

Interiors:



Installation view of Aitken's work by Aaron Igler
All images were created in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum *Interiors*, 2002

Doug Aitken

Doug Aitken at the Fabric Workshop Museum

Doug Aitken's new video installation, *Interiors*, at the Fabric Workshop Museum in Philadelphia through January 11, 2003, presses the boundaries of perception, space and architecture in relation to the syntax of video and video installation. Aitken's complex three-channel video installation explores issues of human intervention within modes of production, consumption and existence.

During a two-year residency and collaboration, Aitken worked with the staff of the Fabric Workshop to create the new work. Aitken tested over 300 samples of screens for the installation structure. The result is a house-like enclosure with three opaque screens of projections and multiple translucent screens. A large round cushion provides seating in the center of the structure. In ancient cultures, the house symbolized the image of the universe, with an axis in the center joining three worlds together.¹ In Aitken's "house", the three screens present four different worlds with the viewer as the pinnacle or axis. As the artist weaves seemingly disparate narratives, the viewer is challenged to merge these diverse worlds.

The opaque and translucent screens function as walls and windows. Walls restrict, enclose and isolate. They are associated with the binaries of both protection/imprisonment and boundaries/no limits. Windows are for looking out as well as looking in. Aitken utilizes the window/wall architectural metaphor as a visual strategy to explore the meaning of the title *Interior*. The viewer may choose to be either inside or outside the "house." Their perceptions and experience of the piece is defined by the viewers' location within the structure. Aitken has provided the "boundaries" of structure, but the viewer may choose to move outside the defined borders or limits. The translucent screens serve as both walls and windows. They separate, but do not restrict. They enclose but do not imprison.

The video's imagery also addresses the definitions of "interior" on different levels. Some images are quite literally interiors, such as the Japanese auctioneer in his penthouse in Tokyo, the helicopter factory and the handball court. However there is an interior component even in the "exterior" shots. In the scenes where the characters are outside immersed in their respective environments, there is a feeling of isolation or private moments, which the viewer is not privy to experi-

encing. The work focuses on four distinct narratives: a Tokyo auctioneer, a character played by Andre Benjamin from the rap group Outkast, a tap dancer in a helicopter factory and a woman playing handball. The main narratives are interspersed with other imagery, such as an Asian couple gazing lovingly at their baby while outside a garbage dump.

In contrast to Bill Viola's new five-channel video installation, *Going Forth By Day*, on exhibit at the Guggenheim through January 12, 2003, Aitken challenges the traditional technical and narrative structures prevalent in contemporary video.² While Viola's work addresses mythic and symbolic themes of life, death and birth/rebirth, Aitken invokes the complexity of the individual and their symbiotic relationship with global culture as it relates to consumption and production. Viola's characters are the embodiment of society as a whole, while Aitken focuses on the individual and their place within the whole, implying both the connections and disconnections embedded within the interior and exterior of culture.

While multi-channel video installations have become commonplace in the contemporary art scene, both Viola and Aitken approach the technical structure of their work from diverse perspectives. In Viola's work the camera is stationary. All movement/action is within the frame. Each panel contains its own distinct narrative. Viola cites Giotto's frescoes in Padua as influences. In Aitken's work, the camera is constantly moving, altering the angles of perception. The imagery is looped and seems to travel in a clockwise fashion from screen to screen. However, just when it appears that the loop is completed, Aitken alters the sequence, adding new series of images. The quick edits force the viewers to constantly shift their focus. Unlike many video works, which celebrate endlessly, repetitive, banal imagery, challenging even the most die-hard viewer's endurance, Aitken compels the spectators into becoming active participants. It is impossible to remain passive in the immersive environment. Aitken also utilizes techniques borrowed from popular media, i.e. MTV, as a tactic to shift the viewer's attention to specific imagery and sustain their interest.

Viola's narrative structure is linear with a defined beginning, climax and end. The installation is an articulation of the passage of nature's cycles, and each panel was shot during a



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seasonal equinox or solstice. In contrast, Aitken states that a linear narrative does not accurately depict our current experience with time. "We're navigating an image and content world, which is de-material and intangible. Everything is in flux and being replaced and recontextualized endlessly."³ Aitken recreates this state of flux by projecting different scenarios simultaneously on the screens. At points, the images converge, defining moments of cohesion, only to fragment into carefully, controlled randomness. There is a sense of seemingly familiar spaces with odd, almost surreal events or happenings. The scene of two girls playing handball in the pristine white court, devoid of any scuff marks, evolves into a James Turrell light sculpture; the blue ball rolling to a stop, signaling the end of an important, but undetermined moment in history. The scene of the helicopter factory — again a pristine environment, devoid of human presence; the epitome of effectiveness and production controlled by unseen machines. One lone worker, pausing from his duties to perform a rhythmic tap dance, his legs pulsating in time to the movement of the assembly line. The rapper communing with nature in a private moment, transfixed by a sea of snow billowing past in the sunny California landscape, gaining in momentum until it all but obliterates his face.

Sound is a key component in both Viola's and Aitken's

work. Viola utilizes ambient sound manipulating volume and tempo to create tension and release. Each panels' sounds mix freely in the space, creating an overall acoustic ambience. Aitken uses panning devices throughout various speakers to further delineate the architectural space. Ordinary gestures unfold into a cacophony of rhythmic compositions, building in tempo from contemplative to intense delirium then rupturing into brief silence. Aitken utilizes sound to both emphasize the discordance of the narratives and to fuse them at crucial moments. The climax of *Interiors* occurs as simultaneously the Japanese auctioneer taps his fingers, chanting indecipherable "auctionese"; Andre Benjamin's graphic rapping and the helicopter plant worker tap dancing. The motions rhythmically coalesce, momentarily becoming uniform. The intensity builds as volume, tempo and pitch reach a frenzied state, then just as suddenly dissipate.

At the beginning of his artist lecture, Aitken states that he is much more interested in a dialogue versus a monologue. The success of *Interiors* lies in its complexity as a dialogue—a dialogue between the viewer and subject, a dialogue between the disparate characters; a dialogue between architecture and space; a dialogue between perception, sound and imagery; a dialogue without words, but rich with language.

(Endnotes)

¹ Chevalier, Jean and Gheerbrant, Alain, editors, *Dictionary of Symbols*, London: Penguin Books, 1982, p. 529.

² As a pioneer in video art, Bill Viola defined the syntax and structure of video. He has influenced countless numbers of artists. I use him as an example to illustrate how Aitken has

broken away from traditional structures and do not mean to imply that his work is in any way inferior. *Going Forth By Day* is one of his most engaging and challenging works to date.

³ Doug Aitken's artist statement, p. 1.

Colette Copeland is a nationally established artist who teaches photography and art theory and criticism at University of Pennsylvania and University of the Arts in Philadelphia.