

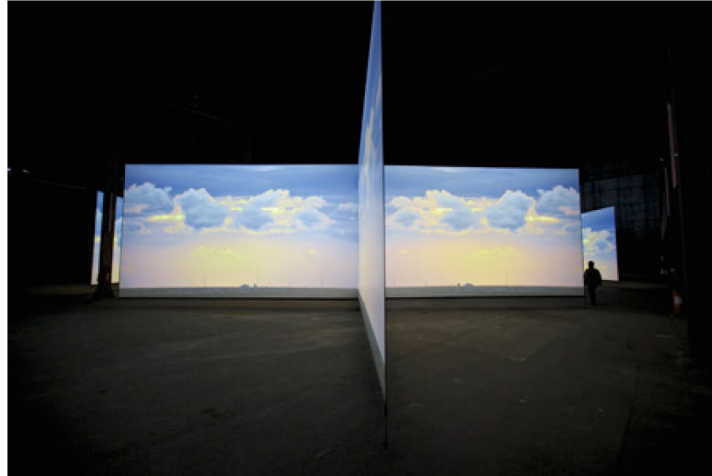
## 303 GALLERY

Barry, Robert. "Doug Aitken". frieze (1/11/12)

# frieze

## Doug Aitken

GRAND HALLE, PARC DES ATELIERS, ARLES, FRANCE



Doug Aitken, *Altered Earth*, 2012, Installation view

In the spring of 1953, Dylan Thomas visited Igor Stravinsky in his hotel room in Boston. The composer was sick in bed with colitis and the poet off-colour and on edge, but after a glass of scotch to calm his nerves, Thomas laid out his plan for an opera libretto. The plot concerned an Earth devastated by warfare and the founding of a new world by one man and one woman, who were either the only survivors of this apocalypse or alien visitors who had stumbled upon the depopulated planet. Between them, this Edenic couple would experience the world anew, renaming and rediscovering each element of natural fauna as it re-emerged from the radioactive dust. Six months later, Thomas was dead and the project never came to fruition.

Though Doug Aitken insists he didn't have a back-story in mind when he shot his new multi-channel video installation, *Altered Earth* (2012), the work could almost be a final realization of Stravinsky and Thomas's unrealized *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Meeting with a small group of journalists in a garden across the road from the Parc de Ateliers on the afternoon of the opening of 'ALTERED EARTH: Arles, City of Moving Images', Aitken admitted that the first thing that came to mind when he came to the Camargue region in southern France was the work of J.G. Ballard. Commissioned by the LUMA Foundation, a locally-based regeneration project initiated by one of the heirs to the Roche Pharmaceuticals Company, Aitken's work, five years in the making, is highly site-specific, never to travel from the former industrial space of the Parc des Ateliers. Aitken's images drift and cascade across 12 vast screens, retaining something of the eerie, savage animism of his first impression of J.G. Ballard and this region: the sense of the overgrown, of dead technology carrying-on autonomously, of place sliding into non-place, that

characterizes Ballard's Cape Canaveral stories, in particular, is here in droves.

Amidst it all, somehow lost in this subtly hostile world, are two figures – a man and a woman – seen only in part or in silhouette; never identifiable. As such, they become avatars for the audience in this violently de-familiarized world of glacial salt mines and febrile marshlands; a seemingly impossible topology of rice paddies and flamingos that seems neither European nor Asian, or somehow both at once. The only other human figures are the semi-mythological horseback guardians (the name for the local mounted herdsman), caught at first in black-and-white, the only colourless moment in the film, as if to present them as memories insubstantially haunting the present, like Ballard's dead astronauts. Otherwise, Aitken's vision makes of this an Earth grown wild – even though, in real life, there are few places in the world less 'natural' than this protected reserve. An 'altered earth' indeed: the unique nature of this Provençal wetland is the result of centuries of irrigation, which have utterly transformed the region, gradually making the land suitable for cultivation.

Aitken sees his work as simultaneously a synthesis and overcoming of three of the 20th century's most grandiose artistic forms; declaring himself 'bored' of traditional cinema, 'frustrated' with architecture, and tired of the 'masculine' urge to transform and transfigure underpinning land art. *Altered Earth*, then, seeks to present a 21st-century land art, leaving the land untouched but transmuted by the oblique power of lens and screen; a 'liquid architecture' of mobile monumental forms; a modular, non-linear post-cinema through which the audience is free to choose its own path and assemble its own narrative. It's a bold strategy and a seductive notion, but if it relies on a hall big enough to spin a train around and enough screens to fill a multiplex, I suspect it will ultimately fail to garner either the popular appeal of the last or the monumental permanence of either of the former.

The 12 screens of *Altered Earth*, each one approximately eight-and-a-half by five metres, are arranged to form one central cross, with each corner facing an opposing 'V' to make four distinct zones. The film then plays sometimes a little out of sync, sometimes in a strict visual counterpoint, such that the images in front of you will only sometimes match visually and temporally those behind you, creating a sense of an ever-changing three-dimensional environment, at times opening out, at other times closing in on you. Likewise, many of the images formally reflect the different arrangements of the screens within the physical space of the hall: cloud patterns reflected in water doubling the mirrored opposing screens, tiered lines of wind turbines reproducing the staggered video surfaces as viewed askance, and the prismatic view from inside a seemingly abandoned lighthouse interjecting the crystalline constellation of the whole.

In the end, for all its grandstanding appearance, *Altered Earth* remains a remarkably modest work that probably retains far more in common with at least certain kinds of cinema than its creator would like to admit – in particular, the genre of IMAX documentary films. Though Aitken may well have wished his audience to wander amongst his landscape of projections, experiencing all the ebb and flux of hypermodernity; the predominantly Arlesian audience at the opening notably stayed mostly rooted in a single spot, from which they could comfortably view any given set of four screens from start to finish. Defiantly non-conceptual, the work offers a direct sensual aesthetic. What finally saves it from the trap of postcard picturesque is the previously alluded to sense of Ballardian hyperstition – the post-apocalyptic possibility of a de-familiarized perception in each innocent act of discovery.

**Robert Barry**