

Conversation with Bill Viola

August 10, 2009 | By Violant Porcel

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Bill Viola, *Five Angels for the Millennium* (Kira Perov).

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Violant Porcel. Art critic

A fundamental artist in the consolidation of video art as an essential discipline of contemporary creation, Bill Viola (New York, 1951) has managed to show that technology can become a path towards spirituality. This is why the artist, who years ago established his centre of operations in California's Long Beach, has received the Catalonia International Prize 2009. Bill Viola's works have often been placed in holy settings. Recently, the Bòlit Contemporary Art Centre in Girona presented in the Chapel of Saint Nicholas *The Messenger*, a video installation included in *Noches oscuras del alma*. Also participating in the exhibition were the artists Toni Serra and Manuel Saiz, thus providing three different visions of the unveiling of the hidden.

Viola created *The Messenger* in 1996 for the majestic Durham Cathedral, in northern England, forming part of the programme of celebrations of the UK Year of the Visual Arts. The video reveals a naked man who emerges from the opaque depths of the water, takes a deep breath and opens his eyes, and then sinks back down again. The nudity of the protagonist caused some controversy at the time. Together with this version, it was necessary for Viola to create another in which the individual's genitals appeared blurred so that a committee of theologians could choose one of the two. In the end, they considered that the initial option, more explicit, best preserved the spiritual meaning of the project. Nevertheless, the piece remained half hidden in the cathedral in order to avoid offending conservative followers.

Since he exhibited his first work at university, Bill Viola has shown his videos in a loop, a mode that allows any delayed viewer the chance to see his work in its totality. This reiteration, moreover, establishes an analogy with the idea of ritual, an action regularly repeated and predictable, allowing the individual to move on to

another stage. Thus, *The Messenger* becomes a metaphor for the cycle of life.

During July 2009, La Seu Vella in Lleida, with its solemn austerity, housed *The Return*, a striking video, owned by the Sorigué Foundation, sponsors of the project. The piece forms part of the video installation *Ocean without a Shore*, a title taken from the work of the Sufi mystic Ibn 'Arabi, which was initially presented in the Venetian church of Oratorio San Gallo during the 2007 Biennale. It is a profound reflection on death through characters who emerge out of the darkness and pass through a curtain of water towards the light. When they become aware that their physical presence is material and transitory, they return to the shadows. His next challenge: another altar in an English cathedral, but this time the installation will be permanent.

Violant Porcel: Why did you leave your city of birth, considered one of the artistic epicentres?

Bill Viola: I didn't feel comfortable; in Manhattan people enclose themselves in a



Violant Porcel meets Bill Viola.

microcosm with the only concern in life of reaching the top.

V.P.: From a very young age you have been interested in mysticism, both eastern and western. You've mentioned on some occasion that this path attracts you because it describes the creative state that connects the individual with the most profound levels of being. One of your favourite writers is St John of the Cross.

B.V.: That's right, a man who is imprisoned, humiliated and, instead of responding with hatred and anger, writes *Spiritual Canticle*, whose verses possess a boundless expressive strength.

When I read it I understood the effect that art could produce: that work showed me why I devote myself to creation.

V.P.: Is the spirituality that comes out of your discourse related to your abundant readings linked to the sacred?

B.V.: Religion and art are similar; both are concerned with the essence of the human being. While the monotheist institutions have problems entering into dialogue, artists can help to unite civilisations. It now seems we are about to come together in an accumulation of disasters: ecological, economic and pandemic. The new generations should not be afraid, quite

the contrary. When everything disappears, it is time to invent.

V.P.: But young people have moved away from spirituality.

B.V.: I don't see this crisis so often talked about these days. All human beings, even without being fully aware, have a spirituality that forms part of their nature. You even sense it in prehistoric caves.

V.P.: I think your work appeals directly to the viewer's emotions. The critic Valentina Valentini wrote that your powerful images manage to awaken the body of the western viewer, subjected to the control of the mind. You have sometimes been criticised for your connection with the general public.

B.V.: I am not interested in making art for specialists, but for everyone. When we go to the cinema, we do not need cards left in the lobby explaining the meaning of the film. If we want to explore it further, we can obtain more information, but it is not an essential requisite to understand the film. It should be the same for art.

V.P.: Beyond your many references to the pictorial tradition, I think what really moves so many viewers is the poignancy that emanates from your works, as well as an insistence on showing beauty in a profound sense, an idea usually scorned by current art.

B.V.: We already find this issue in Islamic religion. The Koran states: "God has inscribed beauty upon all things," making reference to a hidden quality, present in all elements. The

contemporary world reduces beauty to exterior appearance, but I am interested in its union with the concept of Truth, a subject approached in Antiquity and highly recurrent in Renaissance philosophical discussions.

V.P.: And how does the language of video art assimilate this conception?

B.V.: The digital image has become the new lingua franca. The camera works like an inner eye that allows you to introduce yourself into things and establish their essence. Like the individual, it is an instrument that includes a physical and spiritual part. In my work, I use black and white when I want to talk directly to the soul, and colour to present the more social aspects.

V.P.: Nature occupies an outstanding place in your creative universe. Elements such as water or fire are common; it seems as if the characters in your videos serenely accept the norms and rites of the natural world. In the eighties, you even prepared a project on animal consciousness which took you to spend a few months with a herd of bison at the Wind Cave National Park in South Dakota, and to become artist-in-residence at San Diego Zoo.

B.V.: Nature also attracts me in a spiritual sense: I try to explore the intrinsic laws of the cosmos, in its transcendent dimension, to better understand the habitat of the human being. Arrogant behaviour towards nature only leads to destruction; we must adopt a more reverent attitude towards it, as we are its guests. In fact, observation of animals has taught me many things about the behaviour of the human being.