





DOUG AITKEN's groundbreaking video projects have portrayed "electric earths" and "new oceans." Now he's ready to turn the Museum of Modern Art inside out with *sleepwalkers*, a 127-foot-high video installation that wraps around the museum's facades.

PORTRAIT BY **CATHERINE OPIE**

Opposite: Doug Aitken's *vanishing point*, C-print mounted on aluminum, 2005

DOUG AITKEN doesn't act like a man rushing to meet the biggest deadline of his career. As the 38-year-old artist settles onto a sofa in his Venice, California, studio, he moves with the lanky grace of a surfer and speaks with the unhurried attitude of a guy who's hangin' out with friends on a Saturday afternoon.

But the dark circles under his eyes tell another story: Aitken just returned to Los Angeles after a three-month stint in New York, and he is under the gun, working long hours to meet a December deadline for *sleepwalkers*, the biggest project yet in a career defined by grand, even grandiose, ambitions.

But perhaps "big" doesn't quite do justice to the gigantic scale of *sleepwalkers*, a multipart film that's made up of five parallel narratives that will be projected simultaneously onto three sides of the exterior of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, at heights of up to 127 feet. As if he wants to turn the museum inside out, Aitken is using the building's exterior walls to sculpt a multisided "installation" from the very architecture of midtown Manhattan.

"For me, this project is about creating a kind of hybrid space between architecture, film and sculpture," explains Aitken, whose laid-back affect recalls the laconic cowboy persona of another Venice resident, influential Los Angeles artist Ed Ruscha. "You know, in a lot of ways, I think I've seen this project as a way to try to create a liquid architecture, by turning architecture into a waterfall of changing, shifting narratives."

The five storylines in *sleepwalkers* follow a series of five characters—played by Tilda Swinton, Donald Sutherland, singer Chan Marshall (aka Cat Power), Brazilian superstar Seu Jorge and New York street drummer Ryan Donowho—through a night in their lives in New York City. Each character represents a different aspect of the metropolis. Sutherland, for instance, is a wealthy uptown Master of the Universe, while Jorge plays an electrician who works in the electronic haze of Times Square's advertising signage. Though their respective paths never cross, each plot is precisely synchronized to underscore their linked existence.

As the characters wake up, leave home and travel through the city toward their respective nocturnal workplaces—"on walkabout," Aitken says—the visual setting for each story becomes increasingly minimalist. Eventually the characters are reduced to a series of almost abstract images, and staccato editing turns their body movements into bold rhythmic gestures that reflect the thrum of the city around them.

"I saw the characters almost as signifiers," explains Aitken, "as vehicles for this movement and flow of the



From top: Doug Aitken; production still of Seu Jorge in *sleepwalkers*, 2007; maps and cycles (*las vegas greyhound station*), C-print, 2004.





city running through you, as opposed to characters like 'a girl who got out of a long-term relationship, blah blah blah.' It seems like cinema can handle that."

The final cut of *sleepwalkers*, which was shot on 35mm film and will be transferred to a high-resolution digital format, will consist of five narratives of some 10 to 15 minutes apiece. (At press time, Aitken hadn't yet determined the running time, although each narrative will be precisely the same length.) The work will be projected onto MoMA's exterior continuously from 5 p.m. until 10 p.m. every night from January 16 through February 12, and while as many as four vignettes will be visible from the sculpture garden, at no point will a viewer be able to get a comprehensive overview of the entire project. Instead, one collects mere glimpses of the overall broken narrative, mentally assembling them bit by bit into an imagined whole.

Sleepwalkers will be the third time Aitken has worked with MoMA's chief curator of media, Klaus Biesenbach. In 2004 they cocurated the show "Hard Light" at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, for which Aitken created a work called *interiors*, featuring André 3000 of Outkast.

"I'm always joking that after we did *interiors*, now we are doing exteriors," says Biesenbach. "Doug for many years has been working to visualize the human condition within the backdrop of architecture. He did another beautiful work called *i am in you*, in which a little girl is sleeping in a prefab house that is being driven on the highway."

