

AMERICAN
LANDSCAPE
VIDEO

10 NOVEMBER - 1 JANUARY 1989

Rita Myers • Dara Birnbaum • Doug Hall • Mary Lucier

17 JANUARY - 19 FEBRUARY 1989

Frank Gillette • Steina Vasulka • Bill Viola

SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

INTRODUCTION

Video as an art form has a brief but distinguished history and recently has been an especially important medium for defining new directions in which to carry the American landscape tradition. The use of technology and a consideration for audience interaction link video to conceptual art, performance, earthworks, and installation. Video art's relationships to these and more traditional forms of painting and sculpture are united in *American Landscape Video*, an exhibition of seven works that engage specific imagery and the arrangement of objects and raw materials to vivify their themes and emphasize the psychological effects of scale and detail found in the perception of landscape.

In nineteenth-century American landscape paintings, the national sense of identity was intimately linked with its wilderness. Nature was portrayed as an idealized source of moral lessons and inspiration for the observer. Landscape painting of that time was a vehicle for Romantic notions of God and Nature, joined in transcendent spirituality. The video artists represented in this exhibition are now over a century removed from the age of Thomas Cole and Albert Bierstadt, artists who epitomized the American landscape school of painting. One hundred years of cultural history, modern art, and technological innovation have intervened, influencing the work of these seven artists who use natural images as a frame of thematic reference, but approach new sensibilities and perspectives, expressing contemporary apprehensions through video landscape, current technology, and gallery-sized environments.

The installations included in this exhibition were shown earlier this year at The Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh. Organized by Bill Judson, Curator of Film and Video, the show is the first museum-organized exhibition of several separate video installations to be explicitly directed toward a single thematic consideration. Engaging natural landscape imagery in electronic transcriptions of picture and sound, these artists continue a tradition of American art which addresses themes that arise from the study of nature, pursuant of a new message.

WARNING:

High Frequency Radio
Device In Use

*The Terrible Uncertainty of
the Thing Described* contains
a Tesla-coil which emits inter-
mittent blasts of high frequency
radio waves and loud sounds
which could be harmful to
persons with hearing devices
and pacemakers.

RITA MYERS

▣ born in New Jersey, 1947;
lives and works in New York City

The Allure of the Concentric,
1985

4 monitors
¾" videotape, 4 channels,
sound, color
music: Dana McCurdy
duration: 5 minutes

reflecting pool, aluminum towers
and gate, lava rocks, 3 dead
dogwood trees

Collection of the artist

The Allure of the Concentric evokes a mood of introspection. Using a pool of water as the central focus of meditation, Myers recalls the importance of water as a primary Luminist motif to suggest themes of concealment and revelation.

This dream-like installation involves video monitors placed close to the floor that emanate light and imagery, combined with an arrangement of props that represents human ritual, cataclysm, and interaction. The expansive yet exquisite video images of landscape and wildlife on Myers' four monitors imply shards of memory. Placed alongside precise architectural elements and natural forms, the installation is ordered as a series of fragments that become representational in their associative functions.

The Allure of the Concentric is structured, both visually and spatially, as a courtyard and forum for reverie. Expanded from the single drop of water that breaks the surface of a pool into concentric ripples, Myer's environment is conducive to spiritual experiences, recalling the sensation in which contemplation of the landscape stimulates an examination of self.

Produced with support from the New York State Council on the Arts, Media Program; the National Endowment for the Arts, Inter-Arts Program; the Jerome Foundation; and the Artist-in-Residence Program, Harvestworks.

DARA BIRNBAUM

▣ born in New York, 1946;
lives and works in New York City

Will-o'-the-Wisp, 1985

3 monitors
¾" videotape, 3 channels,
sound, color
music: Mike Nolan
duration: image, 4 minutes;
sound, 8 minutes

8 black and white photo panels

Will-o'-the-Wisp is a section from Dara Birnbaum's "Damnation of Faust" series of videotapes and installations begun in 1983 which refer to a passage in the Berlioz opera where Marguerite, Faust's lover, is warned that he will betray her.

