

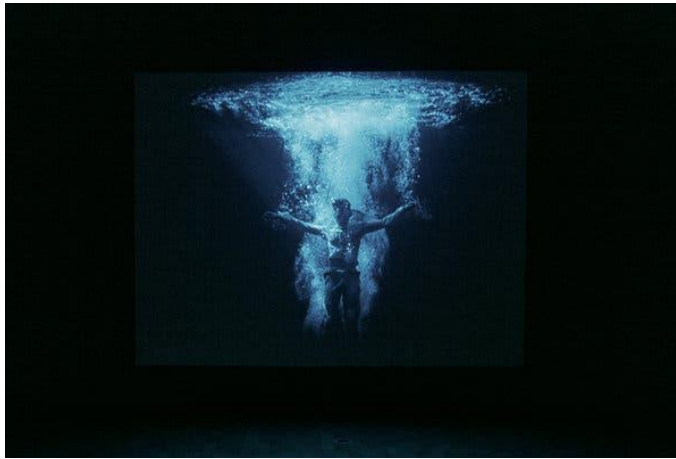
## My Bill Viola Video Marathon

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From sunrise to sundown, a Philadelphia visit rediscovers the artist's challenging contributions to installation art.



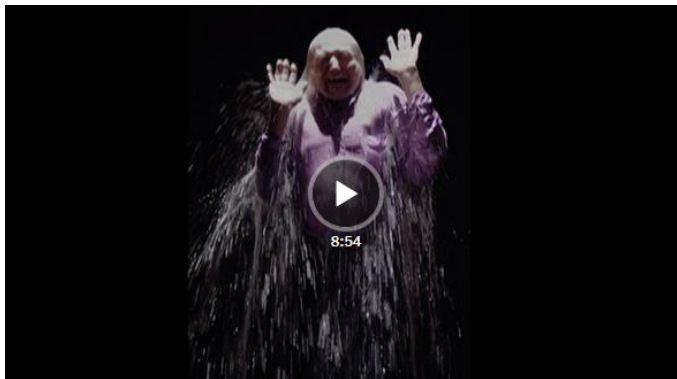
A scene from Bill Viola's "Ascension" (2000) in the exhibition "I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like: The Art of Bill Viola," at the Barnes Foundation. Credit...The Barnes Foundation; Sean Murray

When rereading a classic novel many years after college, one finds that greater maturity often deepens the experience, bringing more insight into the author's objective. Recently, I had a similar reaction in viewing 10 videos of varying length, several for the second time, by the artist Bill Viola during a daylong marathon among three museums here. Engrossed in the humanistic spiritualism that permeates Mr. Viola's work, blended with his idiosyncratic imagination about the activities of daily life, I emerged with a fresh understanding of how his representation of a singular instance stands for a timeless worldview of both people and nature.

Mr. Viola, 68, a New Yorker by birth and Californian since 1980, now lives in Long Beach with his wife and collaborator, Kira Perov. Coming from what he calls a TV childhood, he discovered video in 1969 when someone staged a video camera in his high school classroom. When he arrived at Syracuse University, he immediately signed up for the video workshop and has been experimenting and developing new techniques ever since in what was then a nascent art.

In paving the way for video innovation, he has produced challenging art works based on medical imaging technologies of the human body and animal behavior as well as scripted moving scenarios filmed with performers. As proof that video is now mainstream in the art world, all four of the finalists on view for the 2018 Turner Prize, sponsored by Tate Britain, were practitioners of video art with digitally driven, hyper-political themes.

Often museums may show a few Viola videos at onetime, but here the Barnes Foundation takes the lead in an exhibition of eight videos, titled "I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like," curated with a catalog by John G. Hanhardt and other writers. Both the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the Fabric Workshop and Museum around the corner joined in with one video each from their permanent collections. Together the works span the years 1976 to 2009.



A clip from Bill Viola's "Ocean Without a Shore," 2007.

When I walked into the gallery at the Pennsylvania Academy to see "Ocean Without a Shore," I was immediately taken back to that hot day in 2007 at the Venice Biennale when I stood in line in the campo outside the 15th-century Church of San Gallo to see it for the first time. Inside, screens were recessed above three ornate altars, and the videos were synchronized at different stages. In each, a person seen in grainy black and white would come from a distance and break through a sheet of transparent water emerging in full color expressing fear, anguish or joy. (His innovative use of new technologies includes a water wall, a laser-cut, razor-precise edge that creates a sheet of water that looked like glass.)

