

Artbeat

Bill Viola's most recent videotape, *Chott el-Djerid* (A Portrait in Light and Heat) is on view at the Long Beach Museum of Art (2300 E. Ocean Blvd., Long Beach) to April 13, 1980. It's the brilliant beginning of a new series and a departure from his earlier *Four Songs* style. Certain elements remain constant; a personal symbolism involving fire and water, here presented as desert mirage and oasis; the sophisticated manipulation of passing time and ambient sound; the narrative quality, the definite beginnings and endings that all Viola tapes have, even if their interior structure is circular; and the humor,

like the wry, sagacious wit of a Sufi fable.

Chott el-Djerid, however, is less of a revelation of the Viola interior landscape than before. Shot on the snowy plains of Saskatchewan, Canada, Illinois and the Sahara desert of Tunisia, *Chott* is a disquieting study of the interface between illusion and reality. The gelid, winter light and rippling heat of the desert mirage present distortions of reality but they are recorded realities. Not hallucinations.

The tape opens to a horizonless plane of snowy light, punctuated by the occasional geometric silhouette of a house or tree. This bleached expanse of desolation is gradually defined as two flat rectangles of cobalt and ivory. The scene has shifted to the Sahara but the change is barely perceptible. The Viola camera is somewhat stationary, unblinkingly recording the desert behind a wrinkled curtain of heat. Everything is dreamy and distorted by the mirages. Giacometti-like somnambulists stroll across the horizon, a truck rumbles forward, a camel passes. The only sound is the low vibrating howl of the wind. The well-chosen elements don't disrupt the poetic aura of uncertainty. The vocabulary of painting seems appropriate because this tape has more of the minimal, formal, cool qualities of a canvas than the activity of video. Yet, it remains compelling. It's a stunning tape to watch, at one with the monumentality of the endless, breathtaking landscape. Viola calls *Chott* "a half hour landscape in visual symphonic form . . . The images are like . . . physically being inside someone else's dream."

—Hunter Drohojowska