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BILL VIOLA

A PIONEERING AND widely revered video artist, Viola remains one of the most innovative practitioners of filmic art. His retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, "Bill Viola: Liber Insularum," curated by Roc Laseca, will run from December 5 through March 3, 2013. Many of the works shown were made since the artist's last retrospective in 1997, at the Whitney Museum. Viola spoke with Daniel Kunitz about the role of writing in his work, how he responds to technology, and the price of popularity.

DK: *What are you working on now?*

BV: After working in the desert and other outdoor locations, I am planning to go back

into my studio, where I'll be making more intimate pieces based on several years of writing in my notebooks. It is writing, not drawing, that is usually the primary way my work emerges into the world, because it is the movement within the image, not its fixed form, that most emulates the life field in which we all coexist.

DK: *Do you write every day?*

BV: Not as much as I used to. These days I take a pocket-size book with me when I am out and write up anything of interest when I get home. In my practice I have three kinds of books that I use. One is my general notebook, which I use like a journal, writing about anything I might encounter—my research,

my family, how I'm feeling, something I've seen, random thoughts, quotes from what I am reading. Then I create a project book, which is a unique notebook specifically geared to a new series I'm planning to make, including concepts and details of the ideas.

The final element in my creative process is when I start a production book, where I write up all the technical notes of how, when, and where. At this stage there's discussion with my production team, and we solve the technical problems. I decide on which pieces to make with the help of my partner, executive director, and producer, Kira Perov. This is how the cycle goes, and it's all based on writing. >

KIRA PEROV

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Perov, Kira, "Portfolio: Bill Viola," *Modern Painters* December 2012: 25-26

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DK: *And yet words don't appear in your work.*

BV: Well, they are there in some works, such as *Slowly Turning Narrative* from 1992, but you're right. This is most likely because I have a mild form of dysgraphia. Due to the way my brain is wired, it forces me to look at a text as if it were an image. I was born with this. I feel that it is a large part of the reason why I do the kind of work I do, and *how* I do it. It's painstaking to have to write something out—you get to be a very slow writer, and especially a slow reader.

DK: *I wonder if that slowness accounts for the lucidity of your writing.*

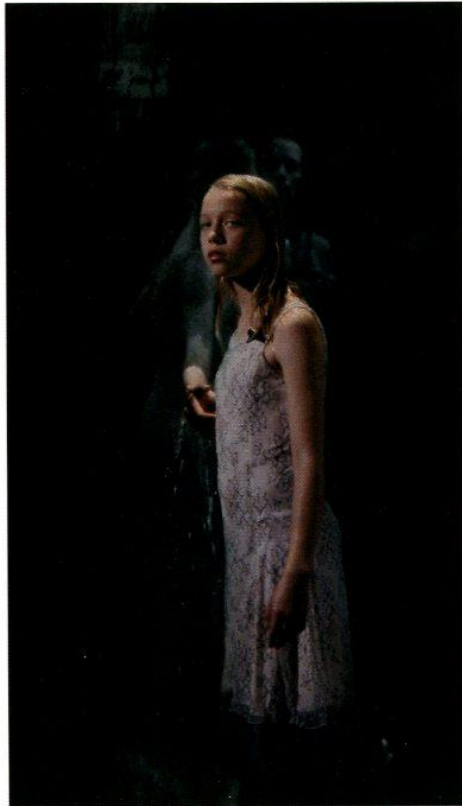
BV: Probably that's part of it. When I was really young, I would just stare at things—the weave of the fabric on the couch, the ceiling at night, a tiny crack in my headboard. It just becomes a world, you know? It's all flowing and moving. It was like water coming by constantly, and I'd see things in it. That's how I've experienced the world for most of my life. I have no words for these things.

