



# VIDEO VISIONARY

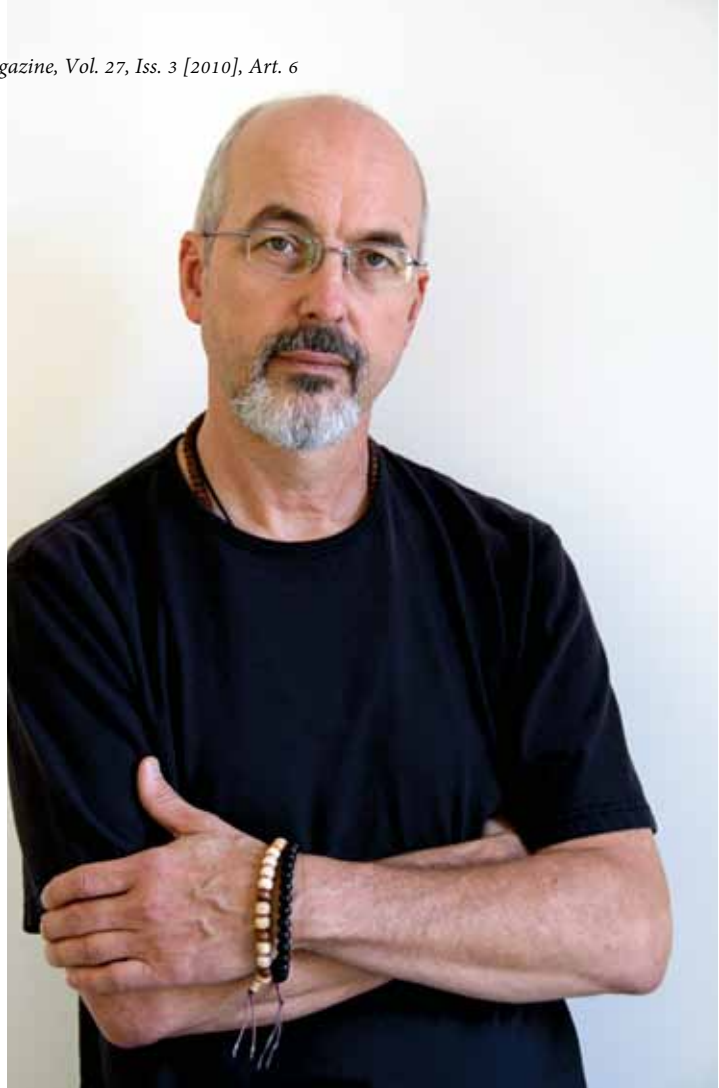
ARENTS AWARD RECIPIENT BILL VIOLA FOUND A PASSION FOR VIDEO IN

SYRACUSE THAT SET HIM ON A PATH TO THE FRONTIERS OF ARTISTIC CREATIVITY

BY DAVID MARC VIDEO BY BILL VIOLA

**Facing Page:**

*Ascension*, 2000  
Color video projection  
on wall in dark room  
Projected image size:  
335 x 251 cm  
Photo: Kira Perov



BILL VIOLA '73, H'95 IS PROBABLY THE MOST ACCLAIMED VIDEO ARTIST IN THE WORLD. He has produced an extraordinary body of work that has been shown and collected by leading museums and exhibited by foremost galleries across the globe. In the process, he has helped define video as an art form



*The Reflecting Pool*, 1977-79  
Videotape, color, mono sound; 7 minutes.  
Photo: Kira Perov

capable of conveying personal expression that is richer in thought and more exquisite in detail than the broadcast television he grew up with. Viola has taken video to places hardly imaginable early in his career: a giant screen suspended over the orchestra at an opera performance in New York's Lincoln Center; the nave of a 900-year-old cathedral in Durham, England; Tokyo's Mori Art Museum, where a third of a million visitors attended screenings of *Hatsu-Yume* ("First Dream"), a Viola video some critics consider his masterpiece. Accolades flow to Viola with a force appropriate to his work. In 1989, he received the MacArthur Fellowship, the celebrated "genius grant"; 20 years later, the French republic named him a Commander of the Order of Arts and Letters, a distinction he shares with such one-of-a-kind creative spirits as Jerry Lewis and Stevie Wonder. A Californian for many years, he welcomes students into his Long Beach studio through SU's L.A. Semester program. Viola came back east during high color this fall to receive the George Arents Award, the University's highest alumni honor. While in town, he spoke to students and



Bill Viola '73, H'95 visits with students at Light Work, a nonprofit organization at SU dedicated to the photographic arts. Viola (at left, top right photo) discusses his art with David A. Ross '71, a longtime friend and arts administrator, during "An Evening with Bill Viola" at the Everson Museum of Art.

faculty at Light Work in the Robert B. Menschel Media Center at the University, and offered "An Evening with Bill Viola" at the Everson Museum of Art, revisiting two institutions he credits for nurturing him back in the day. "It's amazing that I've been able to make a living and support a family doing the work I do," he says without a hint of understatement.


