

ART NEWS
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THE SELF-DISCOVERY CHANNEL

VIDEO MAGICIAN BILL VIOLA HAS SUCCEEDED IN TURNING AN AVANT-GARDE MEDIUM TO THE MOST TRADITIONAL CONCERNS: LOVE, DEATH, KNOWLEDGE, AND THE SPIRIT. THE EXPERIENCE OF NEARLY DROWNING AS A YOUTH PROVIDED HIM WITH A VISUAL METAPHOR FOR THE SPACE BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

BY HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA PHILP

When Bill Viola was ten years old, he fell into a lake and nearly drowned. "The thing I remember is the imagery of this incredibly beautiful, serene blue-green world that I had no idea existed below the surface," he recalls. "It was peaceful and mysterious. I wasn't afraid at all." As though revisiting this trauma, he has repeatedly resurrected this moment in the disorienting yet seductive underwater sequences of his video installations.

Last year Viola installed *Stations* (1994) at the now-defunct Lannan Foundation in Los Angeles. In the crepuscular gallery, grainy black-and-white videos of men and women floating underwater were projected onto walls and reflected on slabs of black granite on the floor. Viola was seeking to evoke that "eternal state between dream and death." Viewers stood with the hushed awe usually reserved for open-casket funerals.

It was at the 1978 International Open Encounter on Video in Tokyo that I watched as a floral vase levitated and floated out the window. The color videotape had an unusual intensity about it, which I commented on to the man beside me. "Thanks," he said. "That's my piece." That work, *The Morning After the Night of Power* (1977), was my introduction to Bill Viola, who, a decade later, received a MacArthur Foundation "genius" award and, in 1995, represented the United States at the Venice Biennale.

Now the first major survey of Viola's work, and the most extensive exhibition ever dedicated to a video artist, debuts at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art on the second of this month (through January 11). The show, consisting of 18 video installations and 25 tapes from 1972 to 1997, will then go to the Whitney Museum of American Art (February 15 to May 10), which orga-

nized it. Whitney director David Ross—who has known Viola since 1971, when both were undergraduates at Syracuse University—cocurated the exhibition with opera director Peter Sellars.

"Bill represents the emergence of video as a fully developed art form," says Ross. "He is one of the first generation of artists for whom video was there as a reasonably available medium. He was of the generation for whom, as John Baldessari said, video would be like a pencil."

Viola, 46, lives in a modest rented home in Long Beach, California, with his wife, Kira Perov, and two sons—Blake, nine, and Andrei, five. Viola answers the door, looking much as he did in 1978, though his longish brown hair may have receded and there is gray in his goatee. The room is redolent of orange blossoms, and Indian flute music floats in the air. Folding tables are covered with stacks of his tidy writings and photographs of his videos taken by Perov, who has been his collaborator for 16 years. All this is preparation for a book on his work, to be published by Flammarion in conjunction with his show.

An outspoken critic of the gallery system's influence on artists, Viola did not have a one-person exhibition at a commercial gallery until 1992, when he showed in Seattle with Donald Young, and in London at Anthony d'Offay, his current dealer. Although he has been the winner of countless honors and grants, he has composed most of his complicated video installations in the spare bedroom of his bungalow. He only had the luxury of a proper studio from 1989 to 1994, the period of his \$50,000 annual MacArthur stipend. "I'm proud of the fact that I've been able to do things on my terms," he says.

"Bill's work is an antidote for the spectacularized society," explains Ross. "Even though the use of images from the real world has an overpowering effect, the purpose is to drive the viewer in personal and spiritual ways."



ABOVE *The Morning After the Night of Power*, 1977, an intense color videotape. OPPOSITE *Stations*, 1994 (top); *The Messenger*, 1996 (bottom left); and *Viola with his wife and collaborator, Kira Perov*.

KIRA PEROV

SCULPTURE

Using computer-aided design (CAD), artist Michael Rees makes work diagrammed entirely on the screen and then fabricated by machine.

"I think of it as three-dimensional printing," says Rees. "The end product can be made of paper, plastic, metal, nylon. I'm about to be the first person ever to make a metal sculpture with this process." In five years, he predicts, "you'll see more materials, more color, faster machines." There's also the possibility of artwork made by molecular construction. "We're talking about the Star Trek replicator. Already there's a company on Long Island that makes artificial skin—they're using living tissue to replicate things." What does this mean for artists? "Pygmalion is here," he says with a laugh. "What's here is so futuristic, it's hard to talk about the future."

