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A mound of sadness could just as well be your hill of joy

THE GOOD LIFE
SHARON MASCALL

If only happiness wore a neon shirt and announced its presence like a toastmaster. Then we'd know what it looked like. Instead, we're on a collective quest. To identify, harness and summon at will the most elusive of human experiences. We all want to be happy. But like needle-hunters in the proverbial haystack, we don't really know where to start.

Juliana Engberg hopes to provide some answers. Or, at the very least, give us some inspiration. As the artistic director of Southbank's Australian Centre for Contemporary Art and the visual arts curator of the Melbourne Festival, she's devised an exhibition that attempts to capture the essence of what it is to be "happy".

A *History of Happiness* — in the true spirit of contemporary art — brings together photographs, film and even piles of rocks in installations that, in some cases, appear far from cheerful. But that, she explains, is the whole point.

"In a balanced life, we need both states — we need one to know the other. Also, we have to have some sense that sadness is fleeting and that it will be replaced by moments of joy," she says.

The idea that happiness can only be truly experienced through sadness is a long-standing theme in psychology, art and literature. The French poet, Baudelaire, made his name in the late 19th century with poems about the *Fleurs du Mal* — flowers of evil — that were at once beautiful and putrid and embodied the ultimate in both good and evil. His obsession with the simultaneous experience of extremes has, to some extent, been put down to smoking too much opium.

... being happy is taking time to smell the roses. It's hearing the rosellas. It's not about having the Porsche, it's being happy that your car starts at all.

JULIANA ENGBERG

Other philosophers and writers, who've also explored the pursuit of good through evil and happiness through sadness, have done so without the help of hallucination.

The Frenchman's poems were considered shocking when they were first released. In today's modern context, some of ACCA's "happy" installations are similarly confronting.

New York artist, Nan Goldin, shows photographs of herself with black eyes and battered cheeks after being bashed by a violent boyfriend. Adjacent to them are snapshots of sexual activity.

"Your pleasure is short lived and spasmodic," says Barbara Kruger's work, reminding us that happiness is merely a momentary mood. While Yoko Ono simply invites us to pick up stones from a pile and deposit them on the "mound of sadness" or the "mound of joy".

"The weight of the stone has importance when you decide whether it's sorrow or joy," explains Engberg. "When you place it in a pile you put it somewhere, you give it a place. Yoko Ono is offering an opportunity for catharsis."

But few people were willing, during my visit, to publicly label their mood and deposit a stone. Even though Ono was asking them to: "Make a numbered list of sadness in your life. Pile up stones corresponding to those numbers," says a plaque on the wall. "Burn the list and appreciate the mound of stones for its beauty."

Easier said than done if you're depressed.

But this is an exhibition that challenges us to find glimpses of joy despite depression. It seeks the positive in the negative and the plain old boring. Even in sadness and the humdrum of everyday life, there are moments, fleeting glimpses of happier mood.

The exhibition also shows that true happiness is far harder to identify, harness and nurture than sadness.

As Goldin's un-erotic photos show only too well, the moment happiness is pictured complete with a sex-toy and frustrated grin, it seems undermined. Nothing can truly convey what it is to be happy in private, unexpressed thoughts.

The final impression is that happiness is elusive: a feeling that comes and goes and — Engberg firmly believes — is nothing like the big-bang emotion that we're led to believe.

"It sounds corny, but being happy is taking time to smell the roses. It's hearing the rosellas. It's not about having the Porsche: it's being happy that your car starts at all," she says.

The Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 111 Sturt Street, Southbank, is open from Tuesday-Friday, 11am to 5pm; Saturday & Sunday, noon to 5pm. Admission is free. *A History of Happiness* closes on December 1.



Yoko Ono offers stone catharsis.