

Thinking man's video

Art: Gary Hill's video installations achieve pure thought. By Sheila Farr

According to Hindu philosophers, masculine energy is a completely passive force; it exists as pure thought. The universe would be only an idea in Brahma's mind if it weren't for the vitalizing power of

Gary Hill

Donald Young Gallery
through June

shakti, the female principle. Viewing Gary Hill's two video installations at Donald Young Gallery, it's easy to see why he was attracted to video. Hill is an artist of the mind, a manipulator of concepts. The only objects to be seen are four video monitors on wheeled platforms in *Placing Sense: Sens Placé* and, in *Remarks on Color*, a projector with sound system. The images themselves remain as intangible as pure thought.

Language, as a transmitter of ideas, plays a lead role in Hill's work; but he maintains a post-structuralist's distrust of it, wary of the nebulousness of meaning. His title *Placing Sense: Sens Placé* (the French translates literally as "placed meaning") juggles the significance of the two mirrored phrases until they end up sans *sens* all together. That's the point, I think. On each screen a different image lurches around then noisily thunks into place. There it holds for a few seconds, gradually sliding into focus or just remaining fixed on a small section of a house interior. Then the eye of the camera wrenches loose again, careens around the space, and kathunk! fixes on another detail—a bit of a stairwell, a portion of bookshelves, some clutter in a corner, a confusion of unmade bed linens, a closet wall. We see only details, never the whole picture.

It's like the process of learning language, by which a person defines his or her place in the initial chaos of existence. As the video loops play on (I watched for at least half an hour), the images, which at first seemed entirely random, become familiar, and what was a topsy-turvy jumble begins to be predictable. Then, when the intervals change between focuses, or the screens suddenly go black for a few seconds, we experience the vague anxiety of disrupted routine, of not understanding. But for the

piece to yield anything, a person needs to spend a fair amount of time with it. Since artists began experimenting with video in the '70s, it has gained acceptance, yet it is still an awkward medium. It demands viewers, but makes few concessions to them. Films acknowledge their audience with seating space. A gallery, meant for leisurely browsing, is inhospitable for a prolonged period of watching.

Hill's other installation, the 1994 *Remarks on Color*, is a 43-minute focus on the head and shoulders of Hill's precocious daughter Anastasia (she was 7 at the time) as she reads, or rather phonetically recites, from a theoretical text of the same title by Ludwig Wittgenstein. She is wearing a lavender sleeveless top with white outlined flowers. The book cover is red. As she mouths phrases like "not all color concepts are logically of the same sort," or "more and more shadows do not produce light," I find myself trying to define the color of her hair—not honey, not amber, neither blond nor brown. And what about her lips? It is hard to extract the meaning of words as they are stumblingly pronounced, especially with the whir and crunch of the other installation echoing through the space. Meanwhile, Anastasia is doing her artistic duty: Her mouth is dry, she is scratching her nose, she's taking deep sighs between sentences, her tender shoulders heaving as she struggles with words. On the screen next to her the words appear: "I feel X. I observe X." I feel tired. She looks tired.

Anastasia is playing the role of her father's beleaguered muse, good-naturedly demonstrating the barrenness of the theoretical world as she recites "looking does not teach us anything about the concept of color." Looking at these two installations, I was struck by the brilliance of Hill's mind, but also by the extremity of its self-reflexiveness. He is so unrelentingly cerebral that one wishes at times for a little passionate abandon. He has written "I must become a warrior of self-consciousness and move my body to move my mind to move the words to move my mouth to spin the spur of the moment—imagining the brain closer than the eyes." Such militant self-consciousness leads, eventually, to solipsism. One hopes that, in art and life, consciousness can extend beyond the self. ■