## AN ARTIST IN SEARCH OF A MEDIUM

Viola arrived in Syracuse in 1969 with a strong sense of an artist's vocation, something he discovered in childhood. He had his "first show," as he calls it, in kindergarten at P.S. 20, Queens, when the teacher hung his finger-painting of a tornado on the wall. "My father wanted me to study advertising at Syracuse and I intended to major in painting, although I really wasn't much of a painter," he says. "But once I found my footing as a college student, Syracuse became like a playground for me. I went to electrical engineering to learn how to solder circuits. I checked out the new computer graphics department. My music professor, Franklin Morris, had a Moog synthesizer—and he let us use it. I felt like I was entering a new world."

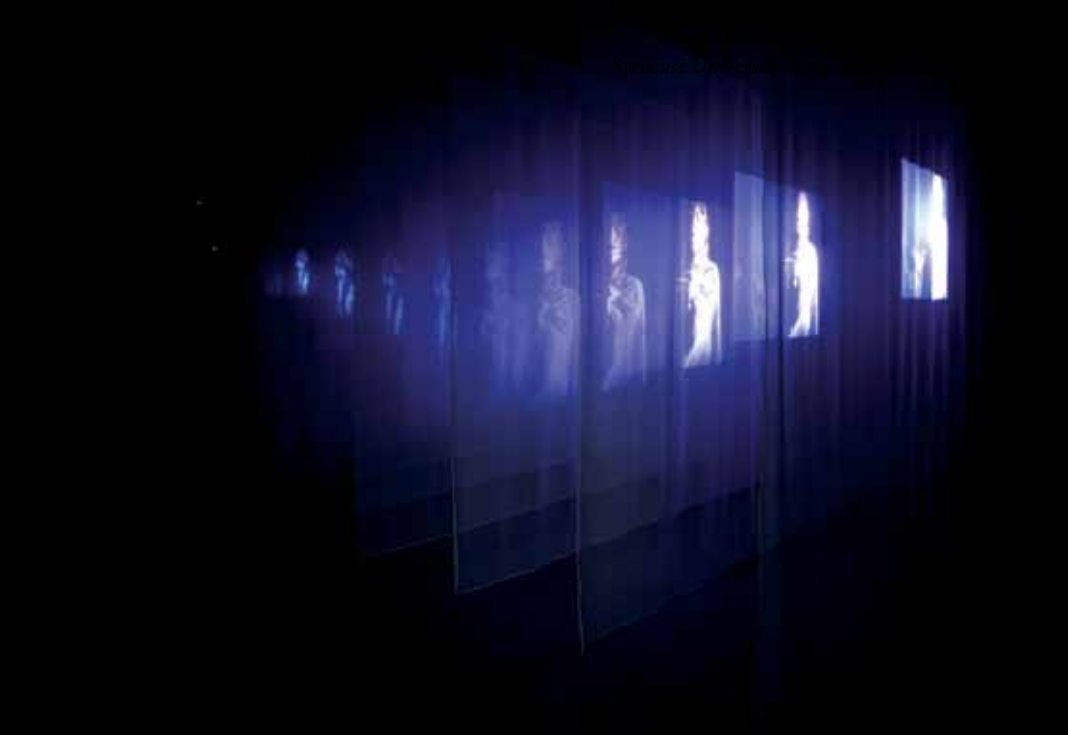
He was.

Although a century of technological advances had spawned photography, cinema, and other new visual arts, there were few opportunities in American higher education to study them during the 1960s. Syracuse was among the first research universities to address the need to prepare new generations of artists to make full use of the tools at hand. "SU took a chance and hired some new blood for the faculty, including Jerry Malinowski, Lee DuSell, and my advisor, Jack Nelson," Viola says. "They took a look at the curriculum and said, 'We need something more creative, dynamic, and contemporary.' So they set up the experimental studios, where you could work in all kinds of new media." Viola switched his major from painting to experimental studios, forerunner of today's transmedia department in the College of Visual and Performing Arts. He continued to study painting in art history courses, crediting his professor, Larry Bakke, for introducing him to the work of Mark Rothko, Willem DeKooning, and Andy Warhol. "Larry was a historian, but he just seemed to know everything new that was up and coming," Viola says.

