

52 INSIGHTS

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Doug Aitken

'The way I see life is very non-linear'

Through his own unique work American visual artist Doug Aitken is transformed into an everyday philosopher. Each project he develops becomes a platform to interpret the boundaries of knowledge and humanity.



If he's not exploring the depths of reality in the Pacific Ocean, then he's journeying across the United States on his moving light sculpture with artists like Ed Ruscha and Beck.

This is Doug Aitken's world, a man who possesses an uncanny ability to bring together creative luminaries in the hope of realising his wonderful visions: a mixture of architecture, film and music gestating inside a pop culture framework.

Although this has earned him a long list of heady awards, a retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art in LA, and showings at almost every major gallery on earth, Aitken will be the first to tell you that credentials are the last reason why he continues with his work.

It's about exploring profound questions. Yet for us in this interview, we have the privilege of getting some answers.



Doug Aitken, Mirrored House Mirage Coachella, 2017

Failure seems to be a subject of fascination for you. You've said in interviews that you believe that there's no such thing as failure, that you're "fascinated by taking concepts to the point of breaking, where things fall apart, and that is where you learn the most, where you're most inspired". What do you mean by that?

Yes, I think that conversation leads us to the starting point of creativity. Where do ideas come from? How do we sculpt them into something that has a structure or a narrative?

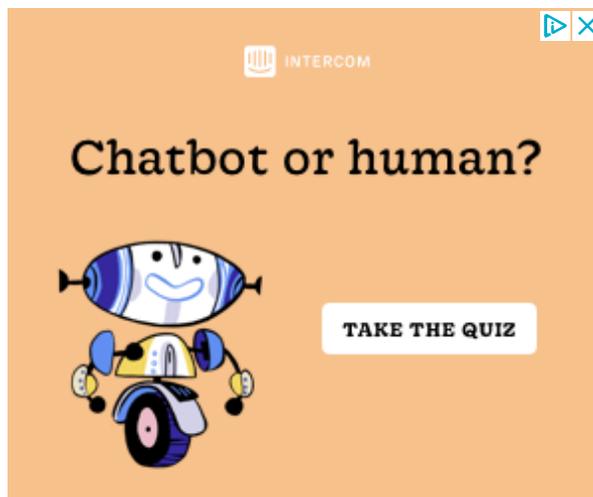
In culture, we have in a lot of ways been weaned on linearity. The history of storytelling, from the campfire to the theatre, or opera.

The way I see life is very non-linear, it's very fragmented, and I think we're pushing and pulling pieces of information and welding them together, and that's how we move forward.

Maybe experience is broader and vaster and more fragmented, and the straight story isn't always the right story.

I also find myself trying out tools that we've never tried before in human history relating to technology. I think that has created this very strange time right now. It's an entirely new landscape to navigate, and I find myself thinking about this when I'm making artwork.

"We're no longer restricted to the white walls of a gallery."



You work a lot in the realm of popular culture, but you're working on some deep existential questions. Is the idea of working in a popular culture framework the best way to get eyes on the work you're doing?

I don't think there's any one right way. Some of the projects I do, I find they slide into popular culture. It's almost subconscious. When we did Station to Station a few years

ago, it was a 4,000-mile train journey across North America.

I told the artists and musician participating – “I’d love you to be a part of this. But you have to do something new, that is offsite. Any type of dream you have, we’ll make it. We’ll find a way somehow”. And it was interesting because I think that the project did become enmeshed with popular culture. It became this mysterious fleeting period in the zeitgeist.

But there’s also the possibility to do things that are very long and durational, and maybe very remote. And that was one of the things that we thought about with Underwater Pavilions. It was three sculptures underneath the Pacific Ocean. They were mirrored dodecahedrons.

With that work, it was very different. I had no idea I was going to come to the Pacific Ocean in December, on an island off California, and swim underneath the surface and try to construct these mirrored sea caves.

We’re no longer restricted to the white walls of a gallery. We can find different ways to short-circuit culture, or subvert, or even create something that’s a secession almost. We use other situations, and we create our own situations. I think there’s always going to be that movement. There needs to be that experimentation culture. Without it, we don’t have oxygen.

Do you think people outside of the cultural realm would understand what you are doing? I’m thinking of a couple who are watching Station to Station go by and trying to understand what it is about. Do you ever have those moments where you question how it will be interpreted?

It was interesting with Station to Station. There was a moment on that project for me where it all was worthwhile. We were in the desert, and it was the night before we were

staging the happening.

I was walking down the street at night to a liquor store, and this figure jumps out of an alley next to me. It was this American Indian guy, he came up to me and said, “hey, do you know anything about this Station to Station thing tomorrow night?” And I said, “yeah, what do you want to know?”

He said, “I heard about it on the Native American radio station, and they said they had some tickets so I came down from the reservation to see if I could get some of these tickets they’re giving away”. I said, “don’t worry about it, I’ll give you a handful, please come”.

