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American Landscape Video
The Electronic Grove

The Carnegie Museum of Art
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
May 7–July 10, 1988

M^{rita} Myers

Introduction

American Landscape Video: The Electronic Grove is an exhibition of seven video installation works by major artists who use video as their medium and America's natural landscape as a central aspect of their subject. Although these works exemplify an emphatically contemporary medium, they also continue a major tradition of American art in addressing themes that arise from nature.

Video as an art form has always had strong connections with work in other media. The use of technology and an interest in audience interaction link video to conceptual art activities such as performance, earthworks, and other installation work. Video art's relationship to the more traditional forms of painting and sculpture becomes especially evident in this exhibition because the works share common themes, specific motifs, and artistic approaches with landscape paintings from the previous century.

In 19th-century landscapes, nature was a rich source of metaphor for artists. America's sense of identity was intimately linked with its wilderness, and this had a profound effect on American cultural and artistic life. Nature was portrayed as an idealized vessel that contained moral lessons and inspiration for the observer, and the landscape paintings became a metaphor for Romantic notions of God and Nature joined in a transcendent spirituality.

The video artists represented in this exhibition are now a century removed from the age of Thomas Cole, Albert Bierstadt and Frederic Church, artists who epitomized the American landscape school of painting. One hundred years of cultural history and modernist art have intervened, and the artists in this exhibition are engaged with issues, both personal and cultural, of our present era. Nevertheless, these video artists use the natural landscape and its impact on the individual as a frame of thematic reference. In this sense, these works of video art provide more than isolated contemporary perspectives presented with modern technology; they can be seen as an integral part of an ongoing American landscape tradition.

The Allure of the Concentric (1985) evokes a mood of introspection and contemplation and recalls the quiet groves and calm lake surfaces of many contemplative 19th-century American landscape paintings. With its mysteriously floating trees and the magical gleam of its architectural elements, this installation is like a recollection or a reverie which floats in and out of consciousness. The images of landscape and wildlife on the four monitors have an almost haiku-like spareness, again suggesting fragments of memory. At the physical and conceptual center of this work is the dark pool--a *reflecting* pool in both senses of the term. Its smooth surface is disturbed from time to time by the expanding ripples from a drop of water which interrupts momentarily the mirror-like reflection. The fragmentary images and reflections closely approximate memory, inviting a closer examination of self in the almost dream-like landscape.

Myers' video installations of the late 1970s often involved furniture-like objects and video images which she abstracted into geometric forms. These abstract forms were like architectural schemas and linguistic sign systems suggesting human ritual and interaction. In *The Allure of the Concentric*, the elements have become much less abstract, much more individualized and representational in their associative functions. At the same time, Myers has constructed a landscape which recalls the smaller, delicately rendered 19th-century American landscape paintings in which the contemplation of the painting also stimulated an examination of self.

mary Lucier

Wilderness (1986) is an explicit tribute to 19th-century American landscape painters. In this work, Mary Lucier not only returns to the theme of man's relationship to nature in a shrinking wilderness, she revisits many of the original sites depicted by great landscape artists like Thomas Cole, Frederic Church, and Fitz Hugh Lane. She presents her images in three separate, precisely edited tapes which are then shown on seven monitors, arranged in sequence in an A/B/A/B/C/B/C pattern. The monitors themselves are placed on ornately carved pedestals, another somewhat ironic reference to more accepted traditions in art.

From her earliest work in video in the early 1970s, and even in previous multi-media performance and sculpture work, Lucier has always been concerned with light as a primary element. In a series of "Dawn Burn" video works in the mid-1970s, she aimed her camera directly at the rising sun, using the bright light to actually damage the vidicon tube as it recorded the line of the sun's trajectory into the sky. In her 1983 *Ohio at Giverny* (exhibited at The Carnegie Museum of Art that same year) Lucier made reference to the treatment of light and color in French Impressionist painting by incorporating into her work video images of the gardens and lily ponds where the painter Claude Monet lived and worked. *Wilderness* also explores the ways in which video renders light and color. Now, however, the reference is to American landscape painters, and *Wilderness* takes up, with a modern eye and sensibility, both the esthetic and ecological concerns of that landscape tradition.

dara Birnbaum

Will-O'-The-Wisp (1985) is a part of Birnbaum's "Damnation of Faust" series of video tapes and installations begun in 1983. The title refers to a passage in the Berlioz opera *La Damnation de Faust* where Marguerite, Faust's lover, is warned that he will betray her. In the center of the black-and-white photographic panels of *Will-O'-The-Wisp* is the image of a female head which we also recognize as the recurring face on the monitors. This figure represents the controlling consciousness of the work, as if she, remembering a relationship as painful as Marguerite's, is the speaker of the fragmentary phrases we hear on the sound track. The images of the younger children then suggest an earlier childhood innocence.

