



# **A look at abstract expressionist moving image**

Highway 88 video installation as a case study

Emmaline Ewe

BACHELOR'S THESIS  
May 2023

Bachelor of Media and Arts  
Fine Arts

## **ABSTRACT**

Tampereen ammattikorkeakoulu  
Tampere University of Applied Sciences  
Bachelor of Media and Arts  
Fine Arts

EMMALINE EWE:

A Look at Abstract Expressionist Moving Image  
Highway 88 Video Installation as a Case Study

Bachelor's thesis 31 pages, appendices 1 pages  
May 2023

---

This thesis focused on the subgenre of abstract expressionist moving image. The works of three contemporary moving image artists, Stan Brakhage, Pipilotti Rist and Bill Viola, were analysed to exemplify traits of abstract expressionist video art. Along with this study, a video installation titled Highway 88 was created. The study was conducted to explicate the context in which the moving image artwork was created.

Data for this thesis were collected from a variety of relevant sources such as articles, books, videos, and interviews. Artworks for analysis were sourced from the artists' own websites or YouTube for this study.

The study explored and defined abstract expressionist moving image as an art style along with what artwork this genre constituted of. The study encouraged artists to experiment with an often-overlooked genre by demystifying works in the field showing that abstract expressionist moving image works has its place in the context of fine art.

## CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION .....	4
2	DEFINING ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST MOVING IMAGE .....	6
	2.1 Abstract Expressionism.....	6
	2.2 Moving Image.....	7
	2.2 Abstract Expressionist Moving Image .....	8
3	STAN BRAKHAGE .....	10
	3.1 The Dante Quartet .....	10
	3.2 Summary.....	12
4	PIPILOTTI RIST .....	13
	4.1 Stir Heart, Rinse Heart .....	13
	4.2 Summary.....	15
5	BILL VIOLA.....	16
	5.1 Five Angels for the Millennium .....	16
	5.2 Summary.....	18
6	VIDEO INSTALLATION HIGHWAY 88 .....	19
	6.1 Background.....	20
	6.2 Visuals and editing process .....	21
	6.3 Audio.....	23
	6.4 Themes .....	24
	6.5 Highway 88 and abstract expressionist moving image.....	26
7	CONCLUSIONS.....	27
	REFERENCES .....	30
	APPENDICES.....	32
	Appendix 1. Highway 88 video.....	32

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The written part of my thesis aims to outline the characteristics of abstract expressionist moving image. I achieve this by analysing the genre as whole and using artwork from Stan Brakhage (1933-2003), Pipilotti Rist (b. 1962) and Bill Viola (b. 1951) to complement my research. This creates a theoretical base for my artistic process in which I use knowledge of the genre to create an installation in the style of abstract expressionist moving image. The final artwork is presented along with the working process.

Abstract expressionist moving image is a movement that is not often addressed when referring to art film genres. Often such video works are reduced to terms such as abstract film or experimental moving image. I believe there is merit to exploring moving image works that can be described as an abstract expressionist moving image, and how to define a video work of this nature. Having information available about a genre may inspire artists looking to experiment with a new school of thought, as well as expand horizons of what is possible with the medium of moving image.

Abstract expressionism is a school of thought that was born in the 1940s. Many recognize works of popular artists such as Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) and Mark Rothko (1903-1970). The style emerged as an emotional reaction to the second World War and aims to break boundaries in technical and aesthetic innovations. Spontaneity, abstraction, expression, and colour are hallmarks of this movement, and have paved the way for contemporary abstract artists to express themselves. Personal and philosophical subjects are often at the heart of the school of thought. (Sotheby's 2023.) Moving image can be used to describe various practices covering video, film, and digital images. Technological advances have opened up the scope of what is possible within the realm of moving image with artists continuing to explore and push the boundaries of the medium. (Pimenta 2017.)

Abstract expressionist moving image is a combination of the ethos of abstract expressionism, as well as the medium of moving image. I analyse works by Stan

Brakhage, Pipilotti Rist, and Bill Viola to come to conclusions on the scope of the genre, as well its traits. Stan Brakhage was a prolific experimental filmmaker who has described his work to be a direct expression of his feelings and the connection of the body, mind, and art. (Boaden 2013.) *The Dante Quartet* was a visual culmination of Brakhage's inner states and rendering of sight from behind closed eyes. This was achieved through abstract painterly methods on film. (Danks 2004.) Pipilotti Rist works with video art and multimedia installation. She creates abstract kaleidoscopic projections with the subject of nature, physicality, and psychological planes of existence. (New Museum 2016.) *Stir Heart, Rinse Heart* is a multi-channel video projection work featuring highly saturated close ups of cells and blood with the subject matter of the body and imagination. (SF MoMA 2004.) Bill Viola creates video work concerning water, movement, colour, and the sublime. (Arya 2013.) *Five Angels for the Millennium* is the portrayal of Viola's connection to water and the philosophical elements that come with it.