The next day I get down there, and we’re setting up for the happening, and I see him with five other members of his tribe, waiting patiently. The event starts and about an hour into it I see him again watching the Fischli and Weiss film, it’s called *The Way Things Go*. The candle burns, the string snaps, all these generic throwaway objects moving with incredible synchronicity. He’s watching it transfixed, and then he sees me standing there and says, “you see that? I could make that. If you call it art, then I can make art”.

That was an interesting moment of culture crossing over. Here’s a Swiss collaborative group making this thing, from the 1980s, and suddenly it’s in the Arizona desert at night time in a small town with a population of probably 5,000. Somebody sees the creation of the work, and understands it, and says, “this gives me the power to make my own work”.



Station to Station train light sculpture, 2013

So talking about your forthcoming exhibition Song 1 I want to understand why you chose this song in particular: 'I Only Have Eyes For You'. What does this specific project represent for you? And when you get different people to reinterpret it, like Tilda Swinton or Beck, how does that conversation usually go?

It was a very organic process how that work came about. I remember I was working on these ideas and I felt locked in the studio. Everyone had left for the holidays so I could be there alone. I put on a song and just kept it on for about three or four days. So it would only play and play over and over, and as I was doing this, after a while I started to realize that every time I would hear it, it would be different perceptually.

I would hear different aspects of the song. I became fascinated by this idea of repetition. I thought every century has its contributions, and one of the contributions of the 20th century is the perfect pop song. That idea of a three and a half minute song that can travel anywhere. It can be in a taxi in Manila or in a diner in New York. It's completely weightless and nomadic. It moves on its own. So I started thinking about this idea of a song as architecture, and what is the architecture of some of these songs that you can't shake?

It wasn't something that was made in the last 10 or 20 years. It had been around since the beginning of pop. It's this almost 100-year-old perfectly crafted piece of sound.

So with the work, I wanted to use one single song and recompose it 30, 40, 50 times with different instrumentations, strings, vocals, in every single genre I could, and make it elastic.

Stretch it out in every configuration and then use that simple song as a way of mapping a topography. I saw it as a way of creating this universal membrane that moves from person to person.

I think The Flamingos' version is the best – It's a very haunting, mysterious song.

It is. It continues without resolution. There's never a kind of completion to it. It's kind of like a Haiku in a way. Some patterns repeat, and some lyrics don't sum anything up, and I think that's why it was able to function so well for this piece. We could have these different versions made, for example, I tracked down a Texan slide guitarist to play it. There are no lyrics at all in that version but there's still something so haunting. The reverberation of the metal on the strings that you hear echoes.

You strike me as a passive radical in the way that you're intent on subverting reality but through art, you let the viewer decide for themselves. But you're also interested in how many ways can we unthread reality.

Yes and recently I experienced a somewhat revelation about that, about a year and a half ago. We had just finished the underwater pavilions, and it was the first time that I had physically experienced putting on a scuba tank where I am walking down these mossy steps and thrusting myself off into the Pacific.

There was this moment where I was suddenly sinking, and I was breathing artificially due to the scuba tanks, and my body was weightless.

I thought to myself, every piece of art I've ever seen has been me sitting or standing, and all of a sudden I'm flying into emotion, and the objects of the ocean are changing depth perception, the colours are like filtered blue-green.

It was hallucinatory in the most profound personal way. I thought, it's interesting that we're pushing so hard with technology to create augmented reality – these virtual spaces – when right in front of us, the facts that we have are so profoundly mysterious.



Underwater Pavillions, 2017

That brings up a really strong point about the idea that we've been captivated by our own reality for the 20th and 19th centuries, but we're moving into a new space where our realities could shift dramatically.

Talking about submerging yourself in the water, I can't even think how hallucinatory experiences will be 100 years from now, and how we're going to experience the world around us. That must excite you tremendously.

I mean, I think in a lot of ways art should not be in the service of technology and development. Creating art should be writing the language, not using the language. If we look back on human history and art and culture, all these innovations happen in the service of ideas.

Whether it's Caravaggio coming up with a darker black in his work or Leonardo and his changing perspectives.

The situation that we're living in right now, the engineers are developing technology faster than the dialogue of philosophy and ethics of them.

So what happens is every season we have a new set of tools and in some Darwinistic sense, so many of those tools survive, and the rest are in the bin. And then there's another set. There's not so much consideration of how much they affect the individual or society, or how they'll be used. It's just the act of making.

With regards to working in water, you mentioned that your dad had washed up on shore when you were a young kid and that he survived. Why did he do that and what happened to him?

Well, he was a pretty extreme character. But I think he just got sucked out to sea. A similar thing happened to me about ten years ago and I woke up in a coma.

"I was coming out of the coma after three days of unconsciousness."