"I use the Xerox like a sketchbook," says Judy Pfaff, another artist interested in technology. "In terms of manipulating images and needing a fast image bank, computers are terrific. I'd love to pull images off video."

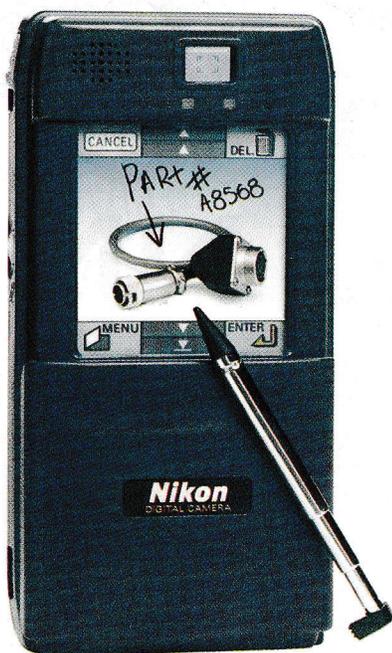
Linda Benglis adds that our way of perceiving may be the most important change in coming years. "What appeared 15 to 20 years ago will look very, very slow. We don't see the same way we did in the 19th century, and we won't see the same way in the future."

PRINTMAKING

Expect to see chains like Kinko's copy shops offering high-tech printers for artists, says multimedia printmaker Bonny Lhotka. "We'll see a scale beyond any print ever made before." Already there are printers with the capacity to produce an etching as large as four by eight feet, so billboard-size prints may be the wave of the future.

"The boundaries between photography and printmaking and painting are breaking down," says Dorothy Krause, an artist and professor at the Computer Arts Center at the Massachusetts College of Art. "To go from the digital camera to the computer and then to be able to print out on different printers opens up so many possibilities." In five years, she hopes, "we'll be carrying all this stuff around on our wrists."

Multiples can be made in different inks on different computers and realized on many different supports—lead, aluminum, even Plexiglas—and these innovations mean that artists and curators will



Nikon's Coolpix 300 Personal Imaging Assistant, a new digital camera with which you can take pictures, write notes, and record sound that can then be displayed on a TV.

have to find new ways of editioning, and even defining, prints. "The way I'm working now, I'm editioning the digital file, not the piece of paper the work is printed on," says Lhotka.

The downside, she adds, is that "there's going to be a lot of bad art produced. Very few are using available technology as an original art tool."

PAINTING

April Gornik has been using the computer's scanning capabilities for the past several years to manipulate photographs as preludes to her paintings.

"I don't have any illusions about its being any more than sketching," she says. "As a tool it's become an invaluable art friend." One of the unanticipated by-products of working on the screen, however, has been that "when I see an actual handmade object it blows me away," she observes. "It has this kind of enhanced physicality because it's not a virtual experience."

Even for die-hard traditionalists, there's good news. Water-based oil paints will speed up drying time and offer more convenient manipulation. And manufacturers are promising less toxic pigments and resins that offer a wider range of effects.

PHOTOGRAPHY

We're focused on both traditional film and digital technology," says Jody Belcher, a representative for Eastman Kodak. "We're continuing to develop new and better film as well as improving papers and chemicals." She adds that a "copy-detection" paper is in the works that will "protect the rights of the professional."

"The near future is going to present photographers with a very extensive choice of materials," says Richard LoPinto, vice-president of the photo-marketing division at Nikon. "Digital imaging will no doubt improve, and there will come a time when photographers can present their digital files to a company or an individual for processing."

Or you can do it yourself. Hewlett-Packard has already developed a color ink-jet machine, the PhotoSmart printer, that offers high-quality prints from photos scanned into a PC. "I could put a Kodak print and a print from this side by side and you couldn't tell the difference," says Robert Chisholm, the company's marketing-communications program manager. "We also have a little scanner that does negatives and slides, and down the road a few years you'll be able to hook up your camera to a TV set and print out from that." He predicts that "going from the camera to the printer," with no intermediary equipment, may not be too far-fetched an idea in the future.

Some photographers, however, are gloomy about "progress" in the field. "Already it's a struggle to get quality material," says Tom Baril, a photographer and the printer for the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. "The big companies don't see black-and-white papers as something they're going to make a profit on." So paper for fine platinum and silver prints is scarce. "I don't know if it's possible for digital images to have the same beautiful hand-crafted look," he adds.

