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Lakin, Max. "Is There Life Out Here?." The New York Times (July 2, 2026) [ill.] [online]

The New York Times

ART REVIEW

Is There Life Out Here?

Doug Aitken's sprawling, elusive video installation asks a lot of questions about contemporary L.A. and its environs, and it's smart enough not to answer them.



Early on in the artist Doug Aitken's "Lightscape," an elliptical, alternately sublime and meandering video installation on view at the Shed, a voice-over intones: "All of this will never make sense." It's both proper warning for what proceeds — a fragmented tone poem filmed in and around the periphery of a dreamlike Los Angeles — and a philosophically succinct evaluation of modern life.

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Over the course of its 65 minutes, unnamed characters drift in and out of discursive sequences in which images of startling beauty and banal cliché thump into each other. Those collisions don't take much manipulation to achieve. Los Angeles produces them as if they were a natural resource: burnished sunsets casting parking lots in umber glow; the Hollywood Hills reflected in a glass high-rise; the neon buzz of a check-cashing storefront.

The action, or lack thereof, is set to a floaty score of minimalist music by Philip Glass, Steve Reich and Meredith Monk performed by the Los Angeles Philharmonic led by Gustavo Dudamel, punctuated by metrical chants written by Aitken and delivered by the Los Angeles Master Chorale.

The result is a restless, emotive, loosely laid but thoroughly Los Angeles-minded mosaic — freeways, traffic jams and parking garages figure heavily (one of the chants is the word “freeway” stretched into a droning thrum). And there's a sequence of quick cuts that abstracts the come-ons and enticements of strip-mall signage (“karma cleaning”) reminiscent of Ed Ruscha's word paintings — undergirded by a mythopoetic treatment of the American West.



A view of Doug Aitken's "Lightscape" at the Shed, a video installation that is a thoroughly Los Angeles-minded mosaic. Credit...Guarionex Rodriguez for The New York Times

"Lightscape" arrives at the Shed two years after its debut at Disney Hall in Los Angeles and subsequent exhibition at the Marciano Art Foundation. It is devotional to Los Angeles's sprawl and Southern California's hallucinatory splendor to a near sacramental degree, and for New Yorkers unaccustomed to the particular weirdness of Los Angeles, it can feel like scenes from an alien planet.

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The Shed bills “Lightscape” as an “immersive installation,” which, happily, it isn’t, or at least not in the overstimulating, exploded kaleidoscope way that such language has come to threaten. It is presented here on seven large screens, most of which alternate between one or two images, or blink off for extended stretches, with a selection of uncomfortable seating from which to view them. You could elect to simply watch a single screen and not miss much.

The Shed has a curious affinity for this kind of audience engagement, which in practice runs from effortful gimmick to theme-park attraction. In 2023 it mounted an uneven “mixed reality” presentation of the composer Ryuichi Sakamoto’s music. Upstairs, it is presenting an interactive virtual reality experience based on the Netflix series “Black Mirror.”

For his part, Aitken, 58, whose work was in the 1997 and 2000 Whitney Biennials, sidesteps the trend, preferring a site-based, film-adjacent idiom that combines video and the built environment. He’s more interested in communal experience than individualized immersion, deploying the facade of MoMA (“Sleepwalkers,” 2007), and a cross-country freight train (“Station to Station,” 2015).



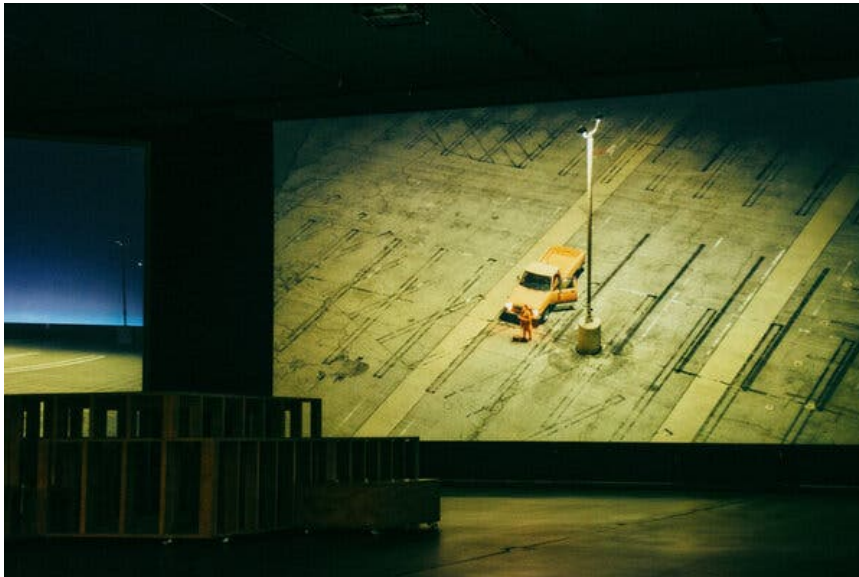
The exhibition is presented on seven large screens, most of which alternate between one or two images, or blink off for extended stretches. Credit...Guarionex Rodriguez for The New York Times

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The black-box contours of the Shed, whose aspirations of a modular city-on-wheels have yet to be fulfilled, would seem to be incidental to Aitken's ambitions, which can feel warmed-over here (the original run featured a live accompaniment by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, which made the trip for a one-night-only reprisal here; live programming is scheduled to include Sun Ra Arkestra and Mike D, of Beastie Boys).

