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## OBSERVER

ARTS • ART REVIEWS

### Doug Aitken's 'Lightscape' Turns the American Dream Into a Requiem

This immersive seven-screen work offers multiple sensorial experiences that together evoke the fractured emotional terrain of contemporary life.



Installation view: Doug Aitken's *Lightscape* at the Shed in New York. BRICA WILCOX

If there is one must-see show in New York right now, both for ambition and for its final memory imprint, Doug Aitken's seven-screen *Lightscape* at The Shed is it. It is a contemporary opera—a complex multimedia orchestration that, in its relentless flow of different stimuli, not only requires time to be absorbed but naturally anchors the viewer, inviting them to stay and embrace its temporal and spatial expansion with all senses. At the same time, it offers an hour of air-conditioned solace during a walk through Hudson Yards or Chelsea, which is never bad in this torrid summer.

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The work feels at once like a soundscape, a videoscape and, as the title suggests, a lightscape. In what we can confidently describe as Aitken's magnum opus, the artist creates a field of evocation that doesn't rely on narrative storytelling, but instead operates in an allegorical, imaginative register. The landscape is clearly the protagonist: it is a terrain of diversities, of fragmented stories and perspectives, different temporalities and spatial experiences that then converge, revealing the entanglement that unites all human destinies.

Everything started not from a conventional script but from a song cycle Aitken composed about five years ago. "I started the project with the vocal music that I wrote. I wanted to approach it in a very minimal, very reductive way," Aitken told Observer after the unveiling. "Instead of having something that was dramatic and long, or language-based, I wanted to use single words, sentences and fragments, and allow those to repeat and almost become landscapes—sonic landscapes."

Only after that did he start developing the visual side of the landscape. "It was very interesting for me because I had never approached a work like that, where I created the music first. But I felt it had to be that way, because the narrative I wanted to express was much more fragmented, nonlinear and contemporary," he explained. "I wanted to leave an open space for the viewer to really occupy the work, instead of being told what to think or being presented with a dramatic structure. I wanted a new landscape that you could fall into."

In its ever-shifting, immersive mix of light, scenes and sound, *Lightscape* feels like a living project and is further activated by live musical performances that blend the script with live improvisations.

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Doug Aitken. Photo: Ami Sioux

The gesamtkunstwerk Aitken has created here is characterized by a sense of fragmentation and interruption, with clear links to contemporary opera as much as to recent experimentation in music and performance, which similarly sought to reflect the new perception and existential condition of modern life. We can think of Luciano Berio's revolutionary approach to traditional opera and theater, with his experimental "musical actions" unfolding through labyrinthine soundscapes, or of Philip Glass's repetitive structures, punctuated by ordinary sounds and noise. In these, as in Aitken's work, music is not the sole carrier of drama but part of a total perceptual field, where sound, image, space, voice, body, light and technology become equal dramaturgical agents, and meaning emerges less through linear development than through immersion, accumulation and a deliberate sense of disorientation.

Aitken concedes those parallels, describing opera as an extension of storytelling traditions that can be traced back to the campfire. "It goes from a conversation to maybe a very simple song, to maybe an early form of theater, which leads into cinema and then leads into the 21st Century." To him, they all stem from an attempt to represent human events and vicissitudes on a stage or in a scene, and to facilitate understanding of them, as in ancient Greek tragedy and comedy, and as in this new multimedia lightscape.

