

Ut Pictura Video. Bill Viola and the Fictionalization of Art History

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Bill Viola, *Going Forth by Day 2*, 2002.
Photo: Didier Plowy/Rmn-Grand Palais, Paris, 2014.

The Bill Viola retrospective at the Grand Palais¹ presents an extensive survey of his artistic production, in which some twenty works created between 1977 and 2013 are exhibited in darkened galleries to the Parisian public. Moving paintings and monumental installations, spanning his career in seven hours of recording, give on to a museological landscape that makes the most of the museum's architectural constraints. Right from the outset of the exhibition, the visitor is struck by one of the first works, *The Veiling* (1995): nine large veils suspended like semitransparent screens show a voluminous forest in a darkened room. Images of people moving through nocturnal landscapes are projected into parallel layers of translucent cloth. This work of hazy spaces, in which the narrative

makes way for an immersive experience, is perhaps the installation that most directly reflects the artist's own definition of his art: sculpting time. The symbolic impact of Bill Viola's video art has meant that, invariably, his video works are interpreted through a metaphysical lens. Countless articles have put forward interpretations of Bill Viola's works as archetypal models of dreams, or have told us repeatedly that his videos are ongoing tales of the processes of life, birth and death. Apart from this common understanding of Bill Viola's work, one can nevertheless observe in his production a very particular way of placing the viewer before heterogeneous examinations of temporality. By using the latest video technologies and old cameras, Bill Viola composes a thoughtful and meticulously

calculated world that seems to reveal with time a fascinating inner landscape.

More than just simple citations, the references to old works of art in his artistic production appear as starting points of variations that guide the composition and drive the movement. In *The Quintet of the Astonished* (2000), the artist creates a dialogue with *Christ Mocked (The Crowning with Thorns)* by Hieronymus Bosch. Inside a closed physical space, each person is completely absorbed by their own emotional experience. The pantomime of the painting is rooted in the imitated reconstitution the bodies provide. The painted gesture becomes a suspended gesture, as though revealing with time the transformations of a face in the throes of powerful feelings. The portraits were shot on high-speed 35 mm film,



Bill Viola, *Going Forth by Day 2*, 2002.
Rmn-Grand Palais, Paris, 2014.



Bill Viola, *Catherine's Room*, 2001. Performer : Weba Garretson.
Photo: Kira Perov.



Bill Viola, *The Sleep of Reason*, 1988. Video/sound installation; 62 min.
Photo: Kira Perov.



Bill Viola, *The Sleep of Reason 2*.
Exhibition View.
Photo: Didier Plowry/Rmn-Grand Palais,
Paris, 2014.

and then transferred to digital video. Through this process, the diachronic continuity of time is ruptured to capture instead the temporal shifts of a being's inner logic. Bill Viola succeeds in showing the invisible world of memories, feelings and emotional struggle through this video.

Bill Viola's large-scale projections are also present in the exhibition. With *Going Forth by Day* (2002), the Grand Palais presents a series that is rarely shown due to its dimensions. In an imposing environment, composed of five projections on the walls of a vast darkened gallery, the artist creates a narrative cycle between the panels—a kind of "all-over" of anthropometric dimensions that fully implicates the viewer. Along the left wall, we accompany a continuous procession of three large adjacent projections of individuals of all ages who are walking in the same direction of *The Path*. The films were shot with a high-speed camera at 300 frames per second, then maximally slowed during the post-production editing process. Slow motion reflects meditation; this is a standard process for Bill Viola.

His video works do not only bear frequent references to Medieval and Renaissance art. Videos such as *Chott-el-Djerid* (1979) or *Walking on the Edge* (2012) convey the talented colourist in the video artist, while evoking Monet and Rothko in landscapes that are in the process of being abstracted.

In *Chott-el-Djerid*, the screen exposes strange and unsettling surfaces; the camera explores regions that are invisible to the naked eye. A landscape of light and heat offers the motion of images distorted in the desert sun and portrays an optical phenomenon, the mirage, which, above all, does not exist. In *Walking on the Edge*, two figures walk towards us from afar. Against a background of arid mountains and shimmering heat, the image depicts the immense psychological distance between a father and his son as two strangers whose bodies physically meet in a space without any affective complicity. In the series *Catherine's Room*, Viola depicts his method of re-appropriating representations, particularly from pictorial art. By referencing the interior scenes of early Italian painters, in this case Andrea di Bartolo's predella, *St. Catherine of Siena Praying* (completed in the last quarter of the 14th century), the artist again works with disparate temporalities. Inside a monastic space, a woman's life takes place before our eyes through the repetition of daily tasks. Time's denouement intersects several temporalities of the woman's conscience, the hours ticking by and the variation of seasons, suggested by the changing light in the window. Before *The Reflecting Pool* (1977), we are caught off-guard by the video's special effects and image editing: a diving body is suspended in the air, then fades while a body emerges from the wa-

ter. One could think that Bill Viola is examining the perceptual potential of water or again the transient presence of light on a reflecting surface, yet through the play of shadow and light, surfaces, amorphous movements and the image's erasure, Bill Viola optically compels us to see that images always summon spatiality and temporality. The exhibition concludes with *The Dreamers*, an installation composed of seven large plasma displays mounted in one room, in which seven people, neither dead nor alive, are immersed in a stream. Bill Viola invites visitors to let themselves be carried away by the slow variation of images in this underwater calm. The visual experiences to which Bill Viola bids us underscore video's specific ability to show that which exceeds our ordinary ability to perceive.

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¹ The Bill Viola retrospective was shown at the Grand Palais, in Paris, from March 5 to July 21, 2014.