I have learned since that Mr. Viola was assigned this space and created the video of the dead coming back temporarily to our world. He deemed the altars as a cross between tombs and places to pray. Unfortunately, in that crowded space no one could stay for long.

How fortunate then to enter its present space arranged in the same configuration, with the suggestion of the altars. Here I saw the entire sequence representing people of many ethnic and cultural backgrounds exploring, in the artist's words, "the fragility of the border between life and death."



Bill Viola's "The Veiling" (detail), from 1995, a video and sound installation of a man and a woman meeting and separating in a nocturnal woodland scene projected on nine parallel scrim. Credit...Collection of The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, Bequest of Marion Boulton Stroud; Carlos Avendano

The sequence had a rhythm to it broken by the different personalities and expressions, until a young girl, seen as a shadow, puts her hand through the water and then turns back, the only one not to break through. This powerful moment, which I missed the first time, immediately reminded me of Emily in Thornton Wilder's "Our Town," who returns painfully to a day in her life. Mr. Viola is influenced by mystic religions; the title comes from the Andalusian Sufi Ibn Arabi: "The Self is an ocean without a shore. Gazing upon it has no beginning or end, in this world and the next."

"The Veiling," at the Fabric Workshop, where Mr. Viola was artist in residence in the early 1990s, was also first shown at a Venice Biennale (1995), one of five video and sound installations that he created to occupy the five rooms of the United States Pavilion. Nine parallel scrims of sheer Italian curtain cloth serve as continuous screens for a slow-motion episode of a man and woman meeting and separating in a nocturnal woodland scene, with projections coming from both ends. Its ethereal quality captures the viewer's own imagination almost as a participant. Still it was sometimes difficult to focus on images between the slightly waving sheets.

Among the artist's myriad technological feats, slow motion is one feature that draws attention to dramatic details that would be missed if shown in real time. Moving to the Barnes, this was most evident in "The Greeting" inspired by the Mannerist painting "The Visitation" (circa 1528-29) by Jacopo da Pontormo that serves as the altarpiece for a church in Carmignano, Italy.

After seeing it on loan last year at the Morgan Library & Museum, I was captured here not only by the elegance of Mr. Viola's scene, with its expressions of anticipation and fulfillment, but by the setting of similar Italianate buildings with mysterious characters in the background and, above all, the draping and flow of fabrics that conveyed the original without losing the modernity of, say, shoulder bags on the present performers.



A clip from Bill Viola's "The Greeting," 1995. Video via Bill Viola studio

Most compelling of Mr. Viola's existential views, pairing the universal with the quotidian, is his horizontal five-panel, flat-screen video "Catherine's Room," based in concept on the five-part predella of the "St. Catherine of Siena" altarpiece by the 15th-century Siennese painter Andrea di Bartolo Cini.

In a simple room based on a nun's cell, the performer, Weba Garretson, goes about her daily routine — yoga in the morning, sewing at midday, writing with frustration in the afternoon, a ritualistic lighting of candles at night, and finally preparing for bed. But the singular window in each panel enlarges the story with a view of a tree passing through the seasons. Here on first take, it seemed to me a whole life lived ending in death, and I succumbed to what I call the dollhouse theory of seeing myself in the interior and living the experience. It was sobering to feel life fleeting by.

Finally, there is Mr. Viola's fascination with water. He has often spoken of his discovery of a magical underwater world in a near-drowning accident at age 6. In the film, "I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like," the enigmatic title drawn from the Rig-Veda, the opening sequence conveys this sensation. Completed in 1986, after three years of recording and editing, it is both a surreal and specific rendering of the fragility and intermingling of animal and human life, from extreme close-ups of birds in zoos and of underground caves to a fire-walking ceremony in a Hindu community in Fiji. As he zeros in on the eye of an owl, suddenly I could see the artist reflected in its black pupil. By the end of the marathon, I had had an illuminating encounter with life, death and consciousness through Bill Viola's own experimental and farseeing eye.