"You can actually construct a photo from a series of numbers," says photographer Bob Mitchell about digital imaging. "There's no visible basis for the final product. That makes everything seamless and within the realm of possibility. But it's so much easier that there's no challenge left. My guess is that there'll be a backlash. Photographers will want the smelly darkroom and the process of going through print after print to try to get that elusive 'voice.'" ■

Ann Landi is a contributing editor of ARTnews.

John Hanhardt, formerly of the Whitney and now senior curator of film and media arts at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, discusses Viola in the context of video artists Nam June Paik and Gary Hill. He says, "Viola charted and created for himself a distinctive voice. Nothing has been imposed on him. His is not received imagery. He has taken a technology and imagined it to do something that hasn't been done before—beautiful images put together at a time when that's not fashionable."

What for Hanhardt distinguishes Viola's work is what some consider unfashionable today—"the dialogue with spirituality, with family, with self. It's a dialogue with esthetics that makes for arresting, compelling images.

"These are difficult to represent," Hanhardt observes, "with the kind of sophistication and authority that he does. These are not cynical images. You feel that this is an artist who is visualizing something he believes in. He's taken this medium so identified with television and commercial display and made it the medium of the artist." Viola's achievement, notes Hanhardt, is apparent in the fact that "the work is represented in museum collections alongside painting, sculpture, and photography. If you are going to have a history of late-20th-century art, you would have to include Bill Viola."

It may seem incongruous that Viola employs an electronic medium to pursue his frankly spiritual quest, but this, too, stems from his alternative roots and a restless, interrogatory intelligence. He reads books on mnemonics and anthropology, the poetry of Rilke and Sufi mystic Rumi. For Viola, video is a tool for self-discovery. "I was always self-monitoring," he says.

VIOLA BEGAN IN MORE TRADITIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES. He and his two siblings were raised in Queens, New York, by his English mother and American father. He is said to have revealed himself as an artist when at the age of three he corrected a drawing his mother had made of his new toy truck. Soon he became the class artist, decorating bulletin boards and illustrating the school paper. In the fifth grade at P.S. 20, he became captain of the TV Squad—a group of students charged with wheeling a TV into the classroom. It was also around this time that he first confronted his own mortality, with his near-drowning in the lake.

Throughout high school and college, in the 1960s, Viola played drums in a rock band with the improbable moniker of J. Trouse. Viola laughs at this memory. One of the band's members found hundreds of matchbooks printed with the name of a Polish plumber. "We figured if we called our band J. Trouse, we could hand out these matchbooks at all our concerts," he says.

In 1969 Viola enrolled at Syracuse University to study advertising, but in short order he developed a still-lingering



The Crossing (fire) and The Crossing (water), 1996 (above and below), explore Viola's big themes: life, death, and states in between. Viola has been greatly influenced by his studies in Buddhism.

KIRIA PEROV (2)

antipathy for Madison Avenue. He turned to the anti-establishment views of the late 1960s, especially the study of Eastern religions. Viola recalls, "People were reading the Upanishads, the I Ching, it was in the air. Being the quiet kid in school who always wanted to be by himself, it really struck a chord."

He discovered courses in electronic music, and, "that introduced me to the whole world of electronics, circuitry, and analogue-wave theory. I was getting training in communication technology, which was a great basis for going into video," he says.

One of his advertising teachers sent Viola to study with Jack Nelson, who had founded a new department called Experimental Studios. There, he met Ross. With a group named Synapse, Viola wired the campus for two-way interactive-cable color TV. He spent the rest of his time doing independent study with Nelson. He graduated with a bachelor of fine arts degree in 1973 and was

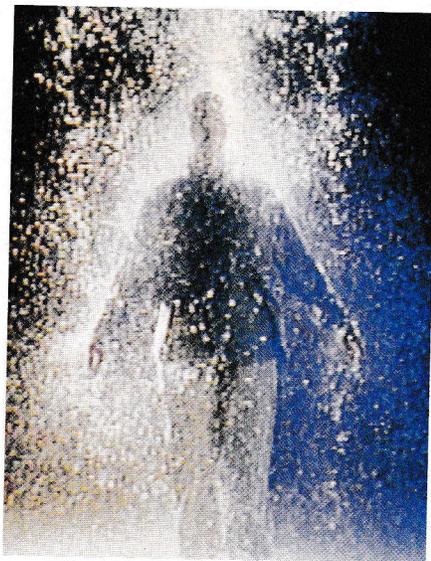
awarded an honorary doctorate from his alma mater in 1995.

