

A Conversation With Bill Viola

October 3rd, 2013 – PETER LUCAS



Each year, Houston's Aurora Picture Show honors a major figure in media art. The award points to the spirit of originality and innovation that drives the organization, and its award dinner is an important event for raising both awareness of the importance of media art and funds for their ongoing exhibition and education efforts. This Saturday, Oct. 5th, they'll be honoring artist Bill Viola, whose work over the past four decades has widened the scope of electronic image-making and has helped to establish video as a vital form of contemporary art. [The 13th Annual Aurora Award Dinner](#) will include a screening of his work, including *The Raft* (2004), and Viola and his partner and collaborator Kira Perov will be in attendance to accept an award created by artist Allison Hunter and presented by Aurora Curator Mary Magsamen.



Bill Viola, *The Raft*, 2004. Color high-definition video projection, 396.2 x 223 cm, 5.1ch surround sound, 10:33 minutes. Photo: Kira Perov.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY



Bill Viola, *Hatsu-Yume (First Dream)*, 1981. For Daien Tanaka. Videotape, color, stereo sound; 56 minutes. Produced at Sony Corporation, Atsugi Plant, Japan, in association with WNET/ Thirteen Television Laboratory, New York. Photo: Kira Perov

Viola's video endeavors began when artist access to the medium did. Since the early 1970s, he has continually created poetic explorations of the human condition with a sort of spiritually heightened awareness. Houston audiences were really introduced to Viola's visions in the 1980s. A number of his early single-channel videos, including *Chott el-Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat)* and *Ancient of Days*, were included in *The Territory*, the long running TV series produced by Southwest Alternate Media Project (SWAMP) and Houston PBS. And in 1988, the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston organized an important solo exhibition of his work, *Bill Viola: Survey of a Decade*. Viola and Perov were in Houston for the installation of that show, but they never made it to the opening due to the unexpected premiere of another of their collaborations: their first son, Blake. This weekend will be the first time that the couple has been in Houston since that CAMH show and the birth of their son here 25 years ago.

In anticipation of the Aurora's upcoming event honoring Bill Viola, I spoke with the artist about his work, his beginnings in the early days of video, and a few existential matters.

You're being honored by the Aurora Picture Show, a community media arts organization that shows a variety of moving image work and provides access to classes and equipment. I wonder if there were any places like this that were instrumental in furthering your creative efforts when you were starting out?

Absolutely. That would be the Synapse Media Center in Syracuse, New York. I was in undergrad there—I'd just become part of the Syracuse University art department. I was walking around and I saw this sign board, and it had something about media, about making images with tape recorders. These new devices were just starting to come out—the Portapak, it was called. The Portapak was really a breakthrough because it allowed people to push one button and you could see the image and also hear the sound at the same time. It weighed about 30 or 35 pounds, and the camera weighed about 10 pounds. You had to take it out specially, and you actually had to do a course. It was something like three weeks. When I look back on it now, it's ridiculous. If you ever saw the machine you'd just laugh that it would take three weeks before you could do anything.

Can you remember the first time you used the Portapak?

Well, the first thing I did... When I finally got cleared after the course, I was able to take out my Portapak and go outside. This was Syracuse in the wintertime, so I got bundled up and I took the Portapak out, and I was super excited. I got to the front door and I opened it up, and I took one step down and it was covered in ice so I flew up in the air and I fell down on top of the machine, and little parts rolled out on the ice. I was blacklisted for a month! But I learned my lesson and, from there, the rest is history.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

So through Synapse, you were able to see and make pretty pioneering stuff...

And the other thing you have to realize too, just to complete the picture... At the time that was happening with me in Syracuse, of course there were the video freaks down in New York, and people then on the West Coast and the Midwest. It was really gathering steam. And with all the people that were disenfranchised because film was so expensive and difficult to use. People caught on to it really quickly. At a certain point, people in Tokyo and people in Latin America had heard about what we were doing with these things, and they were doing it, too! So video became, for the very first time, a truly global medium. It was on every continent within four or five years after I started. That's really incredible, when you think about it. It started to go viral, as they say today.

Now, with a body of work spanning more than 40 years, I wonder if you ever view or reflect back on your earlier work.

It depends. Sometimes I do go back into things. I go back into my notes from time to time, sometimes looking for one particular thing but, in the course of trying to find it, I'm going back over all this other ground that has a lot of great material in it. It's really quite astonishing. You know, you're getting a track record of yourself, and all of a sudden you find yourself in an odd position where you know the big works and all of that stuff, but there are these moments that you just completely forgot, and they become, sometimes, the beginnings of a new work.

