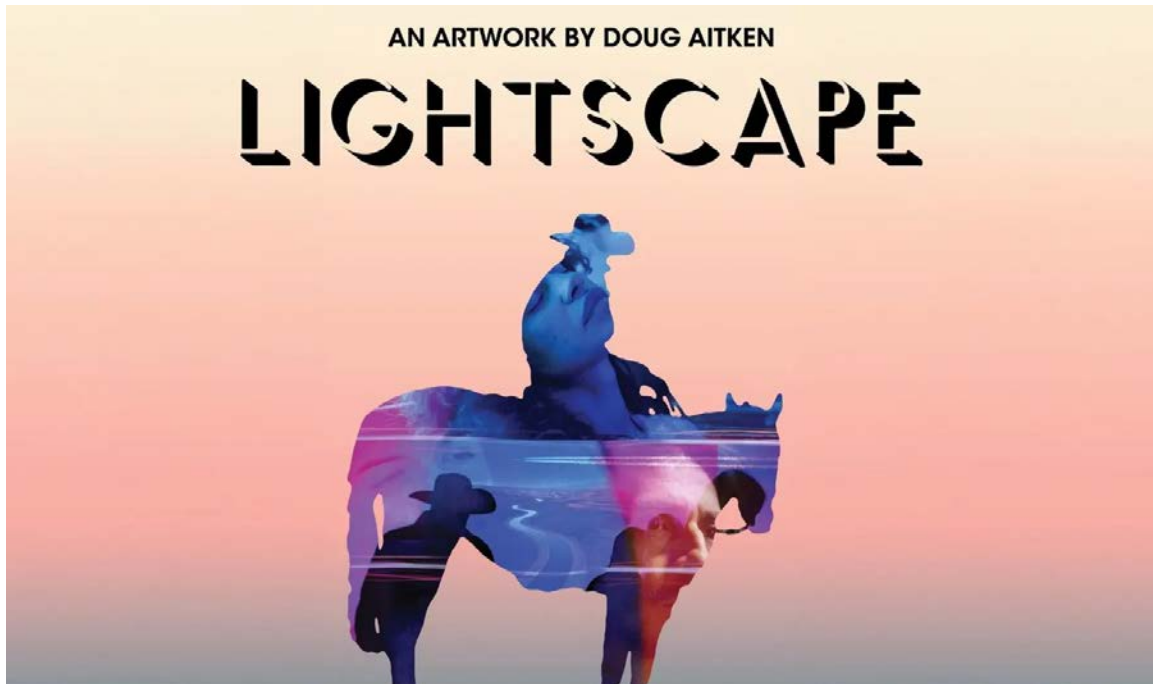


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Teicholz, Tom. "Restless: The Art of Doug Aitken In 'Lightscape' And Beyond." [Forbes](#) (January 29, 2025) [ill.] [online]

Forbes



Doug Aitken, *Lightscape*, 2024 © DOUG AITKEN WORKSHOP

Doug Aitken, the polymedia multidisciplinary artist whose work can seem deceptively simple or so multilayered in its complexity as to be difficult to fathom, has a new work, *Lightscape*, a one hour immersive film and music installation, on view at the Marciano Art Foundation, as well as paintings, sculptures and installations that have grown out of the project on exhibit at Regen Projects in Los Angeles.

Having spent time at both in the company of Aitken as my Virgil, I appreciate the extent to which Aitken's art practice places us in the moment. Although at times fantastical, Aitken elucidates how these moments, which are how we experience life (moment-to-moment), are not static or fixed. They carry within them not just their own stories, but their history, as well as what they conjure for the viewer.

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Installation view of *Lightscape* by Doug Aitken at Marciano Art Foundation.

IMAGE COURTESY OF MARCIANO ART FOUNDATION. PHOTO CREDIT: BRICA WILCOX.

Lightscape is presented on several large screens arrayed in a semi-circle in the great hall of the former Masonic Scottish Rite Temple on Wilshire Boulevard in Hancock Park. Although recorded music is played, there are several times when the work is accompanied by live performances from members of the LA Phil and the LA Master Chorale (check the [website](#) for times and performances).

As Aitken told me about the *Lightscape* installation at Marciano: “The work has a flow: You walk into this unmarked space on the boulevard, and step through this echoing lobby and walk into this huge chamber, and it’s almost like you are going downstream and suddenly you’re falling into this work, which is very unconscious, it’s very sensory. It’s very emotive. And it’s also abstract.”

