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The Washington Post

Hirshhorn Museum's "Song 1" is all about projection



View Photo Gallery — Artist turns Hirshhorn's exterior into 'world's greatest screen' After two years of discussion and planning, Doug Aitken's "SONG 1" multimedia spectacle is being projected onto all sides of Washington's modernist museum.

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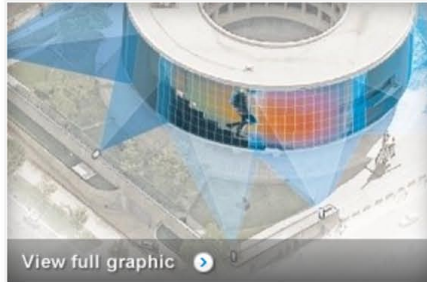
By Philip Kennicott, Published: March 22

They gathered Thursday night in cocktail gowns and hipster garb, in wrinkled dress shirts unchanged since the workday, and in the comfortable baggy uniform of the cherry blossom tourists — and stood gawping at the Hirshhorn Museum. The much-anticipated multimedia piece, "Song 1," by Doug Aitken, finally had its premiere.

The Hirshhorn's building, long derided in Washington for its fortress-like heaviness, has never looked quite so fluid and light. Water rippled on its surface, boats floated by, cars streamed like liquid metal down highways that flashed across the 725-foot facade of architect Gordon Bunshaft's cylindrical museum. All the while, various spectral singers — some crooning for an audience, others affectless and lost in their own solipsistic space — sang an endless loop of different iterations of the classic 1934 pop song "I Only Have Eyes for You."

The Washington Post

Graphic



Exploring the Hirshhorn's "SONG 1" exhibit.

Video



Artist Doug Aitken transforms the cylindrical facade of the Hirshhorn Museum into an urban canvas with his multimedia project, "Song 1."

Aitken, a California-based artist who has had a dazzling career since winning the International Prize at the 1999 Venice Biennale, has long said he wanted the work to be an exercise in "liquid architecture." He succeeded. And when the word "disappear" appeared and floated for a moment on the endless, circular screen, the work emphasized its aesthetic ambition: to set up a visual spectacle that both attracts looking obsessively, yet makes the museum itself dissolve.

It is by far the most ambitious piece of public art yet attempted in the District. Using 11 projectors and multiple outdoor speakers, the video covers the entire surface of the building, with images that are remarkably sharp. Even the shadows cast by real trees feel like a happy accident in the game of illusion, almost photographic double-exposures on the surface of the video.

As an urban intervention, it is brilliant, animating one of the city's monumentally grim dead zones: the Independence Avenue corridor just south of the mall. It makes the march of government office buildings on the south side of the street seem even more forlorn, almost alive in their sadness, like the inhabitants of a badly run zoo looking out at freedom.

And the whole thing is perfectly timed, too, arriving just as Cherry Blossom madness has reached its steroidal peak — artistic balm for people exhausted by all those repetitive pink flowers.

But so many aesthetic, technological and cultural threads come together in "Song 1" that it's worth sorting out the cheap thrills from the more supple and satisfying ones.

The sheer size of the images offers a visceral frisson. Huge faces loom up on the screen, singing, lost in thought, driving a car. Although the Hirshhorn is no higher than the buildings around it, these people seem to tower over the city.

But there are good and long-standing reasons to be suspicious of large images, which are a staple of advertising, Las Vegas and totalitarian personality cults. They are fun and dangerous, overwhelming our skepticism, like being in the midst of an emotional crowd. There are times, watching "Song 1," when you wonder if anything projected with this much clarity on a building of this size wouldn't be almost equally hypnotic. And there are times when you wonder if there's a dystopian urban future hinted at in this project — a perfect melding of messaging, ideology and architecture.