All three artworks are different in subject matter and levels of abstraction. However, by understanding the artists own viewpoints as well as how abstract expressionist moving image is portrayed in their work, I can better understand the spirit of the genre. I am looking to connect and outline these works and see how each artist creates art that falls under the category of abstract expressionist artwork. By outlining the genre of abstract expressionist moving image and analysing these works, I can come to conclusions on what it means to create a moving image of this discipline both visually and emotionally. By reflecting on my findings, I can apply the ethos to my own artistic process.

## 2 DEFINING ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST MOVING IMAGE

### 2.1 Abstract Expressionism

Abstract expressionism is a school of thought that emerged in 1940s New York. The style values process and improvisation with many artists relying on spontaneity to produce results. The aftermath of the second World War is key to understanding context of the abstract expressionism movement. Wanting to express humanity's dark side brought on by turmoil of the post war world, artists sought new means of creating work of radical substance and denotation. This was often done through introspection and expression of man's connection to the body and nature. (Paul 2004.)

According to The Artist Editorial (2023) some of the most common features of abstract expressionism include

- Large, scaled works
- Artist's perspective
- Inspired by surrealism
- Emotion
- Diversity of colour

Abstract expressionism tends to employ the methods of action painting, the energetic application of paint through a variety of unconventional means, or colour field painting presented in large fields of colour in reductive compositions. The movement encourages spontaneity and expression, as well as the production of technical and aesthetic innovations. (Sotheby's 2023.)



PICTURE 1. Helen Frankenthaler, Riverhead, 1963

Abstract expressionist painter Helen Frankenthaler (1928-2011) used colour field painting to evoke feelings of a panoramic landscape. Like many abstract expressionist painters, Frankenthaler explored nature and self through abstraction.

## 2.2 Moving Image

Moving image is broad a term used to describe multiple practices such as video, film, and moving digital images. Moving image extends to technological supports and artistic forms, projection, 3D rendered or sculptural video. Andy Warhol's (1926-1987) 1965 film-video installation Outer and Inner Space has often been pinpointed as the first moment in moving image history being the earliest record of an artist exhibiting and producing video images. (Pimenta 2017.)



PICTURE 2. Andy Warhol, still from Outer and Inner Space, 1966

In an interview with 11 moving image artists with the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, various filmmakers share their views and experiences with the medium. The interview gives a unique perspective into the possibilities and viewpoints shared within the space of moving image. German filmmaker Wim Wenders (b. 1945) prefers the documentary approach, attracted to serendipity and moments captured in time, while American multimedia artist Laurie Anderson (b. 1947) believes VR opens a world of choices and outcomes. Artists Pipilotti Rist and Ryan Trecartin (b. 1981) share views of freeing media from their square forms into unconventional spaces or sculptural frames. (Louisiana Channel 2019.)

In short, the discipline of moving image within the context of contemporary and fine art is varied and multidimensional. With the birth of new technologies, the artform is constantly evolving and diverging from its roots. The best and simplest way to define moving image is images in motion of a variety of mediums created and displayed with the intent of producing art.

### **2.3 Abstract expressionist moving Image**

Abstract expressionist moving image is the culmination of two fine art forms, abstract expressionism and moving image.

Hermine Freed of Arts Magazine (1974) believes abstract expressionist moving image is much like an abstract expressionist painting rather than a sculptural work in which it is viewed frontally on a flat surface. Viewing or creating moving image artwork in this form creates visuals in where the unknown manifests itself in abstraction and unconscious processes.

Freed's ethos of abstract expressionist moving image still holds true, however with the evolution of technologies and moving image display forms, the discipline has evolved past its 2D form. In present times, abstract expressionist principles may be applied to a variety of different surfaces, spaces, and forms. When the ideas of abstract expressionist art and moving image are combined, then abstract



expressionist moving image calls for video of a spontaneous and improvised nature inspired by colour, emotion, and abstraction. It should be radical, innovative, and most importantly, express the feelings of the artist through the medium of video.