Birnbaum began her work in video during the late 1970s, after she had completed her degrees in architecture (at Carnegie Mellon) and painting. Initially, she used existing, often garish images from Pop culture, especially television sources like "Wonder Woman," "Kojak," computer advertisements, and "P.M. Magazine" to make tapes commenting on cultural clichés about violence and femininity. With the "Damnation of Faust" series she moved to a more intricate style suited to this classical subject. Birnbaum's images of landscape are a key element in *Will-O'-The-Wisp*. The leaves, autumnal red and spring-like yellow/green, carry the symbolism which one associates with those seasons. This foliage also acts, like the Japanese fans which partly inspired this work, as a screen through which we are permitted to glimpse traces of the emotional experience to which the work refers.

Gillette^{frank}

Aransas (1978) is named after the seashore wilderness region north of Corpus Christi, Texas, where the images and sounds were recorded. The installation uses six monitors facing into the gallery, arranged alone and in pairs at the four cardinal points of the compass. Each of the six tapes has its own distinct character, sometimes concentrating on a detailed aspect of nature, sometimes delineating the broader configurations of the region. All of the tapes, however, share a reflective tempo, like a contemplative piece of music. Together, and placed as they are in the gallery, the images gradually reveal a carefully orchestrated representation of that landscape space.

When Gillette turned from abstract painting to video in the late 1960s, he was especially interested in taxonomy and ecology. Gillette saw ecology as a metaphor of human psychological survival, and taxonomy provided him with a way of classifying objects and ideas by esthetic rather than scientific association. These concepts were evident in early video works, such as *Tetragramaton* (1972) and *Quidditas* (1974), as well as *Aransas*. At first encounter it might seem that *Aransas* is conceived as systems of organization without discernible personal inflection. This video work, however, is a highly personal meditation, invoking nature as the basis for reflection on man's place in the world. In this sense *Aransas* lies directly in the tradition of American landscape art.

Vasulka^{steina}

The West (1983) offers an electronic landscape of the American Southwest: the colors of the two channels of material have been manipulated into an orchestration of video hues which play both harmony and counterpoint to the rich colors of the New Mexican mountains, desert, and architectural remnants. The overlapping movement of the images echoes the circular configuration of the monitors which surround the viewer. Many of the images have been recorded with a motor-driven camera looking directly into a spherical mirror, creating, in the center of the rectangular image, a circular area of optically transformed space. From time to time large radio-telescope dishes, icons of modern technology standing in the ancient desert, cross the image in concert with the circular forms of the spherical mirror. The resulting video landscape is both primeval and futuristic.

Born in Iceland, Steina moved to New York in 1965 to pursue her musical career. However, in the early 1970s she and her husband Woody, a Czechoslovakian writer, engineer, and filmmaker, became increasingly interested in video, then just emerging as an art form. In the late 1970s Steina began a series of tapes and installations which she termed "machine vision." In *Allvision* (exhibited at The Carnegie Museum of Art in 1982) and related works she celebrated the elegance and spatial complexities of the video medium through a variety of devices that rotated cameras in front of mirrors, monitors, and other cameras. *The West* clearly evolves from these earlier "machine vision" works. However, the earlier works referred more directly to the electronic medium itself, while *The West* has the landscape of the Southwest as its primary frame of reference. In the tradition of Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Moran, and other 19th-century landscape painters of the American West, Steina has captured the exhilarating grandeur and boundless vistas of Western space.

bill Viola

Room for St. John of the Cross (1983) combines in a single work two very different states of mind, one turbulent and one at peace. The title refers to a 16th-century Spanish mystic and poet who was imprisoned and tortured during the Inquisition. St. John wrote profoundly spiritual poems about soaring over confining walls and mountains during moments of ecstatic communion with God. In the installation, the roaring wind and gyrating images of mountains in the dark room evoke not only the anguish of St. John's imprisonment, but also the wildness in his own heart that refused to be subjugated. The cell in which St. John was held for nine months has been recreated to scale and contains homely furnishings and a peaceful view of a mountain on a small monitor, suggesting the serenity which the saint found within himself. The rhythmic whisper of his ecstatic poems read in Spanish reminds the viewer that only his body, not his soul, was imprisoned.

