

Doug Aitken: *Return to the Real*

Exhibition 2 October–20 December 2019

Victoria Miro, 16 Wharf Road, London N1 7RW



Doug Aitken, *Open the gate (Claire at table)*, 2019
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Victoria Miro presents *Return to the Real*, an exhibition of new works by Doug Aitken. Conceived as a unified composition of sound, light, form and movement, the exhibition explores our rapidly changing relationships to one another and the world around us in an age dominated by technology.

‘We are living in a new era, one of complete connectivity, where screen space has become seemingly equal to the physical landscape. This surreal shift in evolution brings us into uncharted waters, a new frontier, one for which we are not fully prepared. These artworks question how we navigate a world of increasing speed and transition, the direction of where we can go and how we can confront the future.’ – Doug Aitken

A starting point for this exhibition is the idea of the contemporary individual and the ways in which humans are continuously both in and out of sync. Diametrically opposed notions of connectivity and freedom, collectivity and isolation are highlighted, reminding us how this new frontier is being shaped and is transforming our lives in real time and, in many ways, defining our generation. The exhibition creates a fragmented narrative of today’s unprecedented digital landscape, in which artworks function like signposts, inviting the viewer to pause, stop and evaluate their surroundings.

Traditional sculptural forms are transformed. In the ground floor gallery, a figure, crystallised in translucent acrylic, appears resting at a wooden table, shopping bags discarded on the floor, a phone just out of reach. Caught in the midst of a silent moment, this is not a heroic figure but a candid snapshot of an individual frozen as if time had stopped. From the hollowed core of the sculpture, light emanates and pulses in shifting colours, choreographed together with an original audio composition of layered vocals which spreads throughout the space. Surrounding the figure are several large lightboxes that reveal new and synthetic landscapes, in which repetition renders unfamiliar commonplace domestic imagery, such as beds and swimming pools. In another work, the wing of a plane extends towards the horizon in a manner that is both seductive and disorienting. This is a portrait of a modern landscape in transition, suspended between the physical world and the world of the screen.

In the first-floor gallery we see a young woman paused in an introspective moment, her form carved from Zebrino marble. Upon closer inspection we notice that the figure is split in half, its interior revealing a chamber of faceted mirror that causes reflected light to flow through and beyond the

body. This luminous kaleidoscopic effect responds to the interplay of a dynamic light wall situated behind the sculpture. Flickering with the speed of the external world, yet held in a moment of quiet contemplation, the figure fluctuates between motion and stillness.

This is a restless exhibition where diverse mediums merge together seamlessly. Minimal in design, several sonic sculptures hang from the ceiling. Composed of reflective steel chimes, they slowly rotate, playing music when activated. Within these works is housed a finely tuned musical scale allowing each sculpture to create continuously changing arrangements, while its mirrored surface abstracts its surrounding environment.

On the terrace of the waterside garden is a freestanding sculpture which also features a number of mirrored chimes, each representing a different note on the musical scale, that gradually ascend and descend in a sequence of musical patterns. A living artwork, the sculpture creates hypnotic sounds as the wind moves through it and, at other times, falls into silence. It embodies the fluidity of time by creating an evolving experience, a soundscape in which harmonies are composed and recomposed anew, unique for each visitor.

About the artist

Doug Aitken is an American artist and filmmaker. Defying definitions of genre, he explores every medium, from film and installations to architectural interventions. His work has been featured in numerous exhibitions around the world, in such institutions as the Whitney Museum of American Art, The Museum of Modern Art, the Vienna Secession, the Serpentine Gallery, and the Centre Georges Pompidou. He participated in both the 1997 and 2000 Whitney Biennials, and earned the International Prize at the Venice Biennale in 1999 for the installation *electric earth*. Aitken received the 2012 Nam June Paik Art Center Prize, and the 2013 Smithsonian Magazine American Ingenuity Award: Visual Arts. In 2016 he received the Americans for the Arts National Arts Award: Outstanding Contributions to the Arts. In 2017 Aitken became the inaugural recipient of the Frontier Art Prize, a new contemporary art award that supports an artist to pursue bold projects that challenge the boundaries of knowledge and experience to reimagine the future of humanity.

Aitken's *Sleepwalkers* exhibition at MoMA in 2007 transformed an entire block of Manhattan as he covered the museum's exterior walls with projections. In 2009, his *Sonic Pavilion* opened to the public in the hills of Brazil at the new cultural foundation INHOTIM. Aitken presented his large-scale film and architecture installation, *Frontier*, on Rome's Isola Tiberina in 2009 and in Basel in 2010. *Black Mirror* featured a video installation and a live theatre performance on a uniquely designed barge floating off Athens and Hydra Island, Greece in 2011. Commissioned and produced by the LUMA Foundation in 2012, *Altered Earth* explored the ever-changing landscape of Arles, France through moving image, sound and architecture. Also in 2012, "SONG 1" wrapped the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington DC in 360-degree panoramic video projections, transforming the concrete exterior into an audiovisual spectacle. In 2013, Aitken created "MIRROR" at the Seattle Art Museum, which utilized hundreds of hours of footage changing in real time in response to the life around it, transforming the museum exterior into a living kaleidoscope.

Aitken curated *Station to Station*, which took place over three weeks in September 2013. A train, designed as a moving light sculpture, broadcast content to a global audience as it traveled from New York City to San Francisco making nine stops along the way for a series of happenings. A feature film and a book about the project were released in 2015. *Station to Station* next took over the Barbican Centre in London for 30 days in the summer of 2015, a month-long happening featuring over 100 artists, musicians, dancers, designers and other creative figures.

In September 2016, a major survey of Aitken's work opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Los Angeles. The survey exhibition subsequently traveled to The Modern, Fort Worth in May 2017. December 2016 marked the installation one of his most ambitious projects to date, a trio of *Underwater Pavilions* tethered to the seabed off the coast of Catalina Island, California. This project was followed in 2017 by *Mirage*, a site-specific sculpture that takes the form of a home completely covered in mirrors and set in the heart of the Californian desert. *Mirage* has subsequently been installed in Detroit, MI (2018) and is currently on view in Gstaad, Switzerland.

Launched in July 2019 *New Horizon*, a nomadic art installation accompanied by a series of live events and experiences, took place across the state of Massachusetts (12–28 July 2019), all centred around a mirror-surfaced hot air balloon and gondola that vividly contrasted with the natural settings of New England.

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