During that summer he took a workshop with experimental composer David Tudor, funneling electronic sound into various objects to create a piece called *Rainforest*, which he later performed on tour. Meanwhile, at the Everson Museum of Art, Ross was hired as the country's first video curator and he employed Viola as the first video preparator. Viola helped artists like Peter Campus and Nam June Paik set up their monitors and build viewing rooms. He was influenced by their exacting specifications for installation and presentation. "It was the best education I could have had," he says.

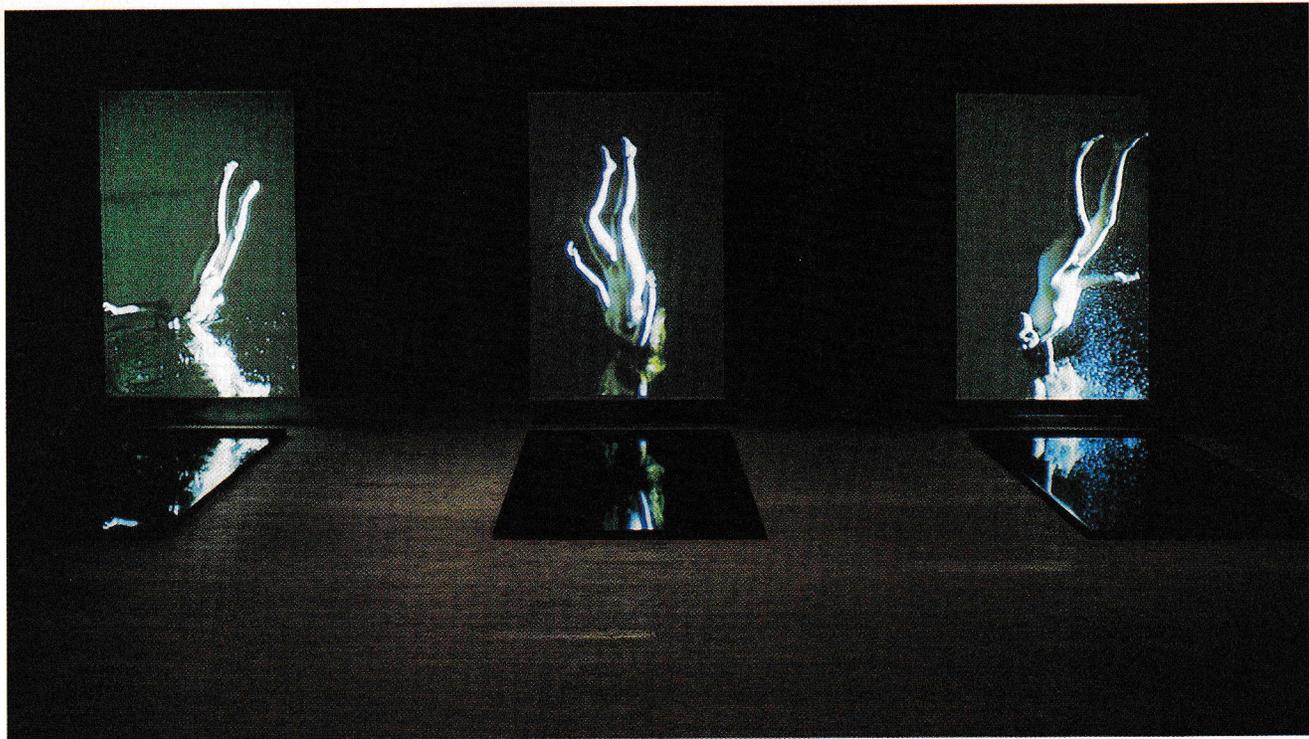
The learning continued when he assisted artists like Jannis Kounellis and Vito Acconci as technical director of a studio called *Art/Tapes/22* in Florence, Italy, from 1974 to 1976. "It was a good experience to see how these people were more focused on the ideas than on the medium," he says.

