





DOUG AITKEN's groundbreaking video projects have portrayed "electric earths" and "new oceans." Now he's ready to turn the Museum of Modern Art inside out with *sleepwalkers*, a 127-foot-high video installation that wraps around the museum's facades.

PORTRAIT BY **CATHERINE OPIE**

Opposite: Doug Aitken's *vanishing point*, C-print mounted on aluminum, 2005

DOUG AITKEN doesn't act like a man rushing to meet the biggest deadline of his career. As the 38-year-old artist settles onto a sofa in his Venice, California, studio, he moves with the lanky grace of a surfer and speaks with the unhurried attitude of a guy who's hangin' out with friends on a Saturday afternoon.

But the dark circles under his eyes tell another story: Aitken just returned to Los Angeles after a three-month stint in New York, and he is under the gun, working long hours to meet a December deadline for *sleepwalkers*, the biggest project yet in a career defined by grand, even grandiose, ambitions.

But perhaps "big" doesn't quite do justice to the gigantic scale of *sleepwalkers*, a multipart film that's made up of five parallel narratives that will be projected simultaneously onto three sides of the exterior of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, at heights of up to 127 feet. As if he wants to turn the museum inside out, Aitken is using the building's exterior walls to sculpt a multisided "installation" from the very architecture of midtown Manhattan.

"For me, this project is about creating a kind of hybrid space between architecture, film and sculpture," explains Aitken, whose laid-back affect recalls the laconic cowboy persona of another Venice resident, influential Los Angeles artist Ed Ruscha. "You know, in a lot of ways, I think I've seen this project as a way to try to create a liquid architecture, by turning architecture into a waterfall of changing, shifting narratives."

The five storylines in *sleepwalkers* follow a series of five characters—played by Tilda Swinton, Donald Sutherland, singer Chan Marshall (aka Cat Power), Brazilian superstar Seu Jorge and New York street drummer Ryan Donowho—through a night in their lives in New York City. Each character represents a different aspect of the metropolis. Sutherland, for instance, is a wealthy uptown Master of the Universe, while Jorge plays an electrician who works in the electronic haze of Times Square's advertising signage. Though their respective paths never cross, each plot is precisely synchronized to underscore their linked existence.

As the characters wake up, leave home and travel through the city toward their respective nocturnal workplaces—"on walkabout," Aitken says—the visual setting for each story becomes increasingly minimalist. Eventually the characters are reduced to a series of almost abstract images, and staccato editing turns their body movements into bold rhythmic gestures that reflect the thrum of the city around them.

"I saw the characters almost as signifiers," explains Aitken, "as vehicles for this movement and flow of the



From top: Doug Aitken; production still of Seu Jorge in *sleepwalkers*, 2007; maps and cycles (*las vegas greyhound station*), C-print, 2004.

