

The Problem With Video Art

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Ancestry still matters in art. We interpret and assess new works in the context of their possible sources. So a problem for artists working in new media is how to make connections to the past.

This problem is the essence of "American Landscape Video," the two-part exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Its second installment (through February 19) opened this week.

Organized by the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, "American Landscape Video" presents single works by seven prominent video artists. The first half of the show included Dara Birnbaum, Doug Hall, Mary Lucier and Rita Myers. The current segment features Frank Gillette, Steina Vasulka and Bill Viola.

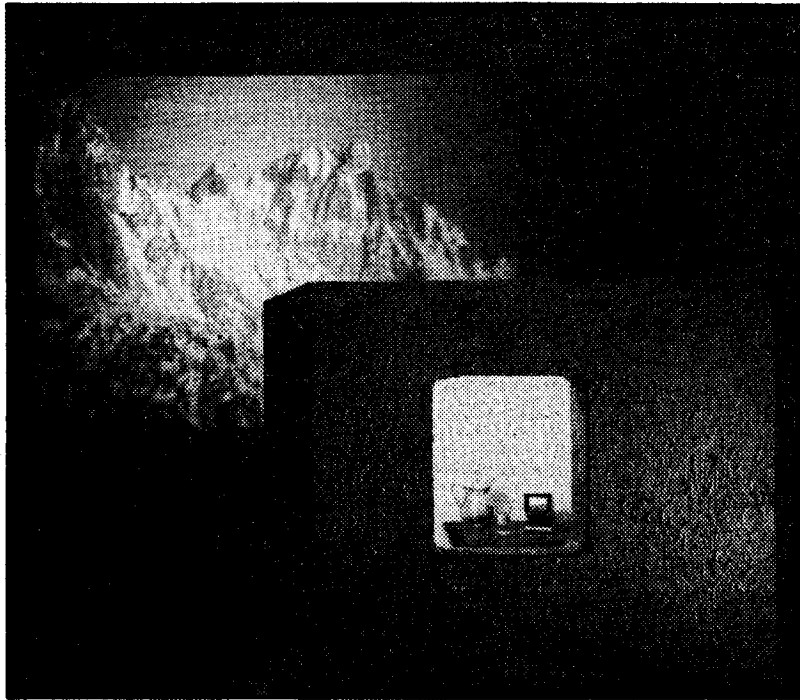
Landscapes on Tape

"Landscape video" means pretty much what you'd expect: taped images of landscapes played on monitors or video projectors. The seven artists involved have devised wildly different ways of composing and displaying their imagery.

The idea of the show is that by shooting landscape, these video artists plug into one of the main traditions of American art.

Nineteenth century American painters had trouble positioning themselves in relation to European art. The New World was barren of the cultural soil from which European painting had grown.

What America had instead was



A scene from Bill Viola's 'Room for St. John of the Cross'

vast, nearly empty terrain, where space and light had a cosmic feel. Painters such as Frederic Church and Martin Johnson Heade learned to describe American vistas in ways that express both sensuous and spiritual ecstasy.

The argument of "American Landscape Video" is that certain video artists are the inheritors of this line of ecstatic sensibility.

I find this notion unconvincing. It ignores irreducible differences between painting and video, as crafts and as visual experience. Video is a process, painting (as viewers encounter it) is not. Technology always makes itself felt in video art, it never does (though technique does)

in painting. Video taps the great fund of junk experience we've all gotten from television, painting, by comparison, is esoteric.

Only one work in "American Landscape Video, Part II" might be described as ecstatic. That is Steina Vasulka's "The West." It is so good it makes you feel sure that video art has a future, whether or not it can muster art historical credentials.

I'd say the same of Bill Viola's best work — the installations "Theater of Memory" (1985) and "The Sleep of Reason" (1988), and the long tape "I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like" (1986). Unfortunately, Viola is represented here by a less impressive piece, "Room for St. John of the

Cross" (1983).

22 Monitors' Worth

Vasulka's piece at SFMMA plays on 22 monitors. They are stacked two high in a semi-circle to get the maximum effect from images of enveloping horizons.

The work is on two channels that alternate checkerboard-fashion on the array of monitors.

Vasulka shot the landscape of New Mexico in a fairly straightforward way, then tinkered electronically with color and framing to get effects whose beauty and sequence are almost indescribable.

A large part of her tape was shot in a spherical mirror. These images combine a fish-eye view of the landscape behind the camera (and the camera itself) and a peripheral view of the landscape beyond the spherical mirror.

Watch a few moments of this double vision played on 22 monitors and you feel like you're hallucinating. When reflected clouds slip over the surface of the mirror, it looks like the Earth itself — with weather boiling over its surface — drifting through a limitless desert. The passages in the spherical mirror reminded me of the color views of Mars taken by NASA's Viking Lander.

Dual Visions

You start seeing everything in more than one way. There are rock formations that look like brains. A serpentine tree trunk against a boulder looks like an aerial view of a river in a gorge.

The editing of the piece is almost as impressive as its light-dazzled imagery. Frames wipe across each other, migrating from one monitor to the next, linking far flung horizons.

After this, Frank Gillette's static six-monitor, six-channel view of the South Texas coast is as dull as last year's car commercials.

Viola's piece is a big, noisy device for contrasting two states of mind. It is an interesting effort, though it doesn't stand up to repeated viewings. (I've seen it in several exhibitions.) Vasulka's "The West" is a show in itself. It is and will remain a milestone in video art.