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Portrait of the artist: Bill Viola, video artist

'I fell into a lake aged six and saw the most beautiful world. My work is about getting back there'

Interview by Laura Barnett

The Guardian, Tuesday 15 May 2012 13.33 EDT



'Video art was born of collaboration' ... Bill Viola, video artist. Photograph: Oliver Mark/Focus/Eyevine

Why have you always been drawn to video?

I came of age at the end of the 1960s, just when video was also coming into the world. Companies such as Sony and Panasonic were starting to market it and we artists immediately knew how it could be used. It was a rare time of collaboration rather than competition: every month, we'd hear that an artist had discovered a new way of using it, and we'd all go and take a look.

What got you started?

Falling into a lake aged six, when I was on holiday in the mountains. I went straight to the bottom and saw the most beautiful world I'd ever seen: fish, shafts of light, plants waving in the breeze. I thought I was in heaven. I'd have stayed there had my uncle not pulled me up. That's why my art has so much to do with water – because I dream about going back to that place.

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What impact has the internet had on your work?

I haven't done a lot of work for the internet specifically, but a lot of my work is on there. It's a web, of course: it has tentacles everywhere, linkage to every human being on the planet; and it's partly the reason why the younger generation literally requires the world to be animated.

Your wife, Kira Perov, is your long-term artistic collaborator. Is it important for an artist to have a supportive partner?

It depends on the artist. I really could not do what I do without Kira. She's like a midwife: I sit in my study, receiving these visions in my mind's eye, and she helps bring them out into the world. She's the brains behind the operation. I'm the dreamer.

Which artists do you admire?

Giotto. I consider him the father of my field. All Renaissance artists were obsessed with movement – flowing robes, sea storms – but he was the first to employ absolute emotional realism.

Is there an art form you don't relate to?

Macramé.

What's the worst thing anyone ever said about you?

In the 1970s, a lot of critics didn't understand video. I got a lot of bad reviews. But film-makers didn't understand what we were doing, either. There were actual fistfights between film-makers and video-makers. I was witness to one.

What advice would you give a young artist?

Break the rules.

How would you like to be remembered?

I would prefer to be forgotten, then rediscovered in a different age.

In short

Born: New York, 1951

Career: Pioneer of video installations all over the world. His exhibition Submerged-Spaces is at venues in Norwich, part of the Norfolk and Norwich festival, until 29 July.

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High point: "Giving a talk at the Accademia Gallery in Florence, with Michelangelo's David looking down on me."

Low point: "My mother's death in 1991. But in teaching me about the fragility of life, it changed my work."