny! I liked the way it looked, and it's such an American high school football-player name that it seemed completely counter to the piece I was trying to write. That seemed somehow appropriate.

Is the piece meant to be funny?

Well, funny but not in a laugh-out-loud kind of way, because it's tempered by sadness. I don't think it's a joke. ... It should be strange or arresting, which is pleasurable. I enjoy the freedom of

experiencing something that I've never experienced yet.
... [Doug] has no precedent.

How did you write the piece?

[The texts] were written graphically. I wanted the compositions to depict [each] event in the same way as the words, like [with] "Fall" — I move the three voices up and down through a certain number of steps, and then it drops. If you look at it visually, it forms a staircase.

I tried to mimic the time of an event. [The section called] "Blast" is really short because a blast is really short. "Fall" is much longer, because it takes a while to fall down a flight of stairs. And I always started at the moment when it's just about to go into catastrophe, and ended at the moment where the body can no longer sustain the event. Some were harder to write than others, like "Hit," where a tortoise falls out of the sky: You would have no consciousness of an object about to land on your head.



(L-R bottom row) Artists Bonnie Camplin, Janice Kerbel, Nicole Wermers and (L-R top row) Lewis Jones, Amica Dall and Fran Edgerley of Assemble pose during the 2015 Turner Prize short list announcement at The Tramway art space in Glasgow, Scotland, on September 30, 2015. (Andy Buchanan/AFP/Getty Images)

"Sink" is a solo piece for the mezzo, because drowning is solitary. I treated her middle note as the surface of the water, so I kept moving [her pitch] under and over — it would get higher, as if she was riding the crest of a wave, and eventually, she sinks down. [The parts] were all really structural.

What makes Doug art and not just music?

It was a considered choice of mine to write a piece of music. I wanted to see, when you have compositional description and more literary description — two things that both defy the visual — what happens when they meet? Can you have a visual experience without having a visual experience? Can you hear a shape instead of see a shape?

I'd like to say [Doug is] more radical than it is, but we're at the point where one can use any form. It seems to me that so many artists are working in a multiplicity of ways, we don't really ask, "Does it not belong somewhere else?" anymore.



Janice Kerbel's 'Doug,' Performed on 1 May 2015 in the Jeffrey Room, The Mitchell Theatre, Glasgow. (Alan Dimmick © greengrassi, London and Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver)

Does the Turner Prize nomination have an effect on your career?

Of course. It does have a certain public attention that other exhibitions don't. It's also really challenging, because normally you know that the people that are seeing [an exhibition] really seek out contemporary art, and this has a different kind of pull. It's stranger.

Is it easier to branch out into different media as your career develops? As a young artist, it would be hard to say, "I've just graduated from art school, and I'm going to do something that I've never done before and I'll have to teach myself to do."

I didn't have traditional training. I don't know how to do anything, truthfully. I didn't know how to paint, how to draw; I'm not particularly good at making stuff. But working on a computer is really comfortable for me. I don't think I had to be particularly tenacious; it's just what I knew how to do.

Doug will be performed at the [Contemporary Art Gallery](#), 555 Nelson, Vancouver. Fri, Jan. 29. Gallery open Tue-Sun, 12-6pm. Free.

[The Turner Prize](#) will be awarded Mon., Dec. 7.