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American Dream: Doug Aitken's Spectacle of Vibes

At the Shed, the artist's focus on beauty delivers an "ultralight portrayal of our cultural moment"

The Shed



Doug Aitken, *Lightscape*, 2026, wooden structure, projection screens, seven-channel video (color, sound, 65 minutes). Installation view. Photo: Adam Reich.

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Through September 13, 2026—This summer New York has been dominated by giant screens that managed to unite people. First, the Knicks' historic NBA championship win; then, the FIFA World Cup co-hosted by the US. Fans in jerseys stared at TVs across bars and living rooms, cheering and sighing in unison. Against this backdrop of media frenzy and image overload, the Shed opened a more rarefied spectacle: Doug Aitken's seven-channel film installation *Lightscape*, 2024, a Minimalist song cycle visually rendered in the style of a surrealist dystopia steeped in mid-century nostalgia.



Doug Aitken, *Lightscape*, 2026, wooden structure, projection screens, seven-channel video (color, sound, 65 minutes). Installation view. Photo: Adam Reich.

Lightscape is projected across an octagon comprised of seven large screens, each resembling a freeway billboard in scale. The setup recalls a drive-in theater, with a Donald Judd-style wooden platform serving as a 360-degree bleacher. But the images are not panoramic; like Aitken's *sleepwalkers*, 2007, the projections often pair up such that any two adjacent screens can tell the same story over the film's sixty-five-minute duration.

I say story, but there isn't a plot as such; recurring characters contribute to continuity. The lyrical fluidity allows the audience to drop in and out spontaneously, as do performers, including actress Natasha Lyonne, pop musician Beck, and artists Niki Haas and Ed Ruscha. Some four-legged friends round out the cast: a mountain lion, a coyote, and a horse. They walk, dance, drive, ride, or plunge—but mostly they gaze wistfully toward the viewer, framed by close-up shots and dramatized by a swelling soundtrack.

Aitken mixes his own compositions with those of Minimalist greats, recorded with the Los Angeles Master Chorale and the LA Philharmonic. The resulting repetitive phrases weave a melodic score composed of strings, pianos, mechanical whirs, and gusts of

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wind. The velvety soundscape fills in for the absence of dialogue by vibing instead with a stream of non-sequiturs that punctuate the cinematic collage. Some are spoken (“All of this will never make sense”) while others appear on street signs and banners as they flash across the screen (“I try to live”). These riddles permeate the atmosphere like epic prophecies.



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Despite celebrity wattage, the real stars of *Lightscape* are natural and architectural. Each scene begins with textures: we see the glossy sheen of a terrazzo floor, the folds in a distant mountain range, or the twinkling fabric of a Los Angeles nightscape. Then we slide into a series of vignettes, including a sunny beach, a dusky drive-in theater, Richard Neutra’s Tremaine House, a pool, a lush garden, and so on. These anchor us in the modernist dreams we associate with Los Angeles. Others are more startling: salt slabs, an airplane junk yard, an oil field, an Amazon warehouse, a Brutalist office building. The theme of multiplicity—repeated in parallel rows of illuminated office windows or in towers of stacked yellow bins circulating through a warehouse—emerges as a poetic framework for the mundane activities that support the convenience and glamour of twenty-first-century life.

Whether Aitken intends any of this social commentary seems not to be the point; it’s an ultralight portrayal of our cultural moment that focuses on beauty. His sleek aesthetic is seductive; his sweeping cinematography, saturated colors, and fluid sequences appeal and repel in equal measure. That feels appropriate for the way the American West (including Los Angeles and Southern California) likes to view itself: as a culmination of the American dream, where one can be chasing a mirage only to suddenly make it big. But this individualist quest comes at a cost. Shot in fall 2023 through spring 2024 before the 2025 wildfires, *Lightscape* glosses over the grit with languid sunsets. In the summer

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of big screens in New York City, it offers neither the brief unity of a basketball championship nor the cheerful divisiveness of rooting for opposing soccer teams; rather, it's a cocoon for art-world escapists, a dream that could go either way.



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