Students also played a significant role in transforming the study of contemporary art at SU. Lance Wisniewski '72 was pivotal in that regard. "Lance attended a summer video seminar out in Berkeley and came back to campus all fired up,"

 To view a video of Bill Viola discussing his creative process, log on to [sumagazine.syr.edu](http://sumagazine.syr.edu).





*The Veiling, 1995*  
Two channels of color video projections from opposite sides of a large dark gallery through nine large scrims suspended from ceiling; two channels amplified mono sound, four speakers 11.5 x 22 x 31 ft (3.5 x 6.7 x 9.4 m)  
Photo: Roman Mensing

*The Crossing, 1996 (detail)*  
Video/Sound Installation  
Two channels of color video projections from opposite sides of large dark gallery onto two large back-to-back screens suspended from ceiling and mounted to floor; four channels of amplified stereo sound, four speakers  
Room dimensions: 16 x 27.5 x 57 ft  
Performer: Phil Esposito  
Photo: Kira Perov

Viola says. "He was head of a student organization and that gave him some power, which he used to buy equipment and set up a student video workshop." Among the video enthusiasts in the group were Carl Geiger '71, who has produced and taught video at his rural studio in nearby LaFayette for decades, and David A. Ross '71, who would become influential in the international art world. "There was this mood in the air," says Ross, who has served terms as executive director of the Whitney Museum and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. "We all believed that portable video was going to usher in a new age and bring about enormous changes, even if we weren't quite sure just what those changes might be. It was similar to the way people felt about the Internet in the early '90s."

Another result of the student-led video movement was the building of SU's first cable-TV system, completed in 1972. Viola had a hand in the project. "I worked all summer pulling cable through manholes to connect buildings across the campus," he says. "Once we were up-and-running, I got a job as a janitor in Watson Hall, which was the center of the system. That gave me the keys to the building. After cleaning up the mess from the beer parties, I'd stay there all night, alone in this incredible state-of-the-art color video studio. No other university had one like it. That's where I became proficient." Having discovered his medium, Viola took the opportunity to master it.

## NOT ABOUT THE EQUIPMENT

Much of the excitement surrounding video during this period belonged to documentarians and community activists who saw the new compact equipment, especially the SONY Port-a-Pak, as freeing them from the excessive costs and cumbersome nature of the alternatives: celluloid film, which required delicate equipment,



*Emergence, 2002*  
Color High-Definition video rear projection on screen mounted on wall in dark room  
Projected image size: 200 x 200 cm;  
room dimensions variable  
Commissioned by the J. Paul Getty Museum  
Photo: Kira Perov



Marc: Video visionary

expensive film stock, and time for the developing process; or the unwieldy standard video equipment created for the broadcasting industry. Viola had reasons of his own for preferring compact video. Film was not an option because he was pursuing images that did not exist in that medium. As for commercial TV-style video equipment, Viola was already familiar with its practical limitations for the more intimate enterprise he was engaged in. "Before the Watson cable studio, the Newhouse broadcast journalism program had the only video equipment on campus," he says. "John Sorgel was a kind of classic engineer guy—you know, with the pens in the breast pocket—but he was a really sweet guy and used to let us come in at night and fool around with the big two-inch [videotape] machines. Those things were the size of refrigerators!"

The radical nature of Viola's desire to explore video as a means of aesthetic discovery may be obscured by time. Before the mass-marketing of the VCR and the dozens of home video products that followed, "video" was little more than a synonym for "television," which existed almost exclusively in commercial broadcast form. In the established art world, no medium inspired greater contempt. Asked how he managed to see a potential for crafting beauty and pondering complexity in what was typically dismissed as the "idiot box" and "boob tube," Viola says, "My generation grew up on television. *The Mickey Mouse Club* and all the rest of it was part of us. The artists of the day, especially the avant-garde filmmakers, looked at video and all they saw was a primitive, poor-quality image. They didn't get the language; we did. For me, it was like going into the belly of the beast. One of the jobs of being an artist is to detoxify things. It's not the whole job, but it is part of the job description."