### **3 STAN BRAKHAGE**

Stan Brakhage was a prolific experimental filmmaker of the 20<sup>th</sup> century having made about 400 films throughout his career that began in the early 50's. His moving image works have been compared to that of abstract expressionist paintings, especially with films like *The Dante Quartet* where abstract expressionist techniques such as action painting have been transferred to the medium of video. (Scott 2003.)

Stan Brakhage was regarded as the biggest proponent of abstract expressionist moving image movement. He has described his work to be impressions of his feelings. Brakhage has also repeated the abstract expressionist painting rhetoric that the body, mind, and work were intrinsically tied together. He has also worked with common themes of the art style such as abstraction of nature and its connection to man. (Boaden 2013.)

#### **3.1 The Dante Quartet**

One of the most common motifs Stan Brakhage brought to his work was that of the act of seeing. Regarding this, he once said: "I am the most thorough documentary filmmaker in the world because I document the act of seeing as well as everything that the light brings me," (Artforum 1973). Brakhage had the idea that sight could be separated from our preconceptions of the shape and nature of things, wishing to present vision separate from typical laws of perception. (Scott 2003.) This included the replication of things seen behind the physical eye, such as floaters, specks, blood vessels, and phosphines which are the explosions of colour seen when eyes are rubbed. These visuals were translated through the physical act of manipulating film stock. (Nunn 2017.)

Stan Brakhage manipulated how film could be used and viewed in many ways by scratching, destroying, layering, and using closeups of organic material for movement and ambiguity. In the case of Brakhage's 1987 moving image work, *The Dante Quartet*, the film was crafted painstakingly over the course of 6 years.

Scratches, graphic patterns, and hand painted colour fashioned after abstract expressionist art techniques were layered above fragments of footage shot on various film stock.



PICTURE 3. Stan Brakhage, reel from *The Dante Quartet*, 1987

The *Dante Quartet* was born of Stan Brakhage's lifelong interest in Dante Alighieri's (1265-1321) *Divine Comedy*. It was Brakhage's attempt to depict Dante's stages of hell. Brakhage combined his inner states of thought in relation to the poem and a cinematic rendering of subconscious visuals from behind closed eyes. The moving image was a culmination of the artist's exploration of sight, cinematic representations of Dante's hell, and abstract expressionist painterly methods on film. (Danks 2004.)

The film takes us through a universe of colour and movement. It gives the impression of viewing hundreds of abstract expressionist paintings at once. In the spirit of abstract expressionist moving image, *The Dante Quartet* breaks ground on what can be done in the medium of film. Brakhage's depiction of subconscious sight stimulates imagination within ourselves and broadens our perspective on what can be seen beyond typical perception. Physically, the film evolves through time through degradation of paint and material much like how our closed-eye vision may change with age. The underlying footage can be seen as flashes of what we see before us as we go to close our eyes. In terms of the physical film, that footage only served as a base for the artist to transform into the quintessential work of abstract expressionist moving image that we see today.

### 3.2 Summary

Near the birth of abstract expressionist painting, Stan Brakhage was one of the first artists that created and popularised abstract expressionist moving image. Brakhage experimented with film, pushing the limits of how the medium could be treated. Elements of spontaneity and innovation can be seen throughout every reel of film he has worked on. Dante Quartet is a key example of abstract expressionist moving image, being that the very concept of the film is born of Brakhage's psyche and personal expression. Colours, movement, and emotion are poured into every frame. Abstraction without a clear narrative allows the viewer to perceive the work however they wish. Brakhage infers his own intentions behind the work through the title but invites the viewer to journey through their own hell while viewing the artwork.

## 4 PIPILOTTI RIST

Pipilotti Rist is a Swiss video artist known for being a pioneer of video art and multimedia installations. Her works are often described to be surrealistic, intimate, and abstract. With kaleidoscopic and vibrant projections, Rist fuses nature and technology. She explores psychological and physical planes of existence. Textures and forms of living things often play a role on how she presents her work. (New Museum 2016).

Stylistically, Rist likens her art to music videos. Utilising digital editing techniques to alter the visuals of her moving image work, she tampers with the speed, colour and glitching of the medium itself. She refers to this practice as painting with video, especially with the saturation of colour to express the collective and her own connection with the body and nature. In an interview with the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, she says: "I'm not more colourful than life is." Her views and videos express that sentiment through abstraction and expression. (Louisiana Channel 2016.)