This installation presents an image of Marguerite on large photographic panels combined with three video monitors to form a media landscape. Colors shift from the bright green of early spring to browns of late fall to suggest seasonal change and to evoke a strong sense of melancholy through obstructed views and processed imagery, both suspended and flowing.

A continuum of electronically generated sound, brief interludes of melody, and fragments of a spoken

Collection of The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh Museum purchase: Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Milton Fine and the Carnegie International Acquisition Fund, 1986

narrative establish the fleeting traces of emotional experiences to which the work refers. The combination of sound, still, and moving images alternate between purely visual sensation and multi-media communication, a metaphor for the interrelationship between individual and social experience.

Produced with support from The Carnegie Museum of Art.

☞ born in California, 1944; lives and works in San Francisco

The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described, 1987

6 monitors, 1 projector
¾" videotape, 3 channels,
sound, color

principal photography:
Jules Backus
duration: 14 minutes

steel mesh fence, 2 stainless steel
chairs, Tesla-coil, 6 tubular
pedestals

Collection of the artist

DOUG HALL

The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described recalls the nineteenth-century notion of the sublime: the concept that nature's terrifying power triggers spiritual release and fulfillment. Representing nature as a dangerous presence, Hall's astonishing images of turmoil—storms at sea, tornados, forest fires, and electrical storms—are intercut with industrial processes that harness power as merchandise.

In this ominous installation, Hall's arrangement of video imagery and materials associated with a mechanical world refers to conditions of fear and awe. The sculpture consists of a steel fence, over-sized chairs (a surrogate human form for the artist), and electronics. Electricity is used in the service of the video image and is set loose as an undifferentiated electrical charge generated by a Tesla-coil, a crude technology invented in the early twentieth-century by Nikola Tesla, a visionary, inventor, and contemporary of George Westinghouse and Thomas Edison.

Primal landscape, and particularly its sounds, are elements of a universal language for Hall. The signifying potential found within the tumultuous landscape is formulated into sculpture that viscerally communicates a sense of trepidation and threat. The artist emphasizes the relationship between the world that we term "natural" and the one we perceive as our own creation to imply that environmental conditions echo the inner world of human emotion.

Commissioned by The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, with support from the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities, a state agency; the National Endowment for the Arts; and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Video production support from The Contemporary Art

Television (CAT) Fund. Post-production assistance from Bay Area Video Coalition, San Francisco; and Multivision, Inc., Needham, Massachusetts.

MARY LUCIER

□ born in Ohio, 1944;
lives and works in New York City

Wilderness, 1986

7 monitors
¾" videotape, 3 channels,
sound, color
music: Earl Howard
duration: 21 minutes

7 pedestals in a colonnade
Collection of the artist

In the installation *Wilderness*, an explicit tribute to nineteenth-century American painters, Lucier recorded video images at the original sites of the landscape paintings of Thomas Cole, Frederick Church, and Fitz Hugh Lane. Arranged in specific patterns and synchronized sequences of imagery, Lucier's seven video monitors are placed on classical pedestals in ironic reference not only to traditions in other arts, but also to the history of the garden.

With a modern eye and sensibility, Lucier addresses both aesthetic and ecological concerns through a form of temporal narrative and landscape panorama. The work is an allegorical text investigating the American pastoral myth through contemporary technology. Collecting images of nature, industry, and the home, Lucier produces on video the atmosphere and symbolism once sought by painters to involve the relationship between past and present, the mundane and the poetic, the real and ideal.

Commissioned by the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, with funds from the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities, New Works Program. The national tour by the New England Foundation for the Arts, a consortium of the six New England state arts agencies, has been made possible in part by funds from the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities and by the Jessie B. Cox Charitable Trust. Additional funding for Wilderness has been provided by the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation.

