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Bill Viola: Video Magic

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"People thought that I was an idiot and that video would never last"

Known affectionately as "the Rembrandt of the video age", artist Bill Viola has more than made his name over the course of his vibrant career. Beginning in the 1970s, Viola attached himself to the video camera whilst it was still in its clunky, analogue phases, unearthing a deep beauty in the grainy, washed out images that it produced. The blue glow of the video screen revealed a new world in the eyes of the art student and from the moment the red light started flashing, it was something he knew he would be doing forever.

Of course, nowadays video art is just as viable as painting, sculpture and photography. In some cases, in fact, the mobile, roaming art can be much more intuitive to real experience. Whilst Viola started off in the early days of video, his work now attracts huge audiences and in its themes of birth, death and all that lies in between, speaks to a humanistic attitude present inside all of us.

The first time that I saw an exhibition by Viola was in Paris. It was early May and spring time was in full swing. The streets had thawed and expanded, the river was more placid than usual. The sky was covered in a fine mist and the glossy roof of the Grand Palais was frosted with dew. The exhibition was situated in one of the gallery's huge back buildings, inset from the boulevard, stoically waiting for its visitors. Viola's work was being presented for the first time in the Grand Palais and even before entering, I knew that the visit would be monumental.

Entitled simply Bill Viola, the exhibition contained an overview of the artist's works, from his moving paintings to gargantuan installations which filled entire rooms. Figures walked forward and backwards into a sheet of imperceptible water, breaking its glassy surface with the tips of their fingers. Bodies floated underwater in a state of apparent preservation. The entire exhibition was muted, quiet and soft.

The most lasting impression made on me was in Chott-El-Djerid A Portrait in Light and Heat. Focused on landscape, the short film revealed its surroundings with painstaking care, exposing the images only when it has exhausted all other senses. Viola unearthed the physicality of the place on film by looking at its individual parts, focusing on sound, weather and geography before all

else. The pastel-hues of the desert seemed like mirages in the dark and, sitting with my back to the cold stone of the exhibition wall, I was transfixed again and again.

I remember plodding out of the exhibition in a bit of a stupor, the white noise of the Parisian boulevard making me feel groggy in the head. In his videos, Viola had changed the way that I had thought and for a brief moment, time had ceased to move in the same way. That's the funny thing about video art; it can show you a completely different world within the one it films. It can manipulate and weedle its way into your brain so subtly until, all of sudden, your thoughts are not your own. My time in Viola's world was over too quickly and just as soon as the flip had been switched in my head, it was turned back to normal again. I guess that's the nature of great art; no matter how hard we try to hold on to the way it makes us feel, pretty soon, it moves away from us and onto its next, great incarnation.

Viola is a man in a million. His art is so singularly his and yet, speaks to a part of everyone who encounters it. His fascination with the physical world and the way in which we live in it is like no other. Moving slowly, carefully, Viola is like the wise tortoise of the art world, encountering the world around him with intense sensation, keeping his vision perpetually forward.

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