

ART+ AUCTION

VISITORS TO DOUG AITKEN'S STUDIO in Venice, California, are likely, at one point or another, to be offered a pair of drumsticks. Aitken uses the studio, a small modern house walking distance from his home, for entertaining as well as art making. The centerpiece is a wenge-wood dining-room table that he designed to double as a drum set. He had five drumming chambers carved into the wood, with each drum pad measuring about the size of a small place setting. A bowl of drumsticks sits nearby, ready for use.

I chose a drumstick and banged out a few notes on the table while asking Aitken the story behind it. He told me that he lit on the idea about three years ago after a boring dinner party somewhere on the art circuit. "There was that usual awkward moment, and I realized that words have their limits," Aitken said, in his soft-spoken, laid-back Southern California manner (the artist was born in Redondo Beach). "I thought, 'Wouldn't it be amazing if at another dinner, sound could take over?'"

Strangely enough, considering Aitken's international reputation as a video artist, sound has played a powerful role in his artworks over the years. He uses the auditory to define space or to dissolve it in his highly architectural video installations, which take unusual forms, from monitors set in cruciform arrangements

to riffs on cinematic conditions, such as projections across building façades. He has collaborated on his videos with a wide variety of musicians, from André 3000 of Outkast, who was in Aitken's 2002 multi-screen *Interiors*, to indie bands like Lichens, which contributed to his score for *Migration*, 2008, and performed live during the piece's run in New York at 303 Gallery, where Aitken has shown since 1994. Interested in the uneasy intersection of nature and culture or narrative variability, the artist has incorporated into his scores what he calls "field recordings," such as jungle noises from Jonestown, Guyana (in his 1995

Monsoon), and the reverberations of tremors generated by the eruption of the Soufrière Hills volcano on the Caribbean island of Montserrat (in *Eraser*, 1998).

"You could definitely say I've been obsessed with sound," he admits. Even in his 2007 installation *Sleepwalkers*—which he calls his first "silent" film, since it was designed to be projected on the façade of the Museum of Modern Art, with the streets of New York supplying the soundtrack—he used the musicians Chan Marshall (a.k.a. Cat Power), Seu Jorge and Ryan Donowho, among others, as actors. His thinking? They could help create particularly rhythmic visual images of everyday city activity.

"My main focus has always been visual art making," »

says Aitken, who earned a BFA from Art Center College of Design, in Pasadena, in 1991, never formally studied a musical instrument. "But everybody knows that making art involves a lot of sitting around listening to music."

This month Aitken's ongoing interest in sound will be even more prominent with the debut of his *Sonic Pavilion* at Brazil's Instituto Inhotim, a sculpture park and museum (some call it an "art zoo") founded by the collector Bernardo Paz, which features site-specific work by such artists as Matthew Barney, Chris Burden and Pipilotti Rist. Aitken conceived the project almost five years ago after the New York-based art consultant Allan Schwartzman, who works closely with Paz, invited the artist to visit the park and consider adding a piece.

Aitken had heard about geologists using highly sensitive microphones to monitor the cracking of glaciers in Antarctica and had the idea of using them here. He decided to drill a hole roughly one mile deep and plant these "geo-microphones" and high-tech amplifiers to listen to the "primal, geologic sounds," rather like putting a stethoscope on the earth's heart. These devices transform the earth's low-level noises and vibrations into audible sounds that fill a ground-level glass pavilion, situated above the hole and open to visitors. During the multistage production process, he consulted various experts, including Brazilian geologists and the Los Angeles artist and sound designer Damian Wagner.

Early tests at Inhotim yielded surprising results, from sounds that are "consistent and rhythmic, like a bass murmur, to this sharp and violent noise." The audio is constantly transforming with the real-time variations in the earth's rumblings. "That's one thing that just fascinated me about this project," says Aitken, "the idea that you could make a living artwork, a changing artwork that will never be the same twice."

"If you look at the history of Western art," he adds, "it's all about the idea of completion—about the moment the artist steps away from a painting. I'm interested in making an artwork that challenges that idea and doesn't end."

As his inspiration in this regard he names the minimalist composers Terry Riley and La Monte Young, who eschew linear narrative in favor of compositions that repeat, loop and fold in on themselves—making, Aitken says, "time expand and contract in interesting ways."

Minimalism more generally has been a guiding theme of the Inhotim project. Aitken seeks to pare down visitors' experience to heighten their patterns of attention and perception in ways that recall the pioneering work of such light and space artists as Robert Irwin and James Turrell. He decided to leave one glass panel of the 46-foot-diameter pavilion clear, while frosting the others with a lenticular film so that visitors' peripheral vision is diffused. "I was interested in reducing the architecture of the piece to the most minimal," explains Aitken. "No rococo excesses."

From start to finish, the Inhotim project took about five years. Meanwhile, Aitken—whose favorite word for his pieces' content and for his working process alike is *synchronicity*—kept busy on his video works. In one of his studio's editing rooms—really a bedroom equipped with a powerful Macintosh computer, a large flat screen and a desk for an assistant—he showed me early, dreamy footage for an outdoor piece, *Moving City*, slated to be unveiled in summer 2010 in the Parc des Ateliers in Arles, France. It promises to be an intensely poetic work that reconfigures the surrounding landscape as well as its noises into a labyrinthine video installation.

He also talked about the new incarnation of *Migration* running at his Los Angeles gallery Regen Projects this month. The video, featuring wild animals invading American motel »

rooms, debuted last year at 303 Gallery and was shown at the 55th Carnegie International, in Pittsburgh; it has been revamped for Regen, where it will be screened on an indoor billboard during daytime hours and outside the gallery at night.

Although Aitken's videos are generally offered in editions of four and typically sell out, his sound experiments tend to be less marketable and, perhaps as a result, receive less attention in the art world. In 1996, for the public art organization Creative Time, he installed an underappreciated piece in the Anchorage, a cavernous space inside the base of the Brooklyn Bridge, that used recordings of the traffic noises overhead. In 2004 he completed a sound sculpture for the Mies van der Rohe pavilion in Barcelona composed of a central post supporting a

new sweeping steel branches that rotated while highly directional speakers at the end of each branch played snippets of scripted conversation. "The voices sounded as if they were coming from your own head," the artist explains, "and then they'd disappear just as fast."

This June, Aitken staged an opera of his own composition at the Theater Basel as part of a larger program organized by curator Hans Ulrich Obrist and the French artist and filmmaker Philippe Parreno. Aitken's piece was largely inspired by the audio

track of his 1998 video *These Restless Minds*, in which he turned country auctioneers' rattling off bids at breakneck speed into a mesmerizing music.

He is currently working some of those auctioneering sounds—as well as the cracking of a bullwhip—into another opera, slated to debut this month on Tiber Island, in Rome. To accommodate the multiple videos that will run dusk to dawn from October 22 through the end of November, with three days of live performance early on, he is designing an odd modernist building, a rectangular structure with no roof and apertures instead of windows.

As for his Brazil project, Aitken is already revisiting that as well. For starters, it has led to a commission from Seattle collectors for what he calls "a silent pavilion." For this he plans to create an anechoic (sound- and echo-proof) chamber equipped, like the Brazilian structure, with a window through which to view the scene outside. The idea, he says, "is to strip away one level of perception to amplify another."

His wish is to plant other sound pavilions around the globe. "I love the idea that you could be standing in the Mojave Desert and I could be in Mexico, and we could both be experiencing the earth's sonic footprint at the same time," he says. "It would be a shared experience. It would be perfect synchronicity." ■