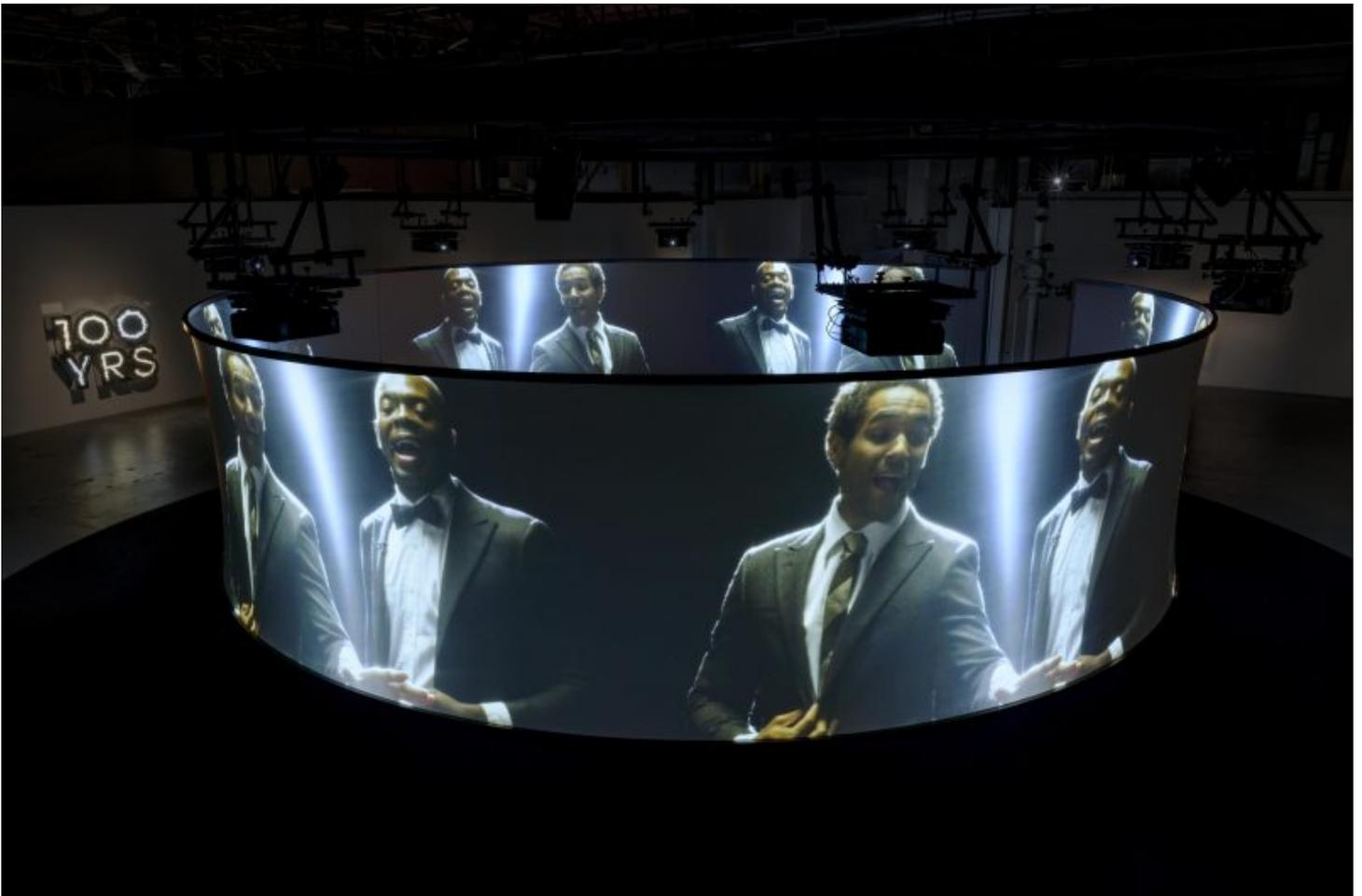
Wow.

Yeah, I don't mention it to people much. He was telling me about his experience when I was coming out of the coma after three days of unconsciousness.

I think the Underwater Pavilions came out of the idea of, how can art live? And where can it live?

You recognise that over 70 per cent of the earth is underwater. You can't help but think about how vast that is, and how much unexplored terrain there is.

I think naively, I thought to myself, it would be fascinating to embark on creating something that could exist there. Where the viewer could move outside of their comfort and safety zone and step into an abyss that is very foreign. When we think of an ocean we think of a linear horizon line and monochrome colour, but we have no sense of confidence, or sense of self when we enter into it and push under it.



SONG I, 2012/2015, © Doug Aitken, courtesy 303 Gallery, New York; Galerie/ Eva Presenhuber, Zurich; Victoria Miro Gallery, London; Regen Projects, Los Angeles; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

You immerse yourself in so many different mediums, and I wondered, out of all the projects you've done, which one typifies you as an artist? Is there one in particular that you're quite connected to?

I think it's a constellation. It's this system, and every work is part of a branch, part of a stem, a series of questions that you have about mortality, about time and your place in this chaotic world. As you keep repeating, the line between fiction and non-fiction is very thin. I think in a lot of ways, creating works is an act of breathing. Breathing in

and breathing out. In some ways it's strange because I don't look back and think about works so much when I've finished them.

Doug Aitken Song 1 is on now at Copenhagen Contemporary until the 30th December 2018

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