

Review

## American Landscape Video

by Valerie Soe

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art recently revived its support for exhibiting video in a big way with Media Department Curator Bob Riley's inaugural show, *American Landscape Video: The Electronic Grove*. The show is both the start of a new commitment to video art and a return to the prominent role the medium once had within the museum's repertoire.

As recently as the early 1980s SFMMA put up significant exhibitions by video-makers, which reflected the active and innovative video community in the Bay Area. However, in the last few years the museum's involvement with video exhibition had

diminished, though video still appeared occasionally at the museum. Robert Riley's appointment as Curator of Media Arts last year signalled a return to a larger role for video art and other non-static mediums, and he has started things off with a bang, bringing this exhibition of several major video installations to the museum as the inaugural show of his tenure. *American Landscape Video: The Electronic Grove* features large-scale pieces by seven



Room for St. John of the Cross, 1983, by Bill Viola

artists working in video and installation, all of whom use the video medium as an integral part of a larger work.

Featured in the first half of the show, which ran through the first of the year, were installations by Dara Birnbaum, Rita Myers, Mary Lucier and Doug Hall; the second portion of the show (which opened January 17) presents works by Bill Viola, Steina Vasulka and Frank Gillette. All of the pieces have as a common thread the exploration of the landscape, either an investigation of video and its relation to nineteenth-century landscape painting or a more general examination of the landscape and its various elements.

The pieces on view in the first part of the show ranged from the contemplative to the explosive, each taking its own distinctive approach to the theme of the show. Rita Myers' "The Allure of the Concentric" (1985) rested four video monitors on four small boulders arranged around a small pool of water, placed in the middle of the space. Three small trees were suspended above the pool, and a gateway and towerlike pillars suggested a private garden or an isolated grove set aside for meditation or prayer. The videotapes depicted scenes from the American Southwest landscape, adding to the sense of removal and remoteness of the piece.

Mary Lucier's "Wilderness" (1986) more directly addressed the thematic connection between landscape painting and video. Lucier videotaped images at the original sites of the paintings of 19th-century American landscape artists, as well as several locations of architectural and environmental decay, drawing a contrast between scenes found in the earlier paintings and her contemporary images. The seven monitors in the piece placed

on pedestals and tree trunks suggested further connections between the work and the landscape.

Dara Birnbaum's "Will-o'-the-Wisp" (1985), featuring three monitors inset into a large photo mural, took manipulated video images of nature and used them to create a moody and evocative piece examining personal concerns. The piece is part of Birnbaum's series "The Damnation of Faust," in which she explores and expands on themes found in the Berlioz opera.

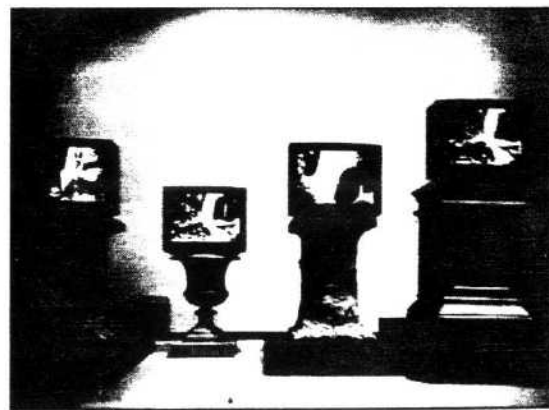
The most dynamic work in the first section of the show was Doug Hall's "The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described" (1987), an examination of the relationship between natural phenomena such as forest fires, tornadoes, and electrical storms, and the unrest of human emotion and experience. A visually striking piece, with the raging storms of the videotape set against a black wall and seen partially through a chain-link fence, the work also had as an added bonus a functional Tesla Coil that artificially created lightning. At various intervals during the piece it ignited one and a half million volts, sending electricity to a pair of steel chairs placed within the installation.

The second half of the show, on view through February 19 continues the theme of landscape and nature within the realm of video art. Frank Gillette's "Aransas" (1978) uses six monitors facing one another, two each on two sides and single monitors on the remaining two sides, with images of nature at close range and in long shot to explore the relationship between the individual and the world at large. Simply arranged and shot, the piece is a quiet meditation on the themes of the exhibit.

Bill Viola's "Room for Saint John of the Cross," (1983) utilizes the contrast in scale between a wall-sized projection monitor and a tiny hand-held television to symbolize the alternation of turbulence and calm found within the state of mind of the imprisoned 16th-century Spanish mystic of the title of the piece. The installation's sparse yet eloquent execution succinctly illustrates the opposing forces found within one individual, as represented by the serenity and the malevolence of the natural environment.

Steina Vasulka's "The West" (1983) is an exhilarating and visually exciting tour de force which combines sophisticated video technology with the grandeur and stark beauty of the American Southwest. Images collected by the artist from her experiences living in that region are manipulated both in-camera, with dizzying circular pans

recorded with a rotating motor-driven camera aimed into a spherical concave mirror, and in post-production, using computer-synched wipes and fades to cross-dissolve between the two channels of the piece. The result is a hypnotic checkerboard, fascinating the viewer with its steady yet constantly altering play of images across the stacked banks of monitors, inducing a sensation of movement and depth in the stationary screens.



Wilderness, 1986, by Mary Lucier

The show is a welcome first effort by Bob Riley and the Media Arts Department, pointing to a further commitment to video and other non-static media in San Francisco. Its high quality and visibility promise more of the same from the newest addition to the SFMMA and to the video community in the Bay Area.

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