Most of Viola's earliest videos are indebted to the performative videos of the late 1960s. In *The Space Between the Teeth* (1977), preoccupied with time and structure, the artist's repeated screams are linked to the camera's movement, with the pace increasing until the action is frozen as a photograph, which is then seen dropping off a bridge and into the water.

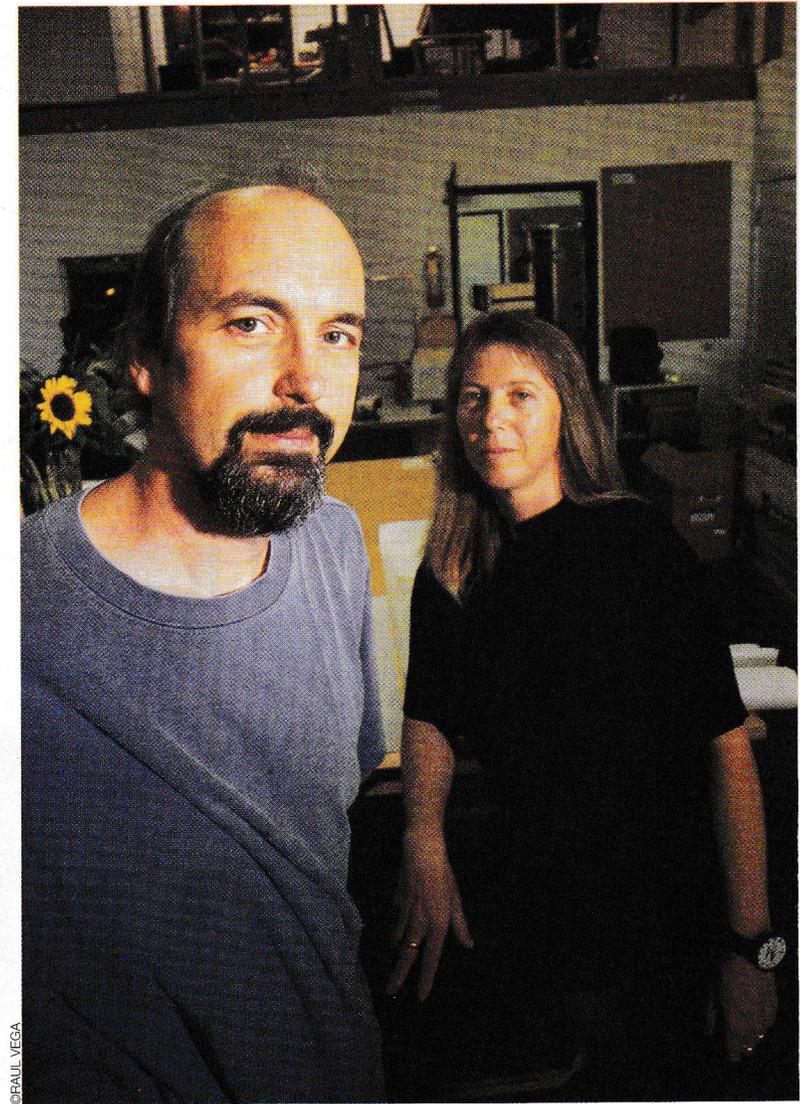
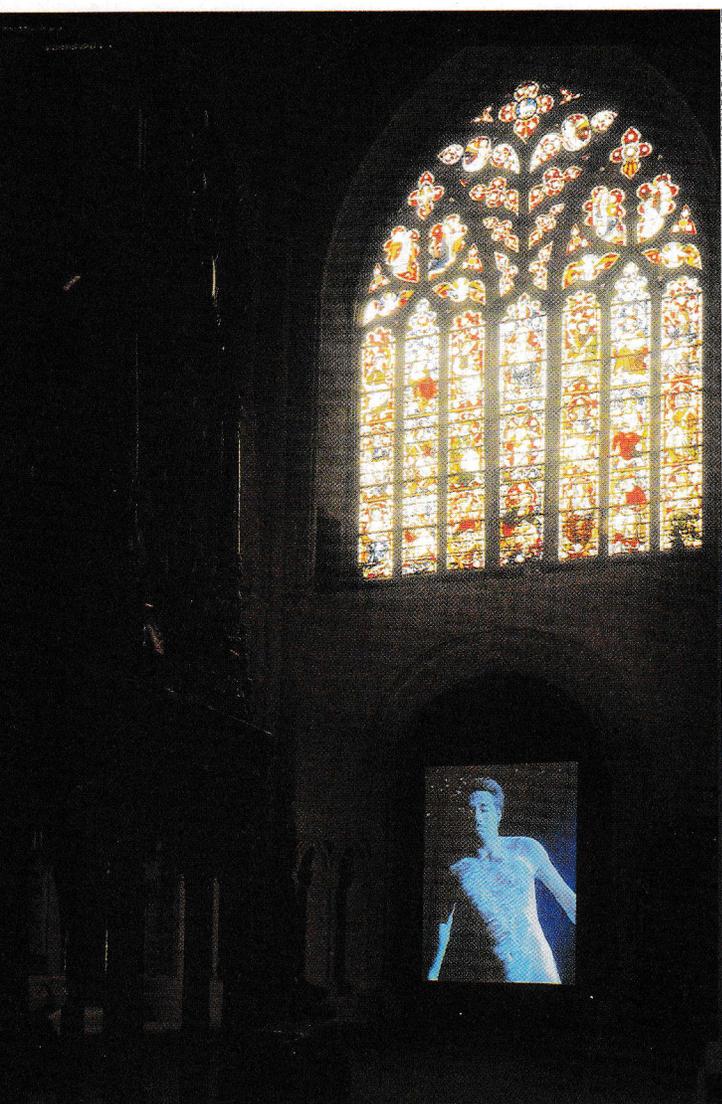
The late 1970s found Viola making videos in the Solomon Islands, Java, and Australia, where he met Perov, who was then an arts administrator. Such exotic travel was possible because Viola's father worked for Pan Am. The artist went to the Tunisian Sahara to record mirages and to Saskatchewan to record blinding snowscapes. Merging the two resulted in the hauntingly beautiful *Chott el-Djerid* (1979), his first landscape piece, which established him not only as an artist of original vision but also as a technical wizard who could simulate nearly hallucinatory states of consciousness on video.



