

Bill Viola's Moving Void

by Joseph Nechvatal on March 13, 2014



Bill Viola, "Three Women" (2008)

PARIS — Free-floating habits are often hard to abandon. The term "video" as a definable medium — and thus "video art" — is now essentially archaic, due to the convergence of all capture technologies into post-media computer manipulated moving image/sound files. The development of digital image display technologies has rendered the differences between

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previously distinct media, such as “video,” “video tape,” and “film” increasingly obsolete and incoherent.

Still, during these early spring-like days in Paris, Bill Viola was presented to the city of lights as our “most celebrated exponent of video art.” Viola’s moving digital art show — his first retrospective in France, curated by Jérôme Neutres and Kira Perov — brought back to mind the pleasures of nourishing spring showers. Yes, warm March showers, along with the resonances of the distinguished viola player Yehudi Menuhin, come to mind there, in that Menuhin, like Viola, makes art that coolly nourishes.



Bill Viola, “Chott El Djerid : A Portrait in Light and Heat” (1979)

Viola’s work is refreshingly non-ironic, even earnest, and this earnestness is the dominant connecting flow of feeling between the works that make up the entire forty years of his career. This long career is represented in the exhibition by selecting pieces, of course, and his wife and studio director Kira Perov strung together works that cover the entire span, from “The Reflecting Pool” (1977-79) to “The Dreamers” (2013). This string of work includes “Chott El Djerid : A Portrait in Light and Heat” (1979) that was shot in a vast dry salt lake in the Tunisian Sahara desert, the room-sized installation “The Sleep of Reason” (1988), a video sculpture “Heaven and Earth” (1992), the Op Art-like installation “The Veiling” (1995), a subtle audio only piece

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“Presence” (1995), the breathtaking “Nine Attempts to Achieve Immortality” (1996), “The Quintet of the Astonished” (2000), a somber “Four Hands” (2001), a grandiose “Going Forth By Day” (2002), the monkish “Catherine’s Room” (2001), the beautiful “Three Women” (2008), and the desert-set (again) “The Encounter” (2012).

Viola’s sublime show of twenty works is cleanly installed, the sound ambient but sharp. It is largely about encounters with long, drawn-out time, stagnant or sudden immersions into water, the contemplation of heat and fire, or slightly animated hints at classical religious paintings. The intention of every work seems to be of psychic transformation, and Viola often confronts a myth-like figure in the rectangle with an elemental foil (such as heat or water) that overcomes it. This surpassing of the image into watery or hot ground is what gives Viola’s work such a painterly romantic appeal while lending it its nature-based spirituality.



Bill Viola, “The Quintet of the Astonished” (2000)

Viola sometimes achieves a sense of gorgeous slow time, full of expressively romantic imagery in the tradition of painting, by shooting on 35mm film at very high speed and in continuous sequence, then employing none of the editing or shifts of viewpoint of conventional filmmaking. The footage is then drastically slowed, transferred to digital media and projected or displayed on plasma screens. This technique enables the minutest, subtle shifts in light and human

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expression to be closely observed. The resulting quality is digital sharpness, rather than the woozily electronic.

Some of the early work retains some of the blurry look of tape-based electronics, though now transferred to digital videodisk. Most notable in this respect is the first piece encountered, “The Reflecting Pool” (1977–79) installed in a modestly sized gallery. “The Reflecting Pool” is where Bill, as performer, presents himself as a circling universalized body (shot at the same viewpoint the entire time) that undergoes a stunned experience of frozen time set off against a moving wet-green background of reflecting water in deep woods. It is highly aesthetic and emotionally intense, and like all of his work, it is largely humorless and snark-free.

If there is a gimmick in “The Reflecting Pool” — and in most of the other work presented here, except the vivid, super-slow-motion video portraits like “The Quintet of the Astonished” (2000) — it is this: suspense. Nothing much happens for what seems like an eternity. That lends the videos a stopped dream-like quality. But then there will be a burst or blast of brief and often shocking activity that tears the still-mysterious shroud asunder.



Bill Viola, “The Encounter” (2012)

Since “The Reflecting Pool,” Viola’s equipment has gotten much more high-tech and sophisticated, his team much larger, and the size of the screens, projections, and installations has grown bigger and more demanding. But his spiritual aspiration-theme of death as part of the life cycle within an overpowering nature has remained rock-steady since the 1970s.

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Surprisingly, I only learned at the press conference that on vacation in the mountains with his family, the six-year-old Viola had a near death experience, nearly drowning in a lake. His uncle pulled him out of the water at the last moment, but not before what Viola describes as a wonderfully “gravity-free” and “beautiful” experience. He then made a comparison to the flow of water and the flow of electrical current that nourishes and runs through our technology.