Your work is very slow. I wanted to ask you about your use of slow pacing and slow motion photography. Is this inspired by something in particular, or something born of your own perception of the world?

The slow motion really started when I was young and I had a near-drowning experience. It was really profound and it changed my life in deep ways, and it's still happening, actually. I was six years old and I fell into a lake and went right to the bottom. My uncle pulled me out. That's one of the key moments in my life. And to have it happen to me that young was a blessing, because the thinking, jabbering guy didn't have a chance to get in the way of it. It was quite pure. One of the most important things that I realized when I was down under was that there is—literally and metaphorically—another world. I think that's an extremely profound thing. And it's what artists do. It's like we're digging in the earth, basically, trying to bring up these things. I guess the slow motion for me is the quelling of something, and the calming it down so that you can look at it. Like looking at the wings of a butterfly in those slow motion movies that we've seen as kids. There's something really there. I mean, it's not just an effect. It's something that opens up a space in you, expands something in you that can be really extraordinary if you really take a look at it. That's what I just got hooked on, really. Because I always felt, from when I was really young—the water event not withstanding—I really felt like there was more out there than what I was seeing. I was convinced of it. So my response to that, when I picked up a camera, was slow motion. So that you can study it, you can hold on to it.

Water and some related ideas of reflection and submergence are prevalent in your work...

The water motif is always coming back. Just imagine: in prehistoric times, our ancestors were walking around and came up to a little stream, and went to kneel down and cupped their hands to drink the water. At that moment they would have seen, for the first time, their own image. And of course, the other big thing is the shadow. Carl Jung talks about that, a lot of people talk about that—this idea of the shadow. The doppelganger, as the Germans call it. It's you, but something outside yourself is looking back at you. It's a kind of reflection that comes back. All of these things are really fascinating—who we are, what we are. All are part of this larger whole.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

While your work doesn't often include music, and sometimes is totally silent, your approach to creating these time-based experiences seems to me to be very musical. I know that you have some musical background and that you worked with David Tudor in the 70s. Do you approach the making of your video work musically, or think of it in that way?

Actually, I absolutely do. I remember being in my third grade class in Flushing Queens, New York, and we were all given little flutes and we were taught the notes. That was one of the most exciting things in my life at the time—that I could put my fingers over these little holes and make sounds come out. It really grabbed me; I just thought it was amazing. So I really became connected with music in that way. To the point where, now, when I'm really going deep into a work and I'm really trying to work it out and see what it is...and I don't know where this came from, but if I knew I was really in the groove and coming up to the cusp when a piece was beginning to form, for me, I heard these sounds. They were sounds in my head, tones. (Hums a sequence of four notes)—something like that. I've never really thought to write them down or anything, but I kind of liken them to a mountain range, and you're looking at it from afar and you're just watching the peaks of the mountains and you're re-forming them. It's one of those inner exercises that I just kind of fell into with out realizing it.

Since you've been uncovering mysteries and dealing with space and time and real and unreal experiences in your work for quite a while now, I'm thinking that you've got a few things figured out. So let me ask you...

What are dreams?

Dreams are the expression of what exists below the mind and the eyes, and I would say, even the soul. Dreams are the things that are completely pure and infinite. And dreams are the reflection of your own soul talking to other souls.

What happens when we die?

Well, Chuang-Tzu [the Chinese philosopher] said that birth is not a beginning, and death is not an end. I think that's one of the most profound things about the human experience to say. It's this unbroken thread that is moving through time and space. It's indestructible. Like water, it will seep into everywhere and just keep going.

What do you think is humankind's greatest invention?

Fear. Because without fear, nothing would really get done. Fear is one of the great things that human beings have. Yeah sure, no one wants to get afraid, but fear is the thing that creates art. It's the thing that tells you that you can get to the edge of the precipice, and you can close your eyes and jump. Whenever you feel that clenching of the throat, it's really deeply profound.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY



Bill Viola, *The Dreamers*, 2013 (detail). Video/sound installation. Seven channels of color high-definition video on seven plasma displays mounted vertically on wall in darkened room; four channels stereo sound. Photo: Kira Perov

The Aurora Picture Show Award Dinner Honoring Bill Viola is this Saturday, October 5th, 6:00PM.