



***Emergence*, Bill Viola**

Emergence

Bill Viola

American, 2002

Color high-definition video (rear projection on screen mounted on wall in dark room)

Projected image size: 84 5/16 x 84 5/16 x 3 7/8 in. Room dimensions variable

Running time: 11:49 minutes

Edition 1 of 3

78 x 78 in.

2004.61



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This work was commissioned by the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

Questions for Teaching

Describe each figure in this video

installation. (Show students the still photos available on the Getty Museum's online exhibition *Bill Viola: The Passions at: <http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/viola/emergence.html>*.) Think about clothing, hand gestures, how the figures move their bodies, and range of facial expressions.

What relationships do you notice between the characters? Who do you think the women in the video represent? Are they aware of each other? How does the young man relate to the two women? Which character do you identify with most closely? Why?

Describe the story the artist is communicating in this work. How do the background and the props add to the story?

Read the information in the Background Information below. (If you are able to visit the Getty Museum, check to see if it's on display so you can view the video in its entirety.) Based on this information, how does this video compare and contrast with movies you see in theaters?

Bill Viola wants to emphasize the emotional response of the people within his video art object, as well as provoke an emotional response from viewers of the artwork. How does seeing the stills from the video make you feel?

Viola slows down the playback speed of the video to force the viewer to pay attention to the subtleties of the characters' expressions, poses and gestures. He also wants his video to be a different experience than going to see a movie. How do you think slowing down the speed of a film would change your perception of it?

Viola chose not to include sound in the video. How do you think the silence in a video affects a viewer's experience of the video? Do you think *Emergence* would have been more or less effective if the artist used sound to help convey emotions? Why or why not?

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Background Information

In the publication *Bill Viola: The Passions*, the artist describes the plot of his video *Emergence*:

Two women are seen sitting on either side of a marble cistern in a small courtyard. They wait patiently in silence, only occasionally acknowledging each other's presence. Time becomes suspended and indeterminate, the purpose and destination of their actions unknown. Their vigil is suddenly interrupted by a premonition. The younger woman abruptly turns and stares at the cistern. She watches in disbelief as a young man's head appears, and then his body rises up, spilling water over the sides and out onto the base and the courtyard floor.

The cascading water catches the older woman's attention, and she turns to witness the miraculous event. She stands up, drawn by the young man's rising presence. The younger woman grasps his arm and caresses it as if greeting a lost lover. When the young man's pale body reaches its fullest extension, he totters and falls. The older woman catches him in her arms, and with the help of the younger woman, they struggle to lower him gently to the ground. Lying prone and lifeless, he is covered by a cloth. Cradling his head on her knees, the older woman finally breaks down in tears as the younger woman, overcome with emotion, tenderly embraces his body.

As a work of art, *Emergence* transcends this—and probably *any*—literal description. The video resembles a painting because it is framed, mounted into a wall, silent, and the narrative occurs in extremely slow motion. As a rear-projection installation, it assumes an otherworldly glow. Although the plot suggests biblical stories such as Christ's Resurrection, such metaphorical associations are ambiguous: For example, the man rising out of a fountain of water implies birth, but his body, when laid out on the ground, suggests death.

Bill Viola created *Emergence* as a work in a series of video pieces he called "The Passions." The series was inspired by Viola's participation in the 1998 Getty Research Institute guest scholar program. Viola spent a year collaborating with artists and scholars to explore the theme of "The Representation of the Passions." Viola wondered how to create a series of video work that explored the expression of emotion—the kinds of extreme emotion that cause people to lose control. He was also interested in delving into the worlds of feeling and memory, concentrating on the processes of life, growth, and death that are universally experienced in human existence.

Viola was moved by the kinds of emotion he observed in Christian devotional art of the 14th and 15th centuries. *Emergence* was inspired in part by Viola's interaction with a fresco painting of the *Pietà* by the 15th-century Italian artist Masolino, which depicts Christ in a sarcophagus, being supported on either side by his mourning mother and St. John. Viola sketched the image and put it away. He is not interested in restaging historical paintings; instead, Viola seeks to bring something new and unfamiliar to the imagery. His original idea conceived of two women pulling a dead man out of a well, but his idea evolved to include the idea of birth as well as death. His original idea was reconceived to present the man's body rising up out of the well, bringing an unexplained surge of water with it, adding contradictory ideas: Was the man drowned? Is it the amniotic fluid of his birth? Viola explains, "To our contemporary eyes, it's a drowning; in my inner eye, midwifery. Images like these have a life of their own because they are untethered and free flowing." The video represents opposing ways to read the element of water—giving life as

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well as taking it away—suggesting we as viewers can reexamine and recognize the diversity of associations existing within all of our experiences.

