



291 GRAND ST | NOV 9 – DEC 21, 2024

Bill Viola

The Raft

Bill Viola, *The Raft*, May 2004, color high-definition video projection on wall in a darkened space; 5.1 channels of surround sound, room dimensions: 29 ft 6 in. x 23 ft x 13 ft (9 x 7 x 3.96 m), duration: 10:33 min., video still.

James Cohan is pleased to present *The Raft*, an exhibition of video works by the groundbreaking artist Bill Viola, on view at 291 Grand Street from November 9 through December 21, 2024. This is the late artist's ninth solo exhibition at James Cohan. The gallery will host an opening reception on Saturday, November 9 from 4-6 PM. **Renowned media arts scholar and curator John G. Hanhardt will give remarks at 4 PM, paying tribute to Viola's life and legacy.**

Bill Viola (1951-2024) was a pioneer in the fields of new media, video, and installation art. For over 50 years his visionary environments, defined by immersive video and soundscapes, focused on the fundamental human experiences of birth, death, and the unfolding of consciousness. Viola also drew great inspiration from spiritual traditions, including Zen Buddhism, Islamic Sufism, and Christian mysticism. By slowing down his images, Viola shifted viewers' sense of perception and awareness to reveal the inner world.

This exhibition is centered upon Viola's large-scale video installation, *The Raft*, May 2004, commissioned for the 2004 Athens Olympics, and exhibited for the first time in New York. *The Raft* depicts a life-sized scale of a group of nineteen men and women from a variety of ethnic and economic backgrounds, casually standing together. Suddenly, they are struck by strong blasts of water that rush in from out of frame. Some are immediately knocked over and others brace themselves against the unprovoked deluge. Bodies are pummeled and faces and limbs contort in agony against the cold, hard force. People in the group cling to each other for survival, as the simple act of remaining upright becomes an intense physical struggle.

Then, as suddenly as it arrived, the water stops, leaving behind a band of suffering, bewildered, and battered individuals. The group slowly recovers as some regain their senses, others weep, while the few with any strength assist those who have fallen. The viewer experiences this event in an immersive setting, standing in a darkened

room and surrounded by the roaring sounds of the water. Captured in slow-motion, *The Raft* arouses a visceral experience of calamity and shared humanity, provoking a consideration of the range of responses to crisis and the resilience to be found in community.

The exhibition also features *Traveling on Foot*, 2012, one of five works from Viola's Mirage series of desert-based meditations on existence. In this video installation, two figures are captured in slow motion, walking closely together, across a stretch of the Mojave Desert towards the camera, with no end in sight. The desert, for Viola, acts as a mirror of the mind. The vast, harsh, arid landscape has the ability of producing mirages, which Viola terms as early as 1979 as "*hallucinations of landscape*"—the experience, he notes, "*of being in someone else's dream.*" *Traveling on Foot* investigates the limits of our understanding of the position of the human in the natural order, both physically and metaphysically.

Coming of age alongside the development of video, Viola experimented with the new technologies to explore the furthest reaches of the expressive possibilities of this new medium. He once said, "*I gradually realized that the act of perception was in fact a viable form of knowledge in and of itself, and not merely a kind of phenomenon. This meant that when I held the video camera and microphone, I was holding a philosophical system, not just some image and sound gathering tool.*"

Viola received his BFA in Experimental Studios from Syracuse University in 1973. Since then, he has created over 220 works that have been shown in museums, galleries, film festivals, and on public television worldwide. During the 1970s he lived for 18 months in Florence, Italy, as technical director of production in one of the first video art studios in Europe, and then traveled widely to study and record traditional performing arts in the Solomon Islands, Java, Bali, and Japan. In 1977 Viola was invited to show his videotapes at La Trobe University (Melbourne, Australia) by cultural arts director Kira Perov who, a year later, left Australia to join him in New York. They began a lifelong collaboration, working and traveling together. After they married in 1980, they lived in Japan for a year and a half on a Japan/U.S. Cultural Exchange Fellowship, where they studied Buddhism with Zen Master Daien Tanaka and had an artist-in-residency at Sony Corporation's Atsugi research laboratories. In 1984 another artist-in-residency at the San Diego Zoo in California produced footage for a project on animal consciousness.

Viola represented the U.S. at the 46th Venice Biennale in 1995, premiering an ensemble of five new installation works titled *Buried Secrets*. In 1997 the Whitney Museum of American Art organized *Bill Viola: A 25-Year Survey*, an exhibition that traveled for two years to six museums in the United States and Europe. He was invited to be a Scholar-in-Residence at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles in 1998, and in 2000 created a suite of three new video pieces for the rock group Nine Inch Nails' Fragility v2.0 tour. His 1994 concert video/film *Déserts*, created to accompany the music composition of the same name by Edgard Varèse, received its American premiere at the Hollywood Bowl in August 1999 with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, conducted by Esa-Pekka Salonen. In 2002, Viola completed his most ambitious project, *Going Forth By Day*, a five part projected digital "fresco" cycle in high definition video, commissioned for the Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin.. Following the completion of a four-month exhibition at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles in early 2003, *Bill Viola: The Passions* traveled to the National Gallery London later that fall, to the Fundación "La Caixa" in Madrid in early 2005, and subsequently to the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra. In 2004 Viola began collaborating with director Peter Sellars and conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen to create a new production of Richard Wagner's opera, *Tristan und Isolde*, which was presented in project form by the Los Angeles Philharmonic in December 2004. The production of the complete opera received its world première at the L'Opéra National de Paris, Bastille in April 2005 (with a reprise in November) and was presented once more at the Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles in March 2007, and in New York in April 2007, produced by the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. Performances continue.

Viola is the recipient of numerous awards and honors, including a John T. and Catherine D. MacArthur Foundation Fellowship in 1989, and the first Medienkunstpreis in 1993, presented jointly by Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, Karlsruhe, and Siemens Kulturprogramm, in Germany. He holds honorary doctorates from Syracuse University (1995), The School of the Art Institute of Chicago (1997), California Institute of the Arts (2000), and the Royal College of Art, London (2004) among others, and was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2000. Viola received the Commander of the order of Arts and Letters by the French Ministry of Culture in 2006, the XXI Catalonia International Prize (2009), and the Praemium Imperiale from the Japan Art Association (2011). He was made a National Academician of the New York-based National Academy in June 2012 and elected an Honorary Royal Academician in 2017 in London. Bill Viola is survived by his wife, Kira Perov, who lives and works in Long Beach, California, and their two children.

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