

October 26, 2006

Page 1 of 2

The World's Window on Japan
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Slow-motion revelations

By Monty DiPietro



Bill Viola, *The Raft*, 2004, Video Installation, projection size: 396.2 cm x 223 cm

A group of people who do not know one another, but are united in a common purpose -- possibly waiting for a bus -- stand together in a tightly cropped long shot. One is reading a book, another is listening to music through headphones. There are the young and old; whites, blacks, Hispanics and Asians; businessmen, construction workers and a tall guy with an athletic singlet and a headband - - the sort of cross section of people you'd find in adverts for the lottery or McDonald's, but almost never encounters in actual life. (Perhaps it's the bus for Political Correctness City?) They stand in front of a tan-colored photographer's muslin backcloth.

These are the characters in Bill Viola's video installation "The Raft" (2004). The piece is shot on 35-mm film in such ultra slow motion that, on playback, a physical movement which would take a few seconds in real-time is stretched out to almost a minute. As characters arrive, their entrances send subtle ripples of reaction through the assembled others. A professorial-looking middle-aged man in a tweed jacket makes his way to the front and center, his disregard for the others drawing a number of disapproving sideways glances. This dissection of modern urban territorial behavior develops quite nicely until suddenly, and wholly unexpectedly, a tremendous deluge of water drenches the group, knocking several of the characters to the ground. Afterward, they all look around in bewilderment, then slowly recompose, reaching out and comforting one another.

"The Raft" is one of seven room-filling video installations and eight flat-screen TV pieces that comprise "Hatsu-Yume (First Dream)," the most comprehensive retrospective of Viola's work ever presented in Asia. The exhibition traces his development from 1981 to date, and is complemented by a screening of "Bill Viola: Video Works" at the ICC Theater in Shinjuku, which features 30 of the American artist's video works from 1975 to 1994.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

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Page 2 of 2

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Viola was born in 1951, and along with his collaborator Nam June Paik, is regarded as a seminal figure in video art. The exhibition begins with the title piece, "Hatsu-Yume (First Dream)," which was influenced by the Zen philosophy Viola studied in Japan in 1981. Other important pieces include "Heaven and Earth" (1992), in which a pair of cathode-ray picture tubes face each other on a vertical axis, the top screen showing the tightly cropped face of an elderly woman in a hospital bed, the screen below that of newborn baby. The monochrome images reflect upon one another to create an atmosphere both pure and poetic, the sort of personal and accessible concept-driven work that Viola does best.

But the large, slow-motion works from the 1990s to present dominate the exhibition. The first thing visitors encounter, effectively foreshadowed by the low-frequency soundtrack that makes its way into the foyer outside the show's entrance, is "The Crossing" (1996). This is a video piece projected on opposite sides of a single, monolithic vertical screen standing in the center of the gallery. On the first side a man approaches the camera from a great distance, stops, and is slowly consumed by fire. On the reverse side the same man performs the same action only to be consumed by a torrent of water.

While "The Crossing" is most definitely an installation, as it could not be shown in the theater or watched at home on television, many of the other pieces here, such as "The Raft," could be fairly accurately described as short films. They tell a story or evolve toward a climax, and as such should be viewed from beginning to end. Thus the show reminds us of the inherent difficulty involved in showing narrative video pieces in a museum environment. Museums are not theaters, with seats and starting times, and most people who see this piece will begin watching at a point other than the beginning, so compromising the effect.

What works better are the pieces that don't have a beginning or end. One of these is "The Stopping Mind" (1991), which is a riot of sound and color projected on four screens boxing in the center of a room. At random intervals, both the frenzied soundtrack and rapid progression of images stop, opening an eerily silent window through which the viewer can contemplate a unique, frozen moment.

The show repeatedly explores the face of human emotions. In "The Passions," Viola filmed actors performing progressive emotional exercises. These are played back in super slow motion on flat-screen monitors framed and mounted on the wall much like photographs. Looking at these, there is no discernible movement. However, after touring the room and looking at them again, it's apparent that a man who a few minutes ago had looked afraid, is starting to smile.

Ultimately, this show succeeds due to Bill Viola's uncompromising dedication to an artistic expression built not on oil paints or technology, but on the infinitely more elusive medium of human experience. Be aware, however, that you will have to spend many hours on your feet to view all the works in this show in their entirety. I would suggest taking a quick walk through first, then choosing which pieces you'd like to linger longer over.