Aitken was born in Redondo Beach, California, and studied at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. After an early career directing music videos while making his own work, he shot to prominence in 1999 by winning the International Prize at the Venice Biennale for his video installation *electric earth*. Aitken's work since then has often used cinematic approaches—highly polished shoots in dazzling and unexpected locations—to create a new kind of narrative that reflects the fragmented nature of contemporary life.

"Doug Aitken has proposed a new possibility to the question of how film can be shown in three dimensions," says Hans Ulrich Obrist, codirector of London's Serpentine Gallery, who curated Aitken's exhibition at the Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, in 2005. "He has revolutionized the way we see the moving image. It is a thing that filmmakers have been working on since the Sixties, but he has pushed it into a new space. He has shown that film is no longer confined to cinema. His installations show film becoming architecture and vice versa."

Aitken's work is shown in multiscreen installations that fragment the cinematic narrative, breaking its temporal and spatial coherence. It's an approach that has led some critics to call Aitken the artist of the MTV generation and others to muse that he is to video art what Jackson Pollock was to painting. While any number of artists may show videos on multiple screens—including Bruce Nauman, the grandfather of the medium—Aitken's innovation, explains Biesenbach, is in his relationship to sculpture.

"[AITKEN] HAS SHOWN THAT FILM IS NO LONGER CONFINED TO CINEMA," SAYS CURATOR HANS ULRICH OBRIST. "HIS INSTALLATIONS SHOW FILM BECOMING ARCHITECTURE AND VICE VERSA."



Production stills, from top: André 3000 in *interiors*, 1999; Cat Power in *sleepwalkers*.

"I WANTED HIM TO BE BLACK AND WHITE, STAINLESS STEEL AND REFLECTIVE SURFACES, BLACK TOWN CARS AND WHITE HAIR, ZEROES AND ONES," SAYS AITKEN OF DONALD SUTHERLAND'S CHARACTER IN *SLEEPWALKERS*. "HE SHOULD ONLY EXIST ON THE TOPS OF SKYSCRAPERS."

"People are very much aware in our world that we are constantly and simultaneously exposed to several different stimuli," Biesenbach says. "Doug Aitken is one of a few artists who find a sculptural form for this. He tries to dissect the narrative into several different plots and several different time levels on various screens in order to make you aware of time and space as you move through it. That's a sculptor's approach."

Aitken has received numerous solo museum shows in Europe, and his work is held by some of the world's most deep-pocketed collectors, including Bernard Arnault, Eli Broad and Eugenio Lopez. And like such peers as Takashi Murakami, Aitken comfortably moves outside the strict confines of the art world to collaborate. Hedi Slimane became a friend after the designer commissioned Aitken to create an installation for Dior Homme's Tokyo store (Aitken has also taken him surfing in Malibu), and last year Aitken teamed up with Hermès to stage "happenings" in Los Angeles and New York to launch his book *Broken Screen*, a series of 27 interviews with a range of his favorite innovators, including John Baldessari and the late Robert Altman. *Broken Screen* also collects Aitken's conversations with contemporaries such as Matthew Barney and Pierre Huyghe, who, like him, utilize the techniques of major motion pictures in their artworks.

"These artists are making conceptual work that requires a cast of thousands and huge budgets," says Karen Marta, an art consultant who worked on the happenings. "They have adapted the strategy of cinema but with a solemn seriousness. They are in the art world, but their ambition to reach a broader audience outstrips the art world."

Aitken's original concept for *sleepwalkers* grew out of ongoing discussions with Anne Pasternak of Creative Time, a New York arts agency that presents public arts projects. He was intrigued by the potential of a skyscraper's blank facade, and as he scouted along 54th Street some three years ago, Aitken saw a perfect site: a large tower that was just emerging from its protective scaffolding.

"Eureka! It was MoMA," recalls Pasternak, explaining that he didn't initially recognize the museum, which was still in the construction phase of its radical expansion. When Aitken met MoMA director Glenn Lowry at a cocktail party soon after, he pitched his idea right to the man in charge. "One bit of good luck followed after another in this project," says Pasternak, "almost like the city was opening up for him."

