



Three Women

Artist: Bill Viola; Performed by Anika Ballent, Cornelia Ballent and Helena Ballent

2008 Acc. #2010.97

Medium: Media Arts, Audio Visual | Color high-definition video on plasma display. 9.6 minutes

Artist's Biography:

Bill Viola is one of the world's best known and critically important contemporary video artists. With a career spanning 35 years his significant contribution to the genre of video art is today widely acknowledged on the international stage. He graduated from Syracuse with a Bachelor in Fine Arts. His first job on graduation was as a video technician at the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse. From 1973 to 1980 he studied and performed with composer David Tudor in the new music group Rainforest (later called Composers Inside Electronics).

In 1977 Viola was invited to show work at La Trobe University (Melbourne, Australia) by cultural arts director Kira Perov. Viola and Perov later married, beginning an important lifelong collaboration in working and traveling together.

His art deals largely with the central themes of human consciousness and experience - birth, death, love, emotion and a kind of humanist

spirituality. Throughout his career he has drawn meaning and inspiration from his deep interest in mystical traditions, especially [Zen Buddhism](#), [Christian mysticism](#) and [Islamic Sufism](#), often evident in the transcendental quality of some of his works. Equally, the subject matter and manner of western [medieval](#) and [renaissance](#) devotional art have informed his aesthetic.

An ongoing theme that he constantly explores is dualism, the idea that you can't understand what you're looking at unless you know its opposite. For example, a lot of his work has themes such as life and death, light and dark, stressed and calm, loud and quiet, etc.

Background Information:

- Video art was first introduced in the early 1960s by such pioneers as Nam June Paik and Bruce Nauman and continues to be a vital form of contemporary artistic expression. Since the early 1970s, it has been Bill Viola's primary medium and today he is considered one of America's preeminent video artists.
- The video consists of a mother and her two daughters first appear in grainy black and white, as if taken from a nineteenth-century painting or an early photographic image. They walk slowly, deliberately, until one by one their physical bodies become conduits of water, and they are released from their everyday lives. They also enter a world of color.
- The woman was a friend of the artist who used to take care of his children when they were young, and the two girls were her daughters.
- This video is from a series Viola calls "Transfigurations," a word taken from Christian theology. Viola uses the term more generally to refer to the transformation of a person that occurs after he or she crosses a spiritual threshold. To describe the effect, Viola quotes the Sufi mystic Ibn al'Arabi: "A morning has dawned whose darkness was you."
- Bill Viola has been deeply inspired by medieval and renaissance devotional art, and his video work reflects his ongoing artistic exploration of birth, death, and spirituality.
- When asked by an interviewer what the imagery of water means to him, Viola responded, "Death... life... time... memory... self-image... illusion... nirvana... a lot of things. I almost drowned when I was six years old on a family holiday at Trout Lake in upstate New York. It was possibly the most profound, life-changing and transcendent experience I've ever had. It was accompanied by a complete lack of fear — only calm and peace. When I think about it now it centers me again."
- Three Women, was exhibited by Viola at the 2007 Venice Biennale.
- Viola uses video to explore the phenomena of sense perception as an avenue to self-knowledge. Using the inner language of subjective thoughts and collective memories, his videos communicate to a wide audience, allowing viewers to experience the work directly, and in their own personal way.

From Interviews with the Artist:

As part of this research, I read transcripts of many interviews with Bill Viola. Although he was not always speaking specifically about our piece, the following are quotes and excerpts which may be useful in viewing and discussing this piece.

- "One of the things the camera taught me was to see the world, the same world that my eye sees, in its metaphoric, symbolic state. This condition is, in fact, always present, latent in the world around us."
- The artist describes part of his creative process as "living within the frame... I think primarily it was curiosity about life. Curiosity about what would happen when relatives died. Where did they go? Could they still be reached? Curiosity about seeing a new member of the family born. Where did it come from? What were they before they were here with us? Curiosity about personal experiences

that seem to indicate an existence of another order or another domain of experience.”

- “Transfiguration is a word that means transformation, a change in form. In ancient Greek, the word was metamorphosis. The idea of metamorphosis is really an essential part of human beings. Every seven years, all the cells of your body are changed. They're all new. We are literally not the same person from year to year.”
- “Transfiguration represents is the most important capacity of human beings to completely transform their inner selves, not just the outside. All revolutions or ideas start in the human heart inside and then they move out.”
- In a speech he made in 2008, Viola made the following points: For Viola, life and death pour out of the same spring. He related the story of holding his newborn son in his arms when all he could think was, "He could die." Life and death are not polar opposites but often come at you in one fell swoop.
- In the same speech in 2008, Viola made repeated references to the arc of time and talked about how many of the Italian Renaissance artists who we think of as "Old Masters" were the young radicals of their time. "All art is contemporary," according to Viola. Michelangelo was twenty-four when he created Pietà, Raphael was twenty-five when he did some of his finest work. These artists were the avant-garde of their time and employed new tools, such as the science of optics, when creating their works. Riffing on Speaking of the present time Viola commented, "The meeting of art and science and the parallels today are extraordinary."
- With that in mind, technology today can be used for good or its opposite. The finger that you can use to press SEND and wreak havoc on the Web is the same finger you use to tickle a child or caress your lover. Technology is fundamentally neutral; it's how we use it that defines us. "Like it or not," he added, "we are woven together in a way that has not happened in human history."
- “For the Persian poet Rumi, each human life is analogous to a bowl floating on the surface of an infinite ocean. As it moves along, it is slowly filling with the water around it. That's a metaphor for the acquisition of knowledge. When the water in the bowl finally reaches the same level as the water outside, there is no longer any need for the container, and it drops away as the inner water merges with the outside water. We call this the moment of death. That analogy returns to me over and over as a metaphor for ourselves.”
- “We have all come from a place of the unborn and we are all here for a short period of time. We have to cross a threshold of water and light to arrive and to leave. We will ultimately all go back to this eternal non-spatial, non-temporal world of potentiality. A lot of my work deals with questions like this, of giving birth, death and human transition.”

Questions:

- When you're watching this video, what emotions do you feel?
- What mood has the artist created with this video?
- What are some of the ways humans are transformed throughout their lives?

- What do you think the wall of water might symbolize in this video?
- Do you think this is art? Why or why not?
- 100 years from now what do you think people will think of this video? Will it still be in an art museum?

Possible Tours:

- Symbols and iconography
- Death and rebirth
- Cycles of Life
- Water
- Ancestors
- Transformation
- Spirituality
- Technology and Art

Resources:

- Wikipedia
- Metropolitan Museum of Art, Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History
- Zen and the Art of Video with Bill Viola, September 15, 2008
- 2008 Clarice Smith Distinguished Lectures in American Art
- cathy@koreatimes.co.kr (Korea Times article)
- interview with Sarah Douglas, published may 11, 2007, reprinted in Blouin ARTINFO. Jan. 25, 2012
- artdaily, January 23, 2012
- www.billviola.com
- Journal of Contemporary Art, interview with Michael Nash, June 30, 1990
- Interview with Charlie Rose, August 18, 1995, www.charlierose.com

submitted by Lin Stein, January 2012