## INSIDE AND OUT AT THE EVERSON

BILL VIOLA, WHOSE EARLY SCREENINGS AT THE EVERSON Museum of Art helped video gain its place inside the art world, returned to downtown Syracuse this fall to help gain a place for video in more pedestrian venues. For better than a month, a specially produced large format version of Viola's *The Quintet of the Astonished* (2000) was projected on the north wall of the Everson for public viewing. The 15-minute piece, originally commissioned by the National Gallery of London, presents five individuals in close quarters before a black background, reacting to something whose impact strikes all, yet leads each in a distinct emotional direction. In composition, it suggests Bosch's *Christ Mocked* (*The Crowning in*

*Thorns*). The *al fresco* screening marked the launch of the Everson's ongoing participation in Light Work's Urban Video Project (UVP), which offers videos to all in sight of its image locations along Syracuse's Connective Corridor. "When Bill was an SU student, he and the Everson Museum helped create a video revolution," says Jeffrey Hoone, executive director of SU's Coalition of Museum and Art Centers and of Light Work, which oversees UVP. "That legacy continues, as Bill helps us create a new way of bringing video art to the public. This could be a national model for the future of public art."

On October 15, as part of Orange Central events, Viola and David Ross, two of the museum's most celebrated former employees, returned to their old haunt for a public "conversation." Sitting comfortably at a table onstage, the pair traded vivid memories of the compact video revolution whose salad days in Syracuse coincided with their own. Several silent Viola videos were screened as they spoke, and references were made to them from time to time. The audience, which filled the Everson's main auditorium to capacity, seemed mesmerized by the conversation, which moved effortlessly from accounts of John Lennon and Yoko Ono exhibiting in Syracuse, circa 1971, to the influences of Buddhist philosophy on Viola's vision. Ross characterized Viola as "an artist engaged in the study of time, consciousness, and the human spirit." A reception, originally planned for the sculpture court, was held in the museum's main lobby when the weather failed to cooperate. "I love it," said one longtime resident who had attended the Everson's historic Nam June Paik video show in 1973. "This is a consummate Syracuse experience—in every way."







**Facing Page:**

*Visitation*, 2008

Color High-Definition video on plasma display mounted on wall; stereo sound

155.5 x 92.5 x 12.7 cm

(61.2 x 36.4 x 5 in)

12:18 minutes

Performers: Pam Blackwell,

Weba Garretson

Photo: Kira Perov

**Above:**

*The Raft*, 2004

Color High-Definition video projection on wall (396.2 x 223 cm) in darkened space;

5.1 channel surround sound

Room dimensions: 30 x 23 x 14 ft

(9 x 7 x 4 m)

Production Still

Photo: Kira Perov

In a 1997 interview with *ARTnews*, Viola said his years in Syracuse provided him with “the best education I could have had.” He had come to the right place at the right time to study a subject that did not quite exist the day he enrolled. It’s worth noting that Viola’s Syracuse education didn’t end at the campus gate. Syracuse was enjoying a salon moment in the spotlight of the art world. The Everson Museum was screening work by pioneer video artists Nam June Paik, Peter Campus, and Frank Gillette, and hosting multimedia performance pieces by Charlotte Moorman and Yoko Ono (featuring guest artist John Lennon). In 1971, the museum made news as the first in the country to establish a video department. Eyebrows rose even higher when David Ross, fresh from Commencement, was appointed video curator. When Viola graduated, he followed his friend to the Everson, taking the more modest position of A-V guy. But even that job had its perks. “Do you realize that I got to be Nam June Paik’s assistant at his first American video show?” Viola asks, betraying a bit of long-term wonder at his opportunity to run tech for the artist who had practically invented video art. Within five years, the A-V guy at the Everson was screening his own work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

When Viola started watching television, it was a black-and-white analog medium offering only the barest minimum of control to the viewer: change the channel or shut it off. The first color video image he ever saw was himself—on a monitor at a tourist attraction in the NBC studios at 30 Rock. But Viola seems neither fond of video technology nor frightened by the speed of its evolution. For him, it’s not about the equipment. “It will soon be 40 years that I’ve been making video and surviving on it,” he says. “That kind of longevity is only possible because video presents me the opportunity to explore the subject matter: the human condition. It’s infinite. Learning something about it and expressing what you find—that’s why we’re here. When you think about eternity, it doesn’t mean thinking about being here 1,000 years from now. It means thinking about what you’re doing now, because what you do matters. It’s part of the fabric of the present moment and always will be.”