This personal experience is the interpretive key to his soulful work, one he has invited me to universalize. This is why the stillness and flow of water plays a major role in this exhibition — and reveals Viola as the opposite of a chilly technological artist, revealing him rather as a cool symbolist. Yet heat and fire appear as well here. First I savored very painterly mirages in the extreme heat of the desert in “Chott El Djerid : A Portrait in Light and Heat” (1979) and again in “Walking on the Edge” (2012) and “The Encounter” (2012). The hot beauty of the desert is the key to these works, and I could watch all three of them simultaneously while comfortably seated.



Bill Viola, “The Deluge” (2002)

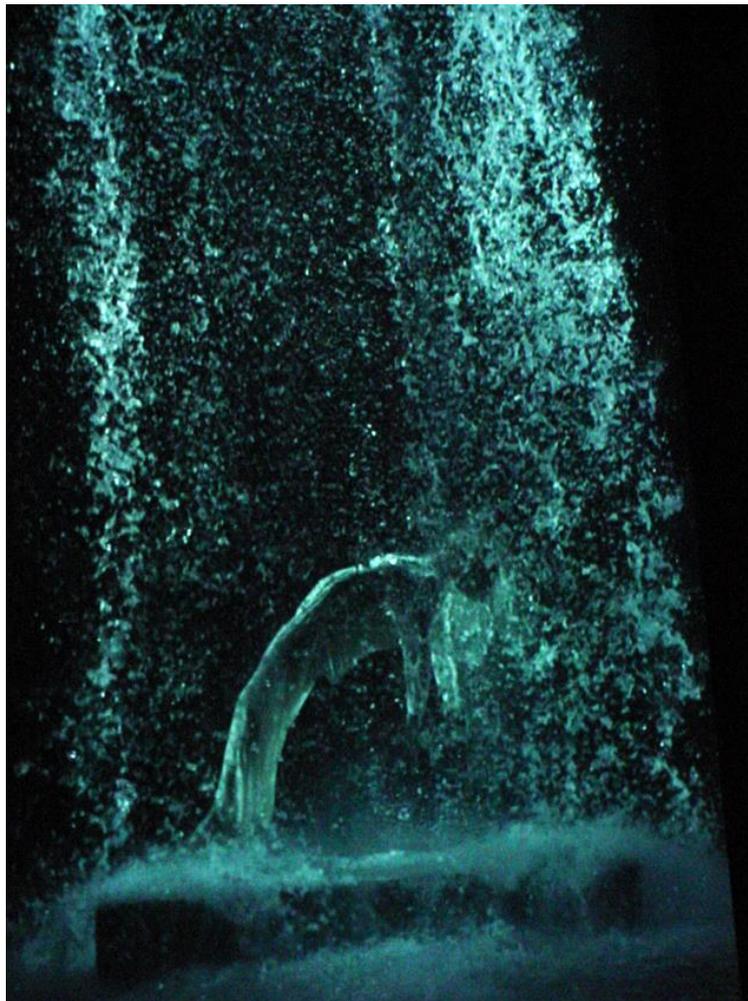
These three heat works led me to the first really large gallery where a watery “Going Forth By Day” (2002) was displayed, a high-definition digital fresco that was inspired by Giotto’s work in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua. This cycle contained one of my favorite moments in the show, when a crushing flood of water burst out from within a small city house in the panel called “The

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Deluge" (2002). It very pleasantly brought to mind some of Pina Bausch's intensely theatrical use of sensational water surges.

Turning away from this flood I took pleasure in the projection of licking flames that was cast directly on the opposite wall and doorway, so that the heat of fire was ever present at my back.

The other fire heavy piece soon to come was "Fire Woman" (2005), a huge projection in a very large room that is fantastically paired in time with another water-drenched work, "Tristan's Ascension (The Sound of a Mountain Under a Waterfall)" (2005). Both of these hot and cool works are derived from Viola's "The Tristan Project" (2005) video-sets that he created for Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde* (as directed by Peter Sellars). (It will be presented again in April at the Opéra Bastille.)



Bill Viola, "Tristan's Ascension (The Sound of a Mountain Under a Waterfall)" (2005)

The exhibition concludes with "The Dreamers" (2013), a room full of new work that suggested to me Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood painter John Everett Millais' painting "Ophelia" (1852). "The Dreamers" appears to be a logical continuation of Viola's exploration of death and water, as the piece consists of seven individual screens displaying people, perhaps dead or sleeping,

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underwater with eyes closed. The subjects lay perfectly still as if dead, apart from occasional slow movements. Small bubbles caused by their breath float at me and to the surface.

It lent a conclusive punch to this first-class show, sealing it with the kiss of death. Indeed, I was deeply touched by "The Dreamers" because it made me recall the moving-image work of Jeremy Blake, and his own sad watery death. That, and the death of video itself as a form of modernist medium specificity, for in the age of digitization, video is no longer a stable substance defined by its physical, technical, and functional boundaries.

Bill Viola *continues at the Grand Palais (3 Avenue du Général Eisenhower, Paris) through July 21.*