Bill Viola: Life After Death at Stavanger Kunstmuseum
30 October 2018 by JEAN MARIE CAREY

It is tempting to suggest that the Stavanger, Norway, with its nearby Iron-Age petroglyphs of Viking longboats, runes, and horses, simultaneously stunning and austere meeting of sheer
cliff faces with the North Sea, and, in perfect synchronism, the recently-opened atelier and skate-wear “pop shop” of Cory Arcangel, was made for a show such as Bill Viola’s Life After Death. But it also fair to say that this powerful exhibition imposes its presence on the airy spaces and vaulted skylights of the Stavanger Kunstmuseum, its physical and thematic gravity permeating the museum’s lakeside park setting.


Life After Death consists of two Viola works extracted from larger multimedia or collaborative projects which have been edited to interact with each other. Divorced from its context as a commentary on Lucas Cranach the Elder’s 1528 diptych Adam
and Eve (created in 2013 and paired with the painting at the Palazzo Strozzi in 2017) Viola’s Man Searching for Immortality / Woman Searching for Eternity converses instead in Stavanger with Tristan’s Ascension (The Sound of a Mountain Under a Waterfall). The latter was originally a 10-minute component of Viola’s four-and-half-hour monumental accompaniment to a 2005 staging of Richard Wagner’s opera Tristan und Isolde (called The Tristan Project) put on by Peter Sellers and Esa-Pekka Salonen, performed in Los Angeles and New York City. Though both Viola and the museum modestly retain the dates of the original recording of the videos, liberated from the Northern Renaissance scolding over The Fall and Wagner’s projection of his own romantic obsessions, Life After Death emerges as a new and singular work that hews in presentation and sensation closely to Viola’s signature concerns with the expansion of time, curiosity about the attributes of livingness, and immersion in contemplative states, enhanced by either sound, or, in the case of Man Searching for Immortality / Woman Searching for Eternity, silence. The double-channel color high definition video is projected against two sarcophagus-sized plates of granite, which, recalling other types of burial markers, are mildly reflective and textured. In each video, an ostensibly old woman and man emerge from the stones (in extreme slow motion, as with Tristan and many of Viola’s other videos) toward us, to appear in full focus. The naked pair begins a granular inspection of their bodies with small, handheld flashlights. The 19-minute videos are carefully choreographed, revealing over the duration that the performers, far from infirm and on death’s doorstep, are lithe, sturdy, even acrobatic. At moments acknowledging both the viewer and each other, the pair eventually recedes, dematerializing into a fizz of graininess. So there is much more to think about here than just a consideration of mortality.

The Stavanger Kunstmuseum is to be massively credited for making such a deep-state take on the videos possible; the theater for the showing was the best environment for such an exhibition I have encountered. Located at the center of the museum, the video installation is staged behind three heavy sets of curtains. Preventing light-and-noise intrusion also seems to discourage visitors from coming and going with the Biennaliesque abandon video art sometimes receives. (In fact, Viola’s work is on the far cinematic end of this genre, rarely displayed on monitors and most often in a normal construal of horizontal and vertical.) It was so quiet during the back-to-back
screenings of Man Searching for Immortality / Woman Searching for Eternity that I could hear my heartbeat, a serious silence that is normally only possible in remote natural settings.

The repositioned Tristan’s Ascension is also a locus for open-ended reflection, articulating philosophical implications through a soundtrack of rushing water of such thunderous pounding that it paradoxically does not encroach too much on the integrity of the concept of mental quietude. The auditory awareness paired with the vision of the figure of Tristan, draped in a gauzy christening gown, rising in sculptural delicacy through a waterfall, tests the capacity of the senses of sight and sound to embody each other. In using granite slabs as a central connecting element in both videos – Tristan arises from one on which his body has been placed – Viola references the discursive stoniness that surrounds crucial questions in our own seeming end times about transcendence, and if death is perhaps not the worst of all possible futures. Viewers of Life After Death who spend an hour with the videos, content in these rare moments of absorption and grace, will of course eventually feel the pull of their own worlds calling them back, but will emerge from within the orbit of this work, able to feel, think, see, and hear with a renewed vigor and intensity.

**Bill Viola: Life After Death at the Stavanger Kunstmuseum, was originally scheduled to close in December 2018; however, the museum recently arranged for an extended loan by Viola, and the exhibition will now extend its run through 22 April 2019.**

Writing by Jean Marie Carey. Photos courtesy of the Bill Viola Studio.

TAGS: ART BLOG, ARTE FUSE, BILL VIOLA, BILL VIOLA: LIFE AFTER DEATH AT STAVANGER KUNSTMUSEUM, CONTEMPORARY ART BLOG, COREY ARCANGEL, LIFE AFTER DEATH, MUSEUM SHOW, STAVANGER, STAVANGER KUNSTMUSEUM

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