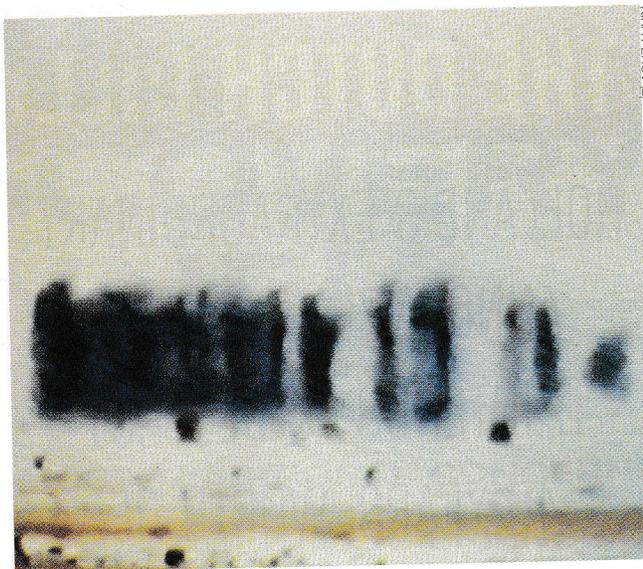
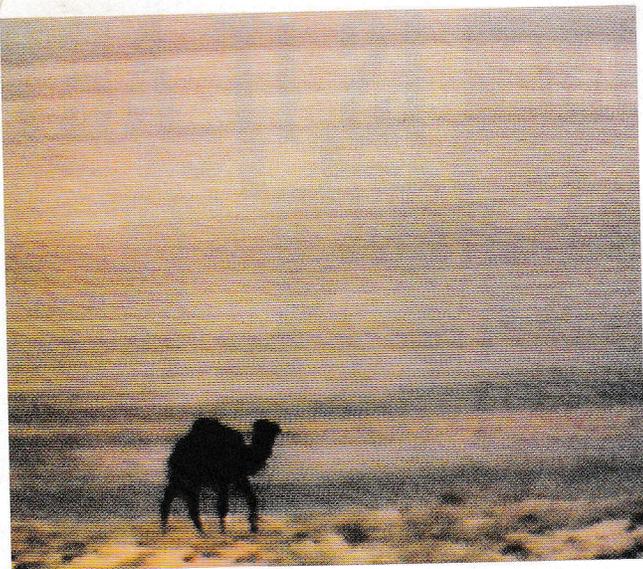
CHARLES DURRATT



EDWARD WOODMAN



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KIRA PEROV (2)

In between travels, Viola was artist-in-residence at WNET 13 Television Lab in New York, and in 1981 he became the first artist-in-residence at Sony's Atsugi lab in Tokyo, where he also began pursuing Zen with Buddhist priest and painter Daien Tanaka. Viola explains, "All our system is about knowledge, epistemology. The other way is based on being, going back to direct experience, or ontology. Transmission of knowledge in the East is based on direct contact between master and student. It's about being, not language."

