

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



‘Tripping’ on art with Helen Frankenthaler and Doug Aitken

Edward Goldman talks about two dramatically different, challenging, and exquisite exhibitions: Helen Frankenthaler’s paintings at the Gagosian Gallery and Doug Aitken’s videos and sculptures at MOCA.

Edward Goldman



Installation view, “Line into Color, Color into Line: Helen Frankenthaler” at Gagosian Gallery. Photo by Edward Goldman

So my friends, on this day of incessant 100° heat in LA, let’s talk about something cool, very cool. Of course, I’m talking about cool art — about two major exhibitions: Helen Frankenthaler at Gagosian Gallery and Doug Aitken at MOCA’s Geffen Contemporary.

Helen Frankenthaler (1928-2011), one of the most renowned American abstract painters, is the subject of the beautifully installed exhibition *Line into Color, Color into Line* comprised of 18 canvases. Though her career spans six decades, this exhibition is focused on works made between 1962 and 1987.

I have to admit that until seeing this exhibition, I respected and appreciated her art but hadn't been deeply moved or challenged by it. Pouring thinned paint onto unprimed canvases and then adding linear drawing-like elements, Frankenthaler creates dramatic juxtapositions enhanced by a rich variety of colors.

On one wall, side-by-side, there are dramatically diverse compositions that come across as manifestations of happiness and decisiveness, uncertainty and moodiness. Deep moodiness. And somehow these dark, moody paintings touched me the most.

Be sure to watch a rare video in the gallery's backroom showing Frankenthaler in the studio working on her canvases, using sponges to create perfectly imperfect lines and shapes. One additionally intriguing detail about this exhibition is that these 18 canvases were kept by the artist for herself. She never wanted to sell these paintings.

By entering the Geffen Contemporary exhibition *Electric Earth* by Los Angeles-based artist Doug Aitken one is plunged into a dark labyrinth of galleries showing video installations, sculptures, photographs, and architectural works created in the last 20 years by this internationally celebrated artist. His site-specific video installations were shown on the façades of museums in New York and Washington. With a group of friends — musicians and performance artists — Aitken travelled in a train with regular stops for improvised performances and video projections.

Here at the Geffen, museum curators achieved the near impossible by organizing an exhibition where visitors — instead of politely walking through — sit and even lie on the floor, transfixed by a stream of videos on large screens in front and above their heads.

By collaborating with the artist, museum curators created a rich immersive experience with visual components enriched by soundtracks accompanying many of the installations. Though I've been following Aitken's career for a number of years, I still was surprised and almost caught off guard in one of the dark galleries, where Aitken had literally dug into the museum's floor. Breaking through the cement into the soil underneath, the artist created a deep, round hole and then transformed it into a pool of water, brightly lit from inside. Water drops into the pool from a metal structure installed above, and one hears the amplified (and mysterious) sound of each drop. If that won't make you feel high, nothing will.