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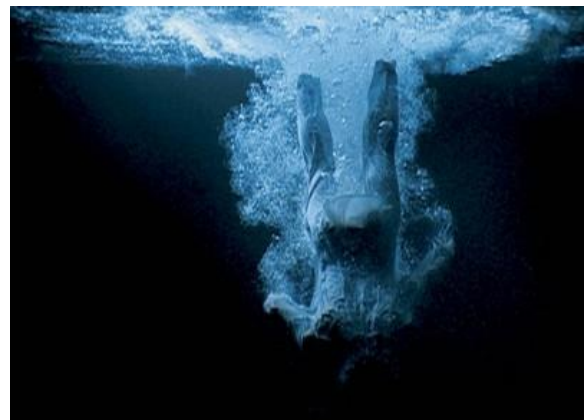


Milestones: Bill Viola

Naomi Polonsky considers the influence of visual artist Bill Viola

Naomi Polonsky on Tuesday 13th May 2014

Leonardo da Vinci spent years of his life obsessively studying the structure of the eye, and the difference between monocular and binocular vision. He questioned the way in which artists depict three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface. Ever since the Renaissance, artists following in Leo's footsteps have examined the subjectivity of the human visual process and its effect on art practice.



Photograph: tate

One artist who has revolutionised the way in which art deals with perception is Bill Viola. Over the last four decades Viola has experimented with videotapes, architectural video installations, sound environments, electronic music performances and flat panel video pieces. Indeed, many consider him to be the father of video art.

Viola received a BA in visual art and electronic music. In his work he fuses these two mediums, creating pieces which confront all the senses. His installations are all-encompassing environments which envelop the viewer in image and sound, exploring aural as well as visual perception.

In one of his video pieces, *Walking On The Edge*, two men side-by-side are seen gradually walking towards the camera on the backdrop of a hazy mountainous desert. They seem not to be advancing, yet they imperceptibly become closer. Mid-way through the video they cross over each other's paths. Viola plays with our perception because the exaggerated slow motion makes it difficult for the viewer to detect the gradual movement

In this surreal mirage-like setting, the figures walk in a repetitive continuum, seemingly without beginning or end, neither forwards nor backwards. Both the figures and the landscapes are obfuscated, which makes them seem transient and immaterial.

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Interestingly this piece has no sound accompaniment, which adds to the surreal sense of setting.

In Ascension, the shot opens with a dark expanse of water, punctuated by a shaft of piercing sunlight. The tranquillity of this image is disrupted when a fully clothed man plunges into the pool, his arms raised to his sides like Christ on the cross. Dreamers, consists of seven individual screens which depict underwater portraits of people who appear to be sleeping.

These paradoxical moving stills are accompanied by the sound of water, gently gurgling. As ever with Viola's work the colours and textures are hyper-real. The ten-minute long clip evokes historical and religious imagery and raises metaphysical questions about the human experience. Viola often depicts the presence of humans in material worlds enclosed by water, fire or darkness. When exhibited these seven screens create an immersive subterranean environment.

Viola incites experiences which are both intangible and inexpressible in language. The art is as much about the viewer's reaction as it is about the piece itself. It is left up to the viewers to interpret the work through the lens of their own perspective. The artist does not see himself as the creator of stories, but rather as a 'secret observer' who uses his video camera to let the viewer into his process of perception.