

ARTWRIT

09. JODY ZELLEN REVIEWS BILL VIOLA

The enigmatic works of Bill Viola are at once philosophical and technological explorations of body, spirit, memory and time. The action in many of Viola's works is slow to unfold but rewarding to witness. Watching, one becomes aware of subtle changes that lead to a denouement, then the sequence begins again. It is easy to be drawn into these scenarios and marvel at both the actor's precision and the technical merits of the work.

For "Bodies of Light" at James Cohan Gallery, Viola presents old and new works that weave together a specific narrative. True to Viola's previous exhibitions, meaning is discerned through the reading across many, rather than a single work. Earlier pieces inform the latter, and older works are appreciated in a new light when seen in context of recent ones. The pieces are always presented in darkened rooms, transforming the gallery into a meditative space. The oldest work in the exhibition is also the most recent. In "Pneuma" (1994/2009), grainy black and white videos are projected into three corners of a square room filling the space with overlapping imagery. The hum of the white noise becomes the audible soundtrack. It is difficult to make out the imagery under the pulsating grain, as if the camera did not have enough light to fully capture the scene, though sporadically the picture coalesces to reveal what appear to be clouds, mountains, interior spaces, and shadows of children. Aptly titled "Pneuma," an ancient Greek word that refers to a vital spirit or soul, the work alludes to what lies beyond the visible, and how the sequencing of fragmentary experiences can become something significant, although in this work that significant something remains elusive.

Viola's works often draw from literary or historical sources, which then become the foundation for his meditations. While the exact references are not explicit, they lay the foundation for their development of the works. Viola speaks of the passing of his parents (in the 1990s) and his reflections on the balance between "The Unborn, The Living and The Dead" as the inspiration for many of his works including this new project, the "Transfigurations." According to Viola, "the title of the series, 'Transfigurations' refers to a rare process whereby both the substance and the essence of an entity is reconfigured. In physical terms, a transfiguration is a change in form, a remodeling of appearance." Viola's "Transfigurations" were created in his studio where a mechanical apparatus was built that created a wall of water and light. Actors were instructed to cross the boundary allowing spontaneous emotions and physical sensations to be recorded by the cameras. Viola's only stipulation was that, having crossed the threshold, they had to turn away from the light and return to the darkness. By combining footage recorded by High Definition cameras as well as one specifically designed to record black and white night vision, Viola was able to manipulate the footage to create seamless transitions from grainy black and white to vivid color as the figures emerged from the water. In pieces like "Acceptance" (2008), the movement unfolds during eight minutes wherein the beginning fuses with the end as a nude female actor's gestures and expressions morph from agony to ecstasy as she passes through the water only to retreat back into the shadows. "The Innocents" (2007), is a modest-size diptych in which clothed adolescents,

a girl and a boy, experience the transformation from dry to wet, from black and white to color, and from dark to light. The other works in the series include “Incarnation” (2008), featuring a nude couple on a single large-scale monitor, and “Small Saints” (2008), in which six small flat-screens mounted on a shelf juxtapose the transformation and reactions of clothed adult men and women, each isolated in their own frame.

In many of Viola’s works, a lone figure that occupies the frame of the screen undergoes a transformation. The figures in “Transfigurations” confront the emotional and spiritual changes associated with passing through water, while in “Bodies of Light” (2006), it is the presence and absence of light and the power of illumination that give the work meaning. Drawing from Tantric Buddhist descriptions of the dissolution of the body during the process of dying and rebirth, Viola follows the dissolution of a male and female body invoked by the passage of light. In this evocative black and white video diptych, lasting over twenty minutes, the bodies pass from substance to shadow, eventually dissolving into enveloping darkness.

His camera records the nuanced performances of the actors, which he then further enhances, often slowing down the frame rate to highlight the expressiveness of the actors. The process of performing is central to Viola’s endeavor, but it is the combination of technological precision and experienced acting that invokes an emotional response in the viewer. For this, Viola relies numerous technicians and the best equipment available, which allows the perfect execution of his signature effects, such as the seamless fusing of color film, black and white, surveillance and High Definition imagery.

Viola’s work has instant appeal: Each piece is a wonder, something awe-inspiring to behold. Collectively, however, they become redundant. As in past exhibitions, -- “The Passions” at the J. Paul Getty Museum in 2003, for example -- a single technique is repeated. Here it is an imperceptible movement. In “The Transfigurations” it is the passage through the water. Although each is different from the next -- how the water flows, the expressions and the reactions of the performer -- the same idea is insisted upon. While it is a treat to see Viola’s recent works in conjunction with selected pieces from the past, the amount of work on view is such that the works cancel each other out. Viola is at his best when he gives viewers room to digest the subtle and visceral nuances in each piece. By presenting so much work, the experience is more claustrophobic than it is expansive, as the compelling works do not have enough room to breathe on their own.

BILL VIOLA, “BODIES OF LIGHT”
JAMES COHAN GALLERY, NEW YORK
533 West 26th Street
October 23 - December 19



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