Since graduating with a painting degree in 1976, Viola has travelled frequently to foreign countries, interested in gathering images and understanding other cultures. Many of his single-channel tapes, made in the last decade, reflect these interests. Some of these have been landscape works, like the painterly *Chott el-Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat)* (1979), with its mysteriously flickering forms abstracted by the heat of the Moroccan desert. While Viola's single-channel tapes have a meditative intensity, his installation works have a more physical, indeed confrontational, presence which this format makes possible. At the heart of both, however, lies a concern with heightened awareness and openness toward inner experiences. In *Room for St. John of the Cross*, landscape is a primary vehicle for those experiences. In 19th-century Romantic landscape paintings, notions of the sublime, a spirituality to be experienced in nature, could be expressed by the natural world in either its quiet and meditative or wild and chaotic aspects. Viola has combined these two aspects of nature to lead the viewer to a deeper layer of awareness.

doug Hall

More than any other work in this exhibition, *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described* (1987) recalls the 19th-century notion of the apocalyptic sublime, the concept that nature in its terrifying power and destructive potential holds spiritual truths. Hall adds a modern dimension to this concept by drawing analogies between awesome powers in nature and comparable forces which man produces. The six monitors and the projected video image in the installation depict forest fires, tornadoes, and storms at sea intercut with industrial flames and errant sparks from high-voltage commercial insulators. Within the gallery itself, an ominous steel fence encloses an actual, awesome demonstration of a physical force: from time to time, a Tesla coil fires an earsplitting electrical discharge at two oversized, stainless steel high-backed chairs. The overwhelming forces of nature thus invade the viewer's space in the gallery, making the terrifying phenomenon an individual experience.

Doug Hall came to video from a background in anthropology as well as the studio arts. During the early 1970s, he was especially active as a performance artist, combining flamboyant theatricality with the appearance of everyday life. In the 1980s Hall turned increasingly to the making of objects and video installations concerned with personas of political power and authority. This was clearly the case in three installations from 1984: *The Tyrant's Last Dream*, *Machinery for the Re-education of a Delinquent Dictator*, and *The Victims' Regret* (exhibited at The Carnegie Museum of Art in 1986). Hall's concern with images of power (as well as with the interaction of theatricality and documentation) is readily apparent in *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described*. Hall's representation of the terrifying aspects of nature evokes the apocalyptic sublime of the large and dramatic "grand opera" landscape paintings by 19th-century artists like Frederic Church and Albert Bierstadt. However, Hall has transformed that 19th-century tradition to reflect 20th-century apprehensions and ironies.

Symposium

Video Landscape: The Electronic Grove

Saturday, May 21

10:00 AM-3:30 PM

Museum of Art Theater

Members: \$10

Nonmembers: \$15

"The Pastoral and Progress: 19th-Century Notions of Landscape and Technology"

Leo Marx, MIT

"Art and Technology: Relationships Between Art and Technology in the 20th Century"

Jack Burnham, University of Maryland

"Fields of Vision: Revived Interest in Landscape Art in America since 1960"

Shelley Rice, New York University

The talks will be followed by a panel discussion with artists Mary Lucier and Doug Hall and Museum of Art Curator of Film and Video William D. Judson.

Lecture Series

Two Video Artists Speak

Wednesday, May 25—Frank Gillette

Wednesday, June 1—Rita Myers

Museum of Art Theater, 7:30 PM

Members: \$6;

Nonmembers: \$10

Individual Lectures

Members: \$4

Nonmembers: \$6

Call 622-3288 for tickets

Catalogue

The catalogue published on the occasion of this exhibition, made possible by a generous grant from the Luce Fund for Scholarship in American Art, a program of The Henry Luce Foundation, Inc., will illustrate the works as installed in this exhibition. This publication, to be available in June, 1988, contains essays by William D. Judson, Barbara Novak, David A. Ross, and John G. Hanhardt, as well as bibliographic and biographical material on the artists.

How to Order

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