### 4.1 Stir Heart, Rinse Heart

Like Brakhage, Pipilotti Rist also believes in conveying a world through closed eyes. She believes dreams, visions, and the eyes in relation to the body is as important as what we see outwardly. Her interest in body forms and abstracted natural visuals are apparent throughout her work. She likens her exhibitions to a journey through the body, a rushed journey through vessels. (Louisiana Channel 2019.)

Much of her work is emotional and largely feminist in nature, utilising mostly the female figure. Though clear forms are often seen in her moving image work, they are often paired with extreme and abstracted close ups of the body and nature. She uses colour and texture to paint as if it were on a canvas. Rist also plays with the exhibition space, combining sculpture with her video work. This may include

hanging lights that form a kinetic world of moving pixels, or video projected into odd shapes to give them a more organic feel.

Stir Heart, Rinse Heart is a multi-channel abstract expressionist moving image piece created by Rist in 2004. The installation incorporates found objects, like egg cartons or coffee cup lids, that hang on the ceiling to diffuse light. These catch parts of the video, which features highly saturated magnified images of inner body and blood. (SF MoMA 2004.) Rist says this is in relation to how our body rinses our heart every second. The moving image work is also inspired by bio feedback, the act of relaxation where the subject becomes consciously aware of every part of their body to fall asleep. This is also in relation to the world behind closed eyes. (SF MoMA 2004.)



PICTURE 4. Pipilotti Rist, Stir Heart, Rinse Heart, 2004

Though to the viewer it is evident that the imagery is that of our inner body, Rist further abstracts these visuals by oversaturating the colour palette. She also layers other video snippets via green screen, such as hands and abstract particles, to suggest dream like structures and representations of bodily movements. The artist paints with fluid moving images, soft yet erratic strokes of visuals. The piece is emotional and introspective with the subject matter being something that we all share. It is an organic piece of abstract expressionist moving image art.

## 4.2 Summary

Pipilotti Rist is a prime example of a modern abstract expressionist moving image artist. With a career in video art that began in the 80's, Rist experiments in modern editing techniques to alter the way videos are viewed. She heightens the experience of everyday objects with extreme angles, speeds, and colours. Her projection methods also break the boundaries of moving image. Rist pours her personality and views onto film in highly expressive organic detail, radically abstracting subjects such as the body, femininity, and nature. By combining technology and nature, Rist expresses her worldview in a radical yet intimate way.

## **5 BILL VIOLA**

Over Bill Viola's 45-year career, he has been named as one of the most acclaimed video and installation artists. His work is inspired by culture, religion, and art history, exploring themes such as spirituality, birth, life, and death. His artworks express layers of consciousness and human life. Viola uses light and darkness, as well as the elements to encourage viewers to journey through a contemplative and reflective experience. He also often utilises slow motion as part of his editing techniques, the stretches of time abstracting his works and giving them a ponderous nature. Sound and repetition are often found throughout his works, further expressing emotion in his videos. (Amos Rex 2021.)

One of the biggest recurring themes in Viola's work is water. Viola recounts his experience of drowning as a child, expressing feelings of peace and wonder when he was under the water. Astounded by the beauty of that underwater world, water has made its way into almost every aspect of Viola's art. He has also expressed the importance of water to man being that man is made up mostly by water and the historical significance of the element. He also believes this concept of fluidity reaches every part of our lives, which is why he wishes to express his emotional connection to the material in much of his work. (BBC 2013.)