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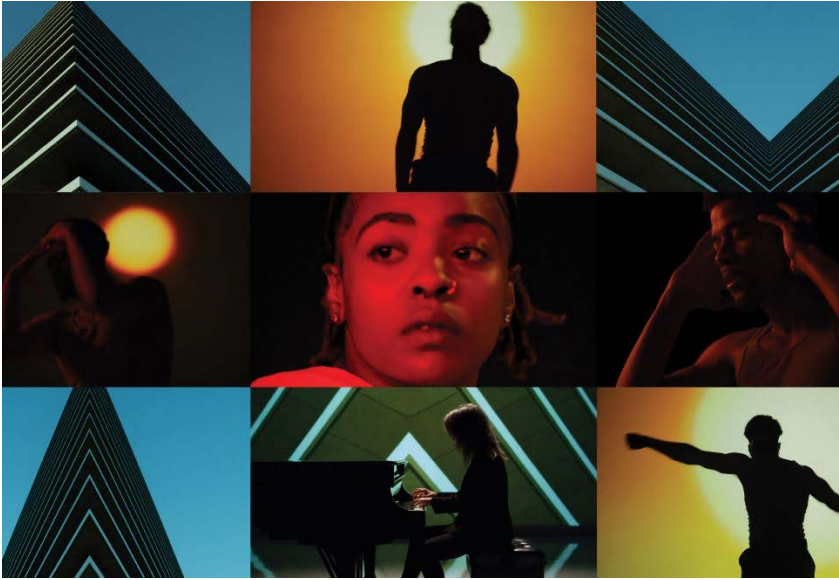
“Now we are at this crossroads. What are the new models of communication that can express the landscape now, the world around us, which is so different, so fragmented, so accelerated? *Lightscape*, for me, was really an attempt to create a different kind of model that would reflect our condition.”

Aitken’s exercise, on a technical level, responds to Gene Youngblood’s notion of Expanded Cinema, which breaks cinema out of the frame to move from linear film narrative into immersive environments, multiple screens, sound, architecture, live perception and the active body of the viewer. “With *Lightscape*, you are entering an exhibition space, which, in a way, is a space that allows you to slow down,” Aitken explained, recalling reading the statistic that the average artwork at MoMA is viewed for three seconds. He wanted a piece that could be more durational and open, to avoid that reaction. “The media around us is so fast. It is pulses of information, flashes of images. One of the qualities that art and culture can bring us at this point in time is that it can give us a space where time is more elastic, more open.”

Aitken invites physical entry into the work, which can also be viewed from a wooden structure at the center, as well as from a more traditional cinema-like row of chairs in front: “I very much wanted to empower the viewer. I wanted to empower the viewer to author their own impression, their own narrative, their own concept out of it.”

The work is structured as modular chapters that can be rearranged depending on when and how someone enters.”If you walk in now and I walk in 20 minutes later, my impression of the work is going to be quite different, but we are both sharing the same landscape, the same psychological landscape and the same impressions,” he reflected. “I like that idea because it allows the viewer to fall into the work and lose time, but at the same time the viewer is empowered to do their own.” That openness was essential for Aitken because he sees so much contemporary culture being spoon-fed, black-and-white and resistant to gray areas. He recalls Robert Redford telling him, inside one of his installations, that this kind of art is necessary precisely because it allows moral ambiguity, questions and friction.

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Aitken has created a modern mythology that blends music, film and architecture. © Doug Aitken

Interestingly, Aitken's inspiration for this was actually minimalist art rather than music: "I was looking at the neon pieces of Bruce Nauman, for example, and how a word flashes and changes and repeats. Or I was looking at the tape loops of Steve Reich, and the way one sentence might repeat, disintegrate and change. I was looking at this idea of making a very reductive sequence of chapters, of cycles, that would create a larger whole, a larger composition."

At the same time, the intense use of lights, the quick shifting of scenes and contexts, and the overlapping of multiple narratives and events across its seven screens make the work appear to reiterate and reflect the informational overload and stimulus saturation of our present moment. It forces us to inhabit a dense, complex entanglement of narratives and messages that operate on the subconscious at multiple levels across media, image and sound, much as we do in our daily lives.

The work appears to directly address this condition of dissociation and alienation through its characters. In terms of content, its complexly articulated storytelling appears to center—even without words and through the combination of very different situations, human circumstances and life conditions—around a series of themes that highlight the tensions and disparities of everyday life in today's America, as well as the dissolution of the American dream into a kind of dysmorphic or dystopian version of its own myth. In multiple moments, Aitken appears to play with its tropes and iconographies: the road trip, the bodega, the drive-in, the endless sunset in the wild desert or the shimmering water in a pool appear to come from the Hollywood vocabulary, shaping this dream of freedom and escapism that has dissolved, or revealed its own contradictions.