DK: *The majority of pieces in the exhibition at MOCA North Miami were made after your Whitney retrospective in 1997. What did you learn about yourself and your work from looking back on it then?*

BV: The Whitney exhibition was a survey of my work that was created over the course of 25 years. Most of the pieces were room-size installations, and I could now feel confident that I had mastered this medium. I began looking at expressing my ideas in a more intimate format. What made this possible were the new developments in video screen technologies in the late 1990s. Flat screens were approaching photographic quality in terms of resolution and detail, and the color palette was achieving greater clarity and depth. My focus was changing at the same time as new formats were being invented and becoming more versatile. In the exhibition at MOCA North Miami, you can see the results of my expanding palette. The range of scale of the pieces is greater too—if you compare, for example, a work such as *The Messenger* [1996], also a room-size projected piece, with *Observance* [2002], a vertical 50-inch plasma piece that is mounted on a wall.

Regarding the retrospective glance: As an artist who has been looking at his self-image in the electronic mirror for most of his life, I'm very concerned about the pitfalls of self-reflection. I think it can trap you and drag you into an endless loop. Because I have a very large inner world, I live very much inside myself. And within my being are very deep places that I don't want to disturb, let alone decipher. I love Werner Herzog's statement about psychoanalysis—"A fully illuminated room is not worth living in."

DK: *How else would you say technological changes have affected your work?*



Bill Viola

Still from *Three Women*, 2008. HD video on plasma display mounted on wall, 61 x 36½ x 4 in.

I collected 25 years ago—bank surveillance cameras, infrared and black-and-white cameras—and of course I have recorded on all the newest media available as well. It seemed also that these changes in technology were in step with my changing focus. I could use high definition for large works such as my installation *Going Forth by Day* [2002], with its five huge projections on the walls at the Guggenheim. But I could also use it to make very small pieces as well. I began looking into the past—the late-medieval, early-Renaissance artists with their highly detailed paintings and the "new technology" of spatial perspective, a kind of 3-D. While Masaccio and Paolo Uccello were grappling with perspective and tempera paint in Florence, up in northern Europe the Van Eyck brothers and Rogier van der Weyden were using new techniques with oil paint, achieving remarkable "high definition" in the image. I remember seeing a lovely small oil painting by Dirk Bouts of a man and a woman, each in their own panel of a hinged diptych. Closed, it was about the size of a large

BV: I spend more money, like the rest of us! I remember when my parents first brought one of those large black-and-white console televisions into our house in Flushing, Queens, in the early '60s. It was amazing—the size of it, and the mysterious blue glow of the cathode ray tube. At that moment I became a video child, born into a new era. So I feel very blessed that I got in on the ground floor. The way the medium unfolded in the beginning years of the 1970s was just so fertile. Media centers were springing up around the country—in Buffalo; Athens, Ohio; Troy, New York; and Long Beach, California, to name a few—and there was an eagerness to share information and show our experiments. We were innovating constantly, this ragtag group from various disciplines, and we saw the *light*—literally, the *video light*. People were hypnotized, completely taken by this new "primitive" art form.

I was in a field where the technology was developing at the same pace as my art, so every new piece of equipment became part of my palette. I still use cameras that

notebook. After a day of traveling you could set it up on your table to say your evening prayers, a kind of early Renaissance iPad. And that's exactly how I used the new small flat digital screens: I made hinged diptychs.

DK: *How did you negotiate being in constant demand after a certain point in your career?*

BV: After the rush of the early 2000s, when the work started to get more recognized, I got on the lecture circuit, because people wanted to hear what I had to say. Gradually it wore me down and took me away from my artmaking. I lost the thread; I was burnt out. *Ocean Without a Shore* at the Venice Biennale in 2007 was the last thing I did at that time before shutting down.

DK: *How did you deal with that?*

BV: Well, everything I was trying to do in that period after *Ocean Without a Shore* didn't work. You have to suck it up and realize that everything you did in the last half-year is crap. That's important. Art schools are misguided when they encourage artists to be perfect, or overachievers. Perfection is the flatline on the heart machine; you don't want to go there.