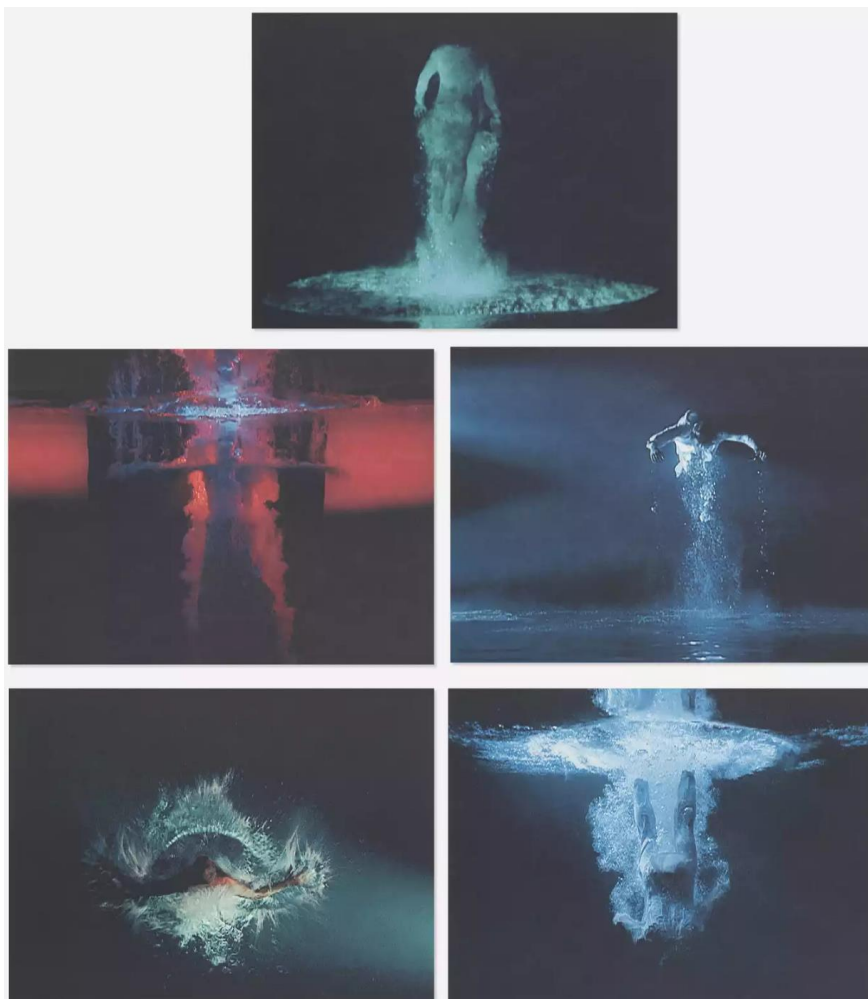
### **5.1 Five Angels for the Millennium**

Bill Viola combines the use of video and technology with the conceptual ideas of Abstract Expressionism. Viola's works are characterized by their highly emotional and contemplative nature, which he achieves through his use of slow motion, repetition, and integration of sound. His art expands the boundaries of traditional art by incorporating the technology of the digital age and creating immersive installations that challenge the viewer's perception of time, space, and consciousness.



Much like artists of all fields, Viola is attracted to the subject of the sublime. Abstract expressionist painters also aligned themselves to this concept. Painter Barnett Newman's interest lied in tying the sublime with contemporary aesthetic concerns through vast fields of colour, while Viola took the concept further by attempting to engulf the viewer entirely.

In 2001 Bill Viola created *Five Angels for the Millennium*. The artwork consists of five video sequences: *Ascending Angel*, *Creation Angel*, *Fire Angel*, *Birth Angel*, and *Departing Angel*. The videos are projected and depict a male figure being submerged and remerged from water. The video is accompanied by water sounds with colours ranging from shades of blue to red. Slow motion as well as various movements and directions are utilised. The videos are life sized and evokes the feeling of the sublime by both appealing to our wonder and fascination of the underwater world, while playing to the viewer's fear of drowning. (Arya 2013.)



PICTURE 5. Bill Viola, prints of *Five Angels for the Millennium*, 2001

Visually, Viola achieves abstraction through extreme movement of water as well as the editing technique of time interpolation. Highly saturated colours also give the sense of a surrealistic world that leaves much to the imagination. Viola paints with the spontaneity of movement in the water, creating shapes organic shapes around his subject. Where Brakhage leans towards the abstract, and Rist lies in between, Bill Viola is an abstract expressionist moving image artist that leans most towards self-expression. He shares his fascination with the sublime and the element of water and all that it represents with the viewer, allowing them to interpret his world with their own eyes.

## **5.2 Summary**

One of the most significant elements of Bill Viola's art that aligns with the abstract expressionist moving image movement is his focus on the inner world of human consciousness and emotions. Viola's works often depict human figures in various stages of physical and emotional transformation, which he uses to create a sense of catharsis in the viewer. Viola's focus is on self-expression, and the evocation of an emotional response from the viewer rather than creating a realistic representation of the world, using abstraction by water, colour, and speed. His art is not just a visual spectacle but an experience that engages the viewer's mind, body, and soul.

