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The Expanding Universe of Doug Aitken's "Station to Station"

I ducked into a black felt yurt set up in the Railyard in Santa Fe, New Mexico, one of the installations traveling with Doug Aitken's latest large-scale artwork, "Station To Station," and was instantly involved in a mind-bending discussion about the expansion of the universe. And about the possibilities of the nomadic in art.



Liz Glynn, the L.A.-based artist who had designed the yurt, was shining a tiny light on the gloom of the interior walls, which were arrayed like the arms of a spiral galaxy, as a visiting high school senior named Mohit Dubey scrawled equations in chalk. Talking fast, he started with a quick peek into why light red-shifts as it travels and ended at the bottom of the wall with the Universal Wave Equation.

"And when you put that over time, you get one explanation for BOOM," Dubey said excitedly,

crouched in the dark, moving his hands to show the universe flying apart. "

I get the occasional physicist," says Glynn, whose yurt piece called "Model Universe" has morphed as Aitken has chugged a gang of musicians, artists and artisans across the country on a train from Brooklyn to San Francisco. For example, in Chicago the yurt dealt with Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, another big subject in physics. The piece is evolving like the cosmos themselves. Aitken calls this rolling cavalcade of artists, which reminds me a bit of the 1970 "Festival Express" tour with Janis Joplin and the Grateful Dead, but with a thousand times more cameras, a "nomadic

happening." I have always had some trouble with Aitken's enthusiastic propositions about nomadism -- that culture and ideas are free-floating products of a kind of collective unconscious and that humans are increasingly rootless. I believe quite the opposite, that place is increasingly important, and that the rootlessness is a function of identity-building in media, probably accentuated by social media.

But nomadic art? Maybe I was wrong about that.

"For me, the idea of a piece that would move through the country over a fixed period of time and could evolve at each different site was really interesting. And Einstein did -- a lot of his writing refers back to the train," says Glynn as we sit among the six yurts alongside the train tracks.

She's talking about Einstein's thought experiments, in which he imagined a train moving at the speed of light. Some of the people in the crowd, which maybe totals a thousand by night's end, are obviously also thinking about Einstein.

Besides Glynn's yurt, there's a white one by Urs Fischer whose mirrored walls contain a large bed, a disco ball and a thick cloud of artificial fog. Ernesto Neto's wonderful orange yurt has a soft, organic-feeling interior that glows with sunlight, lighting up the Dr. Seuss-like tubes of fabric connect ceiling to floor. When I stood in Kenneth Anger's red yurt, a beautiful woman was lying across the pentagram-shaped chair while she was splashed with the disturbing images from his film, "Lucifer Rising."

Much of this experience, however, is necessarily static. It has to be broken down and set up every few days in a different town. It's a tour.

But other aspects of the ride are fluid. Every night the lineup of musicians, films and live performances changes. Saturday's evening in Santa Fe's Market Pavilion featured musical acts Nite Jewel, the Handsome Family, a terrific hip-hop/R&B hybrid duo called THEESatisfaction and a halting but emotionally gripping solo performance by the endearingly flustered Cat Power. In between acts, two beautiful flamenco dancers stomped out a wild, gesticulating combat. Two live auctioneers barked out their calls in a frenetic and fairly musical duet, punctuated by cracking bullwhips wielded by Chris Camp, one of North America's only whip-cracking artists.

Scores of artists are involved with the project, appearing and disappearing.

"This thing changes," said Camp before the show. "I was with a couple of musicians yesterday in the recording car on the train -- I was playing blues harmonica -- and we'd vamp, maybe record, maybe not."

Oh yeah, the train has a car for recording music. "There are some real peripheral skill sets here, which forces you to really stretch," Camp added.

"I am so excited about this English Walnut dye," said Maura Ambrose, lifting a big stock pot of boiling brown water and fabric out of the Makers Yurt. Aitken's train is sponsored by Levi's -- which are in evidence everywhere, on everyone -- but the jeansmaker also put together a fascinating group of artisans who were weaving, cobbling and sewing items of clothing and quilts. Ambrose had been quilting until they hit Santa Fe, then one of the weavers gave her the walnut. Change of plan.

"This is all about collaboration," said Ambrose, who is from Austin, Texas. "He brought me to his property in Chimayo [a community north of Santa Fe] and we harvested all these colors." That included big bags full of rosemary, marigolds, chamisa (or rabbitbrush) and cota, or Indian tea. When she pulled fabrics out of the walnut brown, she started boiling up the cota to make a pumpkin-colored dye.

"My whole plan changed when I got these dyes," Ambrose said. Nomadism, pulling from local plants.

Glynn points out that the structure of a tour, with its scheduled load-ins and load-outs, can't contain the ideas that flow through the artworks themselves. We got back to astronomer Edwin Hubble again and his idea of the expanding universe.

"The yurt was an idea that was used to harmonize the larger Station to Station project," Glynn explained. "You can see my yurt has extra galaxies coming off the sides, but it might be at its limit. I might do more with this beyond the yurt. It's difficult to visualize this idea that the universe is expanding from all points, it is much more amorphous than what this suggests."

We both look at the round yurt, swirling around its axis.

"We always think of the expansion as starting from ourselves," Glynn adds. "But how do you think about the expanding universe without starting from a central point?"

"Station to Station" happens next in Winslow, Arizona on September 21. Who knows what it will be by then?

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