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Doug Aitken, Lightscape, 2024 DOUG AITKEN, LIGHTSCAPE, 2024© DOUG AITKEN WORKSHOP

What you see playing out on the various screens is a series of characters who move through Los Angeles, and out to the Mojave Desert. There is no dialogue. Music, made from phrases, repeated, and accompanied by instrumentation, suffuses the experience. At certain moments, such as while working at an Amazon factory, the characters perform dance movements. Others images, such as a cowboy on a horse in the desert, appear as archetypes.



Doug Aitken, Lightscape, 2024 © DOUG AITKEN WORKSHOP

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Occasionally, as happens in LA, a celebrity appears (look for Beck). There is no plot in the traditional sense, but there is a story being told. You never really know what is going on, you can only guess. It is like driving in a car and being open to the flood of images that occur. It is strangely compelling. And there is an ineffable poetry to *Lightscape* that I found both inspiring and touching.



Doug Aitken, *Lightscape*, 2024 © DOUG AITKEN WORKSHOP

Lightscape, Aitken told me, “is a further development of the installations I’ve done in the past. I really want to merge film, contemporary art, music, sound, architecture, and create a complete experience.”

“We started five years ago,” Aitken said, “With an original song cycle that we wrote that was like short stories. Each one was sung by human voice using a word or a phrase. Each of them together created a collective whole... focused on on the idea of us as modern individuals in a landscape of time, and where are we going next? What’s the horizon in front of us?”

This multisensory artwork is Aitken’s attempt to capture something evanescent: How we live now. “It’s been fascinating because right now in our culture, music is over here, and art’s way over there,” Aitken said. “[But] we live in this world where tonight our conversation is going to be about everything.”

Some of the most affecting parts of *Lightscape*, as well as the paintings showing at Regen Projects, take place in the Mojave desert. Aitken explained: “The work comes out of the idea of the West. The history is not just the last 100 years, it’s thousands of years. When we were filming in Death Valley for weeks and weeks, a flood had passed through that summer and there was a lake in Death Valley that hadn’t been there in 100 years.

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We're using the camera almost like an excavation tool, like a miner, we're chipping away at stone trying to unearth things."



Doug Aitken PHOTO BY AMY SIOUX, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Aitken's own roots in Southern California run deep. Born in Redondo Beach, Aitken is an only child and was raised in Palos Verdes. His mother was a journalist and his father an attorney. As a child, his parents took him on far-flung low-budget cultural adventures in Europe, Africa and South America. Aitken responded to the time alone by "always drawing, creating things."

"Before I knew the word art, I was always making art of some form and I was restless with it... The beauty of the creative process is to not be confined and restrained and instead to really realize it. Concepts, ideas and impulses can create directions [rather than the medium defining oneself]."

As he told journalist Hunter Drohowjowska-Philp for his Archives of American Art interview, in fifth grade he was placed in accelerated experimental visual learning

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program where he was exposed to modern and contemporary art and first discovered the work of Jean Arp, an early influence.

Aitken studied at Marymount College in Palos Verdes before attending ArtCenter in Pasadena as an illustration major. However, Aitken was also interested in studying other artmaking mediums. He was one of the students who assisted Keith Haring on the mural he painted there. Upon reflection, Aitken now says, "I wasn't interested in being siloed in any way, and I think that is like life. We really need to occupy a world that's very open and that's how we find the fullest of ourselves and as a society."



Doug Aitken with P-22 at the Press Preview of his Regen Projects exhibition PHOTO BY TOM TEICHOLZ

What really struck me in experiencing *Lightscape* is the question of what is real. When I mentioned this to Aitken, he responded, "That is the question of our times... What is the line between fiction and nonfiction. Between being a reality TV star and the actual president of the United States. We're dealing with that. That idea isn't something I want to ignore."

Aitken has made artworks in an expansive range of media and art forms, involving photography, film, video, painting, sculpture, light, sound, architecture and design,

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creating installations and projections that exist in spaces and on buildings, in the air, and even under water. He has made mirrored houses (*Mirage*) both in Gstaad, Switzerland in 2019, and for Desert X in Palm Springs 2021, which invite human participation even as they disappear and refract the landscape.