Viola and Perov married and in 1981 moved to Long Beach. They chose the Los Angeles suburb because the Long Beach Museum of Art was considered one of this country's most committed supporters of video art: "Long Beach had a video scene, but it didn't have the edge of L.A.," Viola says.

In 1983 Viola's spiritual preoccupations were laid out unabashedly in *Room for St. John of the Cross*, an installation based on the writings of the 16th-century Spanish mystic during his nine months of imprisonment and torture. In the piece, shown first at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, a small stone house with a single window was surrounded by the jarring projection of a menacing mountain and the sound of roaring storms. Inside, there was a table, a carafe of water, and a color monitor showing a plateau with a few trees, their leaves gently moving. When viewers put their head through the window, the noise of the winds abated and they could hear whispered poetry. Jean-Christophe Ammann, director of Frankfurt's Museum of Modern Art, wrote, "That day I could look at nothing else. I forgot the much advertised Frank Stella exhibition just one floor below. I returned to my hotel . . . carrying in my heart the trembling treeleaves on that bleak and lofty plateau."

"I remember that as a real turning point," says Viola. "After reading [Ananda K.] Coomaraswamy, I began looking at Western mystics who were basically saying the same things as Eastern guys but in the context of Christian traditions. So you go out the back door and end up at the front door."

As Viola's tapes and installations increased in length, complexity, and visual pyrotechnics, the demanding exhibition schedule took a toll. For relief, Viola and Perov traveled for five months to the Four Corners region of the Southwest. But the videotapes of desert landscape, people sleeping, bodies underwater—which had become staples of his visual vocabulary—were not coming together. "I had a creative block and couldn't get the images to work," he recalls. "It was a difficult time."

Chott el-Djerid, 1979, is Viola's first landscape piece, reflecting his visits to the Tunisian Sahara to record mirages. Video lets him simulate hallucinatory states of consciousness.

Compounding it, two years later, in 1991, his mother died. Nine months later, Andrei was born. "The dates are intertwined for me," he notes sadly. "These events focused my investigations and interests in a very real way."

Viola confronted what he calls the "big themes." "My mother was a deeply spiritual person. Her death gave me a deeper understanding of things I had been grappling with for most of my life. It stirred up the pot from the bottom."

The Passing, completed that year, incorporates his mother's death and his son's birth in unembarrassed exultation of the power of emotions. It includes an earlier tape taken in the desert and concludes with an image of the artist lying under water, fully clothed, as though drowned. It was the end of his creative block. The following year he completed nine new installations.

"Buried Secrets," a series of five installations presented at the 1995 Venice Biennale, included *The Greeting*, based on the *Visitation* by Mannerist painter Jacopo da Pontormo and shot on 35-millimeter film with a crew and theatrical sets. In rediscovering the Christian mystics, Viola found himself drawn to the sculpture and architecturally integrated paintings in cathedrals. *The Messenger*, commissioned last year for England's Durham Cathedral, projects onto the rear doorway of the church a figure of a nude man under water coming up to gasp for air. And *The Crossing* (1996) shows two projections of a man, in one, consumed by fire, in the other by water, emphasizing the elements as a life force.

"I think it's a great failure that critical discourse today in art—which exists supposedly on the edge of some of the higher aspirations we have as human beings—does not encompass the very, very human qualities of our emotional lives," Viola explains. "You never hear love coming up in critical discourse today. Love and hate and fear, the great themes of birth and death and consciousness, are age-old themes. I get somewhat frustrated that more people aren't thinking of the great themes in life as being in the domain of art."

Sitting back in his chair, Viola flips through some of his writings and says, "Since my earliest work I've been interested in death and mortality. But it doesn't just have to be about grief. It can be a deep learning process. And you don't resolve it all at once. It seeps in later." ■

Hunter Drohojowska Philp is completing a biography of Georgia O'Keeffe to be published by Knopf.