Alex Poots from The Shed has described the work as "a requiem," in the sense that it seemed to be about a landscape that's disappearing. That helped articulate something

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he already sensed: many of the symbols in the work are intentionally hollow. “They are signifiers of something that you have a stereotype of, but actually they are empty,” Aitken acknowledged. “Maybe that emptiness is asking us what comes next, what replaces that, where do we go from there?”

In this context, it is interesting to note how several moments in the work suggest music as a space of escape from the constraints and obligations of a high-performance, high-productivity society, and as a way to recover a more spontaneous form of self-expression. A girl starts to sing her own motif, dancing to it on the subway on her way to work. A few shots later, she is dancing with her co-workers to the rhythm of the machines inside an Amazon Fulfillment Center that suddenly transforms into a red-lit club. Further down the narrative tunnel, a shift and disruptive transition takes place from following a leopard as it gets anxious to a blonde woman, trapped in the loneliness of a white robe in the artificial environment of a hyper-designed villa.



The video follows multiple characters in a Robert Altman-esque structure, taking viewers on a journey of extreme change. © Doug Aitken

According to Aitken, removing dialogue meant removing the traditional linear structure of a three-act film or play. He made some rules for himself: no heavy dialogue, no ensemble cast followed from beginning to end. “I wanted more of these chapters and fragments. You and I are here now, but maybe 40 minutes later, we reconnect somewhere else,” he said. “In the meantime, we find you in a different location. It is more like a tapestry, more of a wide-open space, like a landscape or a tapestry, than a straight line.”

Most importantly, once he removed dialogue, he had to rely on only two things: sound (which includes music) and choreography. “The movement of the body, the way the body moves through space, the way the body interacts with the landscape,” he

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explained. In some situations, that is more explicit, like a dance. In others, it might be more subtle, like an older woman sitting in a chair, very tranquil, just looking. “In a sense, the body and the landscape become almost instruments. They are instruments for telling the story.”

Pushing this conversation further, we asked if this staging of multiple timelines, this entangled storytelling of different perspectives and temporalities, is also a way to suggest a shift in the way we see and understand reality, leaving behind the illusion of a linear, mechanistic and deterministic structure to embrace the actual complexity and unpredictability that quantum physics also seems to suggest. In response, Aitken described this as one of the first moments in which society has moved away from a complicit agreement that certain things are real and others are not: “A defining characteristic of right now is that this is the moment when we question what fiction is and what is not fiction. We do not really know what is real and what is not.” To him, this is creating a very different kind of world for us to navigate, a very different landscape, where everything is in flux. “In some ways, that is a very powerful question to explore, and I think one of the best tools we have right now is culture—to use all the arts to explore this area, because the area is so ambiguous.”

*Lightscape* is the result of almost five years of work involving multiple parties. Aitken collaborated with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, with Gustavo Dudamel conducting the instrumental pieces, and with the Los Angeles Master Chorale on the choral arrangements and vocal music. The filming itself, instead, remained raw, organic and DIY. “It was done out of my studio in Venice Beach. We were filming on and off for about eight months. It was very much out there in the landscape—in Death Valley or in some urban area,” he recalled, explaining how he tried to create different chapters in different locations, seeing each place almost as a blank stage and trying to visualize what people could be there. “Once I was on location, I did all the filming myself, and I improvised most of it. It was like, now it is midnight, we are in this parking structure downtown, and we have these two people, so let us create that story tonight.”

It can be a challenging way to work, but he felt he could get a different energy from the piece by doing so. It was not about executing some plan. Instead, there was room for improvisation, and it continued throughout the creation of the work. “It gives it a little more wild or unexpected quality,” he said. Something closer to life, to reality.

Asked what he expects from viewers at The Shed, Aitken described the work as a bridge. “For all of us who are creating, that is the goal: that what we create can create some kind of bridge to the other, to someone else out there. To me, it embodies a lot of questions and provocative moments and encounters, and a lot of friction and energy that I find myself restless with as an individual.” To him, in a way, this is almost like an offering. “You make the work, and then I hand it to you.”

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*Lightscape* is an immersive seven-screen installation work offering multiple sensorial experiences. BRICA WILCOX