MoMA and Creative Time joined forces to share the evident logistical and budget challenges presented by the scope of *sleepwalkers*, said to be among the museum's most expensive commissions to date, with its million-dollar-plus budget. Aitken began work on the project two and a half years ago. His renewed residence in Manhattan, where he had lived for about nine years after finishing art school in 1991, sharpened his vision for *sleepwalkers*, and he realized that living in Los Angeles in recent years had allowed him to see New York "with fresh eyes."

For the first couple of months, Aitken stayed in a hotel overlooking Times Square, and he marveled at the fact that visitors came simply to experience the hard-edged visual assault. ("It's not even like a Disneyland, where you get a ride," he notes. "It's just a free immersion in commercialism.") He says he wanted to offer a respite from such visual blare and create a kind of external, publicly accessible equivalent to the enclosed gallery spaces inside of MoMA's walls.

"I really wanted to see if I could develop a reflective space for the city," Aitken explains. "Even at the barest level, that means the images are projected like cinema, not emitted on the screen with LED light.

It will be a very soft light that graces the walls of the museum."

Sleepwalkers was shot in some of the most exotic corners of New York's boroughs. For the narrative starring Donowho, whose character is a drummer who performs on subway platforms (as in real life), Aitken went underground to shoot in the abandoned Atlantic Avenue tunnel in Brooklyn. The 17-foot-high vaulted space dates to the 19th century, when it was built as part of a passenger rail network. Sealed off in 1861 and forgotten about since the Fifties, it was rediscovered in 1981. Aitken had heard legends of the hidden vault, and with the help of an off-duty cable worker who had "keys to all the manholes in the city," the artist and his crew snuck in late one Friday night. "We hired some rent-a-cops to close down the intersection," recalls Aitken, enthusiastic about his excellent adventure. "They had no idea it wasn't permitted."

For Sutherland's character, by contrast, Aitken needed skyscrapers. "I wanted him to be black and white, stainless steel and reflective surfaces, black Town Cars and white hair, zeroes and ones," says the artist. "He should only exist on the tops of skyscrapers."

To secure the locations he wanted, Aitken called property developer Jerry Speyer, a vice chairman of MoMA's board of trustees. Speyer basically handed over the keys to his kingdom—which includes the Chrysler Building, the MetLife Building and Rockefeller Center—and Aitken went straight to the top of the MetLife Building, the site of a midtown heliport abandoned since 1977. "It's like a ghost town up there," says Aitken, pulling out his BlackBerry to show a photograph of the unexpected empty expanse 58 floors above Grand Central Terminal. "You can imagine tumbleweeds blowing across the tarmac. The strange thing is you're in the middle of midtown, but you can only see sky."

Aitken notes that such open spaces in the heart of the city were a blessing, since during the filming, he was at pains to pare every shot to a bare minimum: Even small details could become major distractions when projected more than 100 feet high. But at the same time, the large-scale work also allowed Aitken to create epic visual gestures from normally insignificant flickers of light.

He walks to an editing bay to show an example and cues up footage of Swinton's character, an office worker making photocopies. Imagine, he says, the spray of light from the copier as it sweeps across MoMA's facade and down the block's concrete canyon. "A photocopy machine is this small, overlooked thing," Aitken says, "but you take it and you blow it up 130 feet, and it takes on a meaning. It becomes a rhythm."

One imagines pedestrians or workers in adjacent buildings being startled by the appearance of a gargantuan Xerox machine controlled by Swinton, as if MoMA were an urban drive-in screening *Attack of the 130-Foot Woman*. Aitken chuckles when *sleepwalkers* is compared to a drive-in movie—a comparison that may seem inevitable to anyone older than MTV—but points out that his project has nothing to do, conceptually speaking, with such a relic of old-fashioned narrative. "I see a drive-in as a panoramic version of cinema," he notes, adding by way of contrast, "I see this project more as a way of folding cinema—and these buildings—inside out, by taking the cinematic structure, which is inherently a line, and breaking it to create a three-dimension space."

So why not, in that case, have a screen on MoMA's roof as well? Aitken loves the idea. "Find me a sponsor," he says with another burst of enthusiasm, "and I will."

—KEVIN WEST

no history, 2005,
an installation of
stainless-steel
mirrors