FRANK GILLETTE

■ born in New Jersey, 1941;
lives and works in New York City

Aransas, 1978

6 monitors
¾" videotape, 6 channels,
sound, color
duration: approximately
45 minutes

4 pedestals, each approximately
4' high

Collection of the University
Art Museum, University of
California, Berkeley
Gift of Ann Williams Harithas,
Houston, Texas

Named after the coastal region north of Corpus Christi, Texas, where the artist recorded the images and sounds for this installation, *Aransas* consists of six video monitors facing the center of the gallery, arranged singly or in pairs at the four points of the compass. The images on each monitor are distinct, presenting details or delineating the broader configurations of the terrain. Each record of the environment moves at a reflective, thoughtful tempo and the complete work comprises a carefully composed representation of landscape.

In the sixties, Gillette turned from abstract painting to video with a special interest in taxonomy and ecology. The artist saw ecology as a metaphor of psychological rather than physical survival, and taxonomy provided him a way of classifying objects and ideas by aesthetic rather than scientific association. *Aransas*, one of the first works to address issues of landscape in video installation, is a multi-channel contemplation invoking nature as the basis for reflection on the individual's place in the world and, at the same time, illustrates a geometric sensibility found in the structural art of the seventies. *Aransas* is a complex of signs electronically removed from the natural setting to stress that the natural sign is simple, the invented sign compound.

STEINA VASULKA

■ born in Reykjavik, Iceland,
1940; lives and works in Santa Fe,
New Mexico

The West, 1983

16 monitors
¾" videotape, 2 channels,
sound, color
instrumentation and production
assistance: Woody Vasulka
4-channel audio environment:
Woody Vasulka
duration: 30 minutes

Collection of the artist

The West is an electronic landscape based on the American Southwest which plays both harmony and counterpoint to the rich colors and forms of the New Mexican mountains, desert, and architectural remnants. The semi-circular configuration of sixteen video monitors, stacked to emphasize horizon and overlapping movement, envelop the viewer with boundless vistas of western space.

Vasulka recorded the video images in *The West* with a motor driven camera pointed directly into a spherical mirror. This device allows the artist to record on videotape landscape imagery in front of and behind the lens simultaneously, creating a circular area of optically transformed space centered in the otherwise rectangular shape of the video monitor.

The complete layering of space and the electronic manipulation of image characteristic of Vasulka's work is central to her tribute to the powerful landscape. The elegance and spatial complexities of the video medium are explored in Vasulka's installation structure and double panorama. The West is an electronic expression of mood and place, an eloquent resolution of image and form.

Produced by Programs in the Arts of the State University of New York for SUNY/The Arts on Television, with funds from the Rockefeller Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

■ born in New York, 1951;
lives and works in Long Beach,
California

Room for St. John of the Cross,
1983

1 monitor, 1 projector
¾" videotape, 2 channels,
sound, color and black
and white
reading: Francesc Torres

cubicle, table, water glass,
pitcher, earth

Collection of The Museum of
Contemporary Art, Los Angeles;
The El Paso Natural Gas
Company Fund for California Art

BILL VIOLA

Room for St. John of the Cross combines two states of mind in a single work of art, one turbulent and one at peace. Viola's title refers to the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic and poet who was imprisoned by the Inquisition. During his incarceration, St. John (1542–91) wrote profoundly spiritual verse that envisioned soaring over confining walls and mountains during moments of ecstatic communion with God. The roaring wind and gyrating images of mountains in the darkened installation evoke not only St. John's anguish, but also the passion in his heart that sustained and inspired him. The cell in which St. John was held for nine months has been recreated to scale for this installation and contains furnishings and a serene view of a mountain in miniature on a small video monitor suggesting the peace the poet found within himself.

Viola's video landscape extends the artist's established concern for intense meditations achieved by the transformation and skillful manipulation of video recording processes, as well as symbolic relationships between form and content. The incantatory whisper of his ecstatic poems (read in Spanish), which speak of love, ecstasy, and passage through a dark night, reminds the viewer of the dichotomy between body and soul and refers to the triumph of the imagination.

Equipment donated by Polaroid Corporation.