“Projects like *Lightscape* or projects under the water are projects about creating friction and friction is energy,” Aitken told me. “I’d rather put large amounts of energy into gestures that have something that can spark or burn or fail than something that is....safe.”

Creating artworks that are, in many cases, impermanent and at a scale that is beyond individual ownership allows Aitken a certain freedom in his art. “[The artwork impacts] all these different senses. There’s nothing you can take away. I’m not going to go to the gallery owner and say, can I be on the list.” Aitken said. “I think it’s so important that we don’t compromise and we don’t see it as something that’s diluted or sanitized...I love the idea that art isn’t a space for compromise and it’s not a space for dilution.”



Installation view of Doug Aitken: *Psychic Debris Field* at Regen Projects, Los Angeles January 18 — February 22, 2025 PHOTO: EVAN BEDFORD, COURTESY REGEN PROJECTS

Several weeks following *Lightscape*'s debut, Aitken held a press preview of the companion works in his Regen Projects exhibition, *Psychic Debris Field*. In the interim, the Palisades and Eaton fires had erupted in all their devastation and had not yet been

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contained. Speaking to the assembled, Aitken became emotional, choking up, talking about the prior two weeks as he was installing the show “while LA’s streets were deserted and the city was in peril, and the sky was red from the fires.”

“It was just a strange feeling... we're trying to create something,” Aitken said, “and then there's this world out there in flux and changing.” Aitken said it forced him to ask himself whether making this work, or any art, mattered; and what impact it could have.

“This exhibition is a landscape of different ideas [and] different questions,” Aitken said. The project was about “seeing if we could excavate the earth and make it speak. Could an artwork ask us to look deeper?”



Installation view of Doug Aitken: *Psychic Debris Field* at Regen Projects, Los Angeles January 18 — February 22, 2025 PHOTO: EVAN BEDFORD, COURTESY REGEN PROJECTS

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At Regen Projects, the artworks are displayed in several spaces in the gallery. When you enter, there is a larger- than-life size sculpture of P-22, LA's famed mountain lion on all fours, looking as if it's on the prowl — its body a series of stripes of recycled and repurposed detritus from the project including native seeds. Off to the right there is a sculptural statue of two entwined mountain lions standing on their hind legs that seems like it's taken from Greek antiquity or, from a Natural History Museum diorama. It's hard to say if they are fighting or playing, or if they are caught in a vortex that will lift them off the ground.



Installation view of Doug Aitken: *Psychic Debris Field* at Regen Projects, Los Angeles January 18 — February 22, 2025 PHOTO: EVAN BEDFORD, COURTESY REGEN PROJECTS

The main room has paintings on both sides. The figurative works would not, at first glance, garner much attention. They are landscapes of a typical desert tract home. However, each painting introduces elements of site-specific history, as a former habitat for indigenous people, or a place of prehistory, or a modern home with a pool. In that way, Aitken said, the exhibition is about “very deep ecological time.”

In the center of the room are sculptures of three native bison, that speak to past and present, as well as our current ecological and environmental concerns. The bison which are all white like some sacred offering, are themselves made from reused materials. One is a planter with native flora spilling out of its top, and another reveals on one side the

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computer Styrofoam packaging and plastics that Aitken scavenged and recycled to create the work.



Installation view of Doug Aitken: Psychic Debris Field at Regen Projects, Los Angeles January 18 — February 22, 2025 PHOTO: EVAN BEDFORD, COURTESY REGEN PROJECTS

The farthest room contains an installation of sculptures, light, and sound in a scene of the American West, with moose locking antlers, cacti with birds, a bus stop, and ice vending machine in which plants grow wild.

With these works, Aitken said, he is asking questions such as: Can an artwork be something that requires looking deeper, and that reveals something of the landscape and the community, of what is there now and what was once there, that combines them to form something new that you can touch and grab? Rather than being a passive process, can art have something inside that brings out meaning?

Aitken hoped the artworks asked more questions than it answered, such as: "Where do we go from here? What is the value of our civilization, is it just something we see and dispose of? What remains and what do we want to remain?"

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These works, and this time in particular, pose fundamental questions to Aitken about his own artmaking and its societal purpose. He asked aloud: "Is art a roadmap? Is it a sign post? Can art be like a lighthouse beacon?"

I couldn't agree more with his answer: "I think Art can be our oxygen."