Mostly, though, this is a visual work. "Lightscape," with its clear homages to Los Angeles-centric film history and an overlapping structure à la Robert Altman, speaks in a filmic dialect, though it's probably not fair to gauge it purely on cinema's terms. Its broken narrative obviates any linear reading. The spare dialogue is restricted to a handful of gnomic intonations and Zen affirmations, like "Don't forget to breathe," which recall, probably unintentionally, the "Annie Hall" one-liner in which Jeff Goldblum's spacey actor laments, "I forgot my mantra."

There's a flirtation with magical realism that's restrained before it tips over into full Lynchian-mode. (Aitken nods to other heroes: a lithe body pierces a crystalline swimming pool worthy of David Hockney; Ruscha himself pops up on a roadside diner television; a character playing a piano in the back of a flatbed truck as it pulls away recalls a scene in "Five Easy Pieces.") But these are more glimpses than vignettes. There is no character development, conflict or resolution.



The glacial pace of "Lightscape" suggests a geologic deep time, its protagonists being pulled along by some unseen force out of their control, inching toward oblivion. Credit...Guarionex Rodriguez for The New York Times

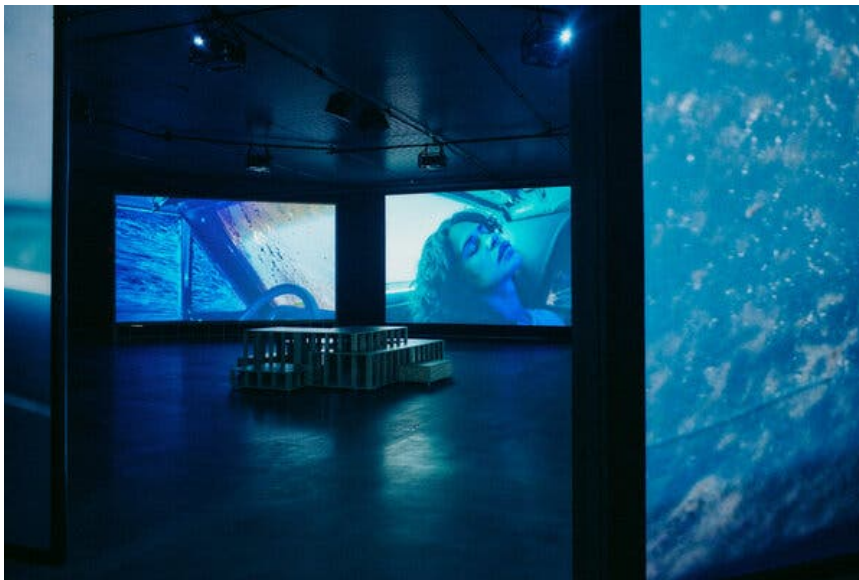
It's more useful, if a bit counterintuitive, to think about "Lightscape" in the terms of land art. Its glacial pace suggests a geologic deep time, its protagonists being pulled along by some unseen force out of their control, inching toward oblivion. Shots of the Mojave

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Desert and pink salt flats are spliced with sweeping pans of wind farms and oil fields. A cowboy ambles through an airplane graveyard, workers complete menial tasks on an antiseptic Amazon warehouse floor — oblique ecological allusions that prod at questions about urban encroachment and our dislocation from nature.

Aitken achieves images of moving beauty, frequently suffusing the screen in saturated color like a William Eggleston picture. Though there are ponderous sequences, too (a mountain lion stalks through a Neutra house as a player piano twinkles), or ones that are simply silly, like a woman experiencing something like religious ecstasy while being doused by lawn sprinklers.

The tone is lugubrious, sticky with ennui. A character played by the visual artist Nikolai Haas says, “I think one day I’ll slip away,” his doleful eyes fixed on the middle distance. These Angelenos are prone to bouts of interpretive dance or disassociating in public, succumbing to the hypnotic fugue state of a drive-through carwash. Natasha Lyonne pops in for a maudlin few minutes. “It’s all connected,” she offers, unconvincingly.



Over the course of “Lightscape” — about an hour — unnamed characters drift in and out of discursive sequences in which images of startling beauty and banal cliché thump into each other. Credit...Guarionex Rodriguez for The New York Times

What that “it” is, is the point — if it can be located, if it exists at all. “Lightscape” is full of lost people searching for meaning in an indifferent, fractured universe. Few of them interact, or even appear onscreen together, and the story lines repel intersection, like “Crash” or Altman’s “Short Cuts.” People look into their phones for answers, or up at the empty sky.

More than ecological ruin or image overload, though, “Lightscape” suggests loneliness as the defining condition of our time — how we are disconnected from the Earth and

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from each other. The Shed, meant to lend cultural credence to the spiritually bereft shopping mall of the Hudson Yards development on Manhattan's Far West Side — the most unnatural patch of one of Earth's most unnatural places — ends up being an apt venue for this meditation. As promised, nothing here makes much sense, but neither does much in life.



Ultimately, “Lightscape” suggests loneliness as the defining condition of our time — how we are disconnected from the Earth and from each other. Credit...Guarionex Rodriguez for The New York Times