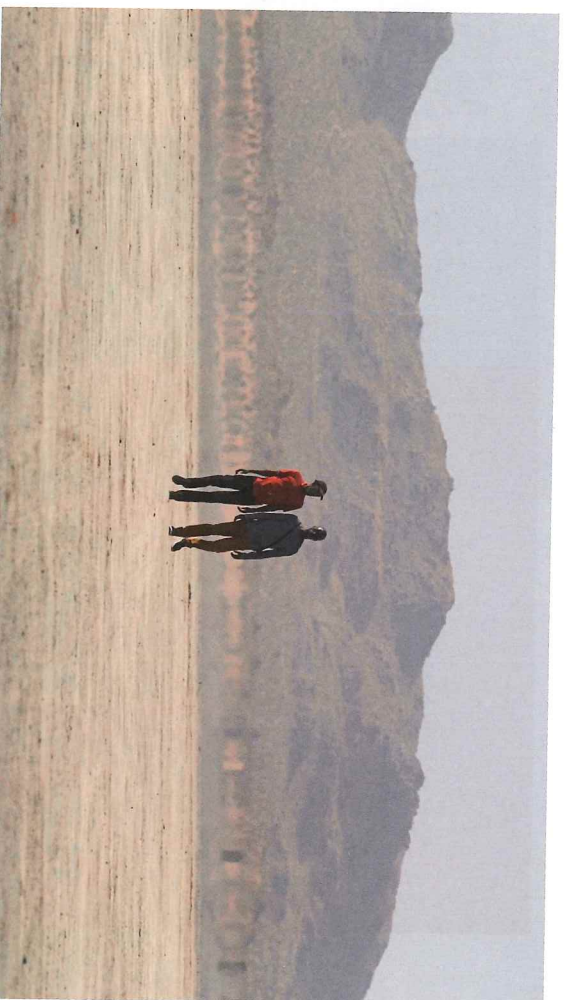


Bill Viola at Grand Palais, Paris

UNWORLDLY EVENTS

Bill Viola's Grand Palais survey covers a lot of territory, both literally and figuratively. With two works from the seventies, one from the eighties, five from the nineties, eight from the aughties and four from the teens on hand, one notices numerous art historical influences from Giotto to Goya; recurring motifs like water and fire, ongoing themes of life/death, impression/response or calm/storm plus his abiding interest in the latest technology. In fact, one wonders whether anyone considered presenting his originally non-digital videos as tapes or laserdiscs played and projected using appropriate technology. Structured thematically like a text rather than chronologically like life, visitors shuffle through several galleries featuring reflections/mirrored imagery before experiencing numerous intense scenes that explore emotions, delusion, dream or imagination; ending with others that evoke rejuvenation/rebirth. Eight installations employ water as a leitmotif, though none so darkly as the apocalyptic 'Going Forth by Day' (2002), whose five 'panels' juxtapose dissimilar scenes: a fiery volcano, aimless hikers, street life, a death bed and exhausted rescue workers. Each panel is 35 minutes long, giving viewers ample time to weave narratives from these otherwise disjunctive scenes. I was moved to reflect upon the inevitable madness and destruction wrought by unfettered climate change. Since much has been written about Viola's interest in time, Renaissance painting, stillness, spirituality and his story about being retrieved from a lake bottom by an uncle at age six, my focus here concerns his videos' anti-spectacularity, perceptual games and surprise outcomes, three less discussed aspects that his forty-year survey incidentally emphasizes. Rather than seduce or lull viewers into complacency, his sluggish anti-spectacles foment anticipation and thus inspire spectators to imagine what happens next, while waiting patiently to discover the results.



Bill Viola, *Walking on the Edge*, 2012, color High-Definition video on plasma display mounted on wall, 12'33", performers: Kwesi Dei, Darrow Igus, Bill Viola Studio, Long Beach, USA, photo Kira Perov

Viola began by experimenting with 'Portapak' videotape recorders, which inherited handheld cameras' dual fictional and documental possibilities. Rather than capturing live events on video, his confounding works have mostly depicted unworldly events, such as 'Reflecting Pool' (1977-1979), this exhibition's opening installation. When one observes the diver seemingly about to enter the pool, nothing appears to be happening, but a lot transpires when one regards the pool's surface. Suddenly, the diver, no longer suspended over the pool, emerges from the pool, rewinding the scene. Viola famously introduced 'still video' for which moving images change imperceptibly. Examples of this approach include 'Heaven and Earth' (1992), during which a dying grandma shares glances with her newly born grandson; 'Four Hands' (2000), for which hands mime symbolic gestures; and 'The Quintet of the Astonished' (2000), whose figures slowly undergo a vast emotional range. Such routine displacements between expectation and outcome serve several purposes. Viola's videos indicate the limits of human perception, as still photos often reveal oversights. One cannot see it all, especially if one exits the room too soon,

only to discover what one missed. One gallery invites viewers to experience three related works simultaneously: 'Chott El Djerid' (A Portrait in Light and Heat) (1979), 'Walking on the Edge' and 'The Encounter' (both 2012). Shot in Tunisia, 'Chott El Djerid' (a 'Star Wars' location) depicts the desert's mystery, as waxy pastel-colored mirages hover along the horizon. Fata morganas transforming the landscape further deform its representation. The projected imagery reads as a warped, drug-induced dream, whose optical and acoustical distortions of nature, as well as aural cues, fill the viewer with longing, desire and anticipation. With 'Walking on the Edge', two men, coming from far away, walk along two desert paths that eventually cross, yet they barely acknowledge one another as they continue on. By contrast, the two women in 'The Encounter' greet one another in the vast desert, eventually going their separate ways.

Sue SPAID

Bill Viola until 21 July at Grand Palais, 254/256 rue de Bercy, Paris, Fr. www.grandpalais.fr