To actualize *Emergence* and other works in his series *The Passions*, Viola had to rethink how he created his video art. He began by creating a **storyboard** for the video. His methods required him to work like a large-scale movie production, hiring actors, cinematographers, producers, and learning to act as his own director. Viola worked with the actors to create the emotions depicted within the video. He gave them acting scenes to “practice” their emotions, oftentimes filming them while they performed their acting exercises. *Emergence* employs actors working in a scene, displaying a set of manufactured emotions. This is similar to cinema, where the viewer’s feelings are manipulated through the display of artificial emotions. The question becomes one of reality versus artifice—what we see on the screen is not necessarily a real story, but remains connected to the viewer’s own perceptions and personal experiences.

Viola slowed down the real-time of the video, allowing the viewer to carefully scrutinize each of the actors and the emotions they portray. Many of Viola’s works attempt to engage the viewer with strong emotion that can be interpreted based on personal experience and response. By slowing down time, Viola creates a different experience than our typical encounter with film and focuses our attention on the deliberate intent of the actors within the video. The removal of sound serves to emphasize the measured actions of the figures as well. The viewer is forced to focus on the action, in turn allowing the viewer to concentrate on their emotional response to the video. The background and costume of the characters in the piece are intentionally timeless—again, by creating a video that takes place outside of the past, present, or future, Viola makes it difficult for the viewer to contextualize the figures. Instead, the emphasis becomes about the narrative and the viewer’s individual response.

Viola’s interest in art history is evident. He also draws on meaning and inspiration from the mystical traditions of Zen Buddhism, Christian Mysticism, and Islamic Sufism. He draws on the traditions of Christian iconography, but combines his interest in other religions to create video art objects that present a theme of the universal human experience throughout time. Viola’s video images can be viewed as a new solution to the age-old challenge of conveying the power and complexity of human emotion. Video art may represent the abandonment and deconstruction of traditional boundaries in art represented by painting and sculpture, yet Viola uses this contemporary media to pay homage to the constructs of the past through his many art historical references.

Viola regards art as more than visual objects. He observes, “Art can have a healing function. What is on the screen can become part of the life process, it can seep into your body and you can take these things and use them.” His art is meant to serve “for cultivating knowledge of how to be in the world, for going through life. It is useful for developing a deeper understanding, in a very personal, subjective, private way, of your own experience.”

About the Artist

Bill Viola (born 1951, New York)

One of the things the camera taught me was to see the world, the same world that my eye sees, in its metaphoric, symbolic state. This condition is, in fact, always present, latent in the world around us.

—Bill Viola



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Whether traveling to remote deserts, looking at Old Master paintings, or focusing on family, Bill Viola infuses his art with a spiritually heightened awareness. His imagery is rooted in contemporary life, yet inspired by age-old religious philosophies and visual iconography. As one of the best-known video artists today, his vision has evolved along with the development of video.

In 1960 at age nine, Viola became captain of the T.V. Squad at school. Less than a decade later, he attended Syracuse University's then-experimental "new media" program, where he studied electronic music, video, and painting. As video preparator at Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse (one of the first institutions to make a commitment to video art) and as technical director of production at Art/Tapes/22, a video art studio in Florence, Italy, he met a number of groundbreaking video artists, including Nam June Paik, Bruce Nauman, and Vito Acconci.

Beginning in 1976 Viola traveled extensively to Tunisia, Japan, and Australia (where he met his wife and collaborator, Kira Perov) to videotape and exhibit. With successive museum installations, he experimented with new techniques and viewing formats. Under pressure to create a new work for the 1995 Venice Biennale, Viola produced *The Greeting*, a contemporary interpretation of a painting from the 1500s by Italian artist Pontormo. He used extreme slow motion to reveal nuances of expression and gesture, opening up new expressive territory. He continued in that vein during and after a 1998 guest scholar residency at the Getty Research Institute, producing works he collectively entitled *The Passions*. Viola's best-known videos from his career include *The Passing*, *Nantes Triptych*, *The Reflecting Pool*, *The Crossing*, *Five Angels for the Millennium*, and *The Greeting*. Viola lives and works in Long Beach, California.