## 6 VIDEO INSTALLATION HIGHWAY 88

Highway 88 was an abstract expressionist moving image installation displayed in Gallery Himmelbau under the RAW degree show. The single channel video is 9 minutes and 14 seconds long and was projected on to a black wall via projector, and the soundtrack was played above the seating area with the use of a sound shower. The piece is intended to be viewed as either an installation piece or a digital video displayed on any device. The installation video is available for viewing in Appendix 1.



PICTURE 6. Emmaline Ewe: Highway 88, 2023, installation view in the Raw degree show at Gallery Himmelblau.

## 6.1 Background

In the winter to spring of 2019 before attending university, I worked as a part time teacher in northern Alberta. The school I was teaching in was located 10 hours away from the nearest major city. It resided in a woodland Cree community where I would teach and live amongst native Canadians. In January of 2022, I returned to a neighbouring community to do some more part time work, and then again in the fall to complete my internship. These communities have one small shop, a school, medical centre, and a small building for community administration. The rest is forest and trailer homes.

In between those two visits, I would travel multiple times through Highway 88, the bicentennial highway that connects Alberta's north and south for holiday visits to the city, or to leave and enter the country. The stretch of road is long and often deserted. Driving in the winter was treacherous and dark, while driving in the spring brought a slew of mud on unpaved roads nearing the reservation. Sometimes the road offered beautiful natural views, while most of the trip was desolate and depressing. Farmlands and forests lined the road, and the further north I went the more eerie the landscapes became.

The very first time I travelled along the highway, the experience was frightening and uncertain. In the dark and dead of winter, I made my way further up the road and with each kilometre I passed, I knew return would be more out of my reach than before. I knew close to nothing at the time, and arriving at the community was a culture shock. Even after acclimating to the environment of my workplace, returning to the road was always a subject of either dread or excitement. Dread would arise when I would begin my drive up north because I knew return would be difficult. I was also making my way to a place of complicated history and a community where, no matter how hard I tried I could never truly be accepted at. Excitement would be a primary emotion upon return because it meant freedom and civilization, a landscape that is familiar.

## 6.2 Visuals and editing process

On my final drive north in the early fall of 2022, I recorded footage of my drive with the intention of turning the experience into a moving image piece. I aimed to capture a casual view of what I saw, trusting that the editing process would help me take the narrative further. Like with most of my video work, the final product is only realised during the editing process. I lay loose guidelines on the source material and structure of the video while relying on my intuition to abstract and complete the narrative through colour, speed, and video manipulation.



PICTURE 7. PICTURE 6. Emmaline Ewe: Highway 88, 2023, still from source footage



PICTURE 8. Emmaline Ewe: Highway 88, 2023, still from the Raw degree show at Gallery Himmelblau.

PICTURE 7 and 8 display footage before and after it was edited. PICTURE 7 was a short video taken over halfway through the drive as the sun was beginning to set. A truck drives by and then a single car followed by an empty stretch of road. The landscape is empty and doesn't offer much. To anyone viewing the source footage, the video may seem depressing with much of the landscape barren from the cold weather. The editing process aimed to highlight the discomfort and desolation with the experience in that single clip. I juxtapose the dead and colourless land with highly saturated inverted colours, adding chromatic aberration to thicken the edges of dead trees and give them more colour. I warped the edges of the video to give the sense that the road expanded beyond the viewers eyes like looking through a fishbowl. On one trip to the city, I flew on a propellor plane instead of driving, and overlaid the footage of the land from above in the middle of the screen during some sections to give a view of how barren the land was. Finally, I overlaid a close-up video of my bloody spit taken from when I was ill on top of the video with the aim of applying a natural humanistic element to the very industrial source footage. The final touch was to slow every bit of footage down. The result can be seen in PICTURE 8.

One technique that was used on every single clip was to dramatically lower the speed of every bit of footage. The slowed down footage worked with the video in the sense that it further conveyed the arduous task of driving down stretches of barren road for a great length of time. Every clip was also oversaturated or manipulated in some way to dramatically alter the colour world of the source footage. This was done to drag the viewer out of the known world. Overlays were used very often too, to alter the landscape where source footage would be less recognizable.

Many of the editing techniques were inspired by other abstract expressionist moving image artist such as the ones mentioned in this thesis. I took Stan Brakhage's ideas of dramatically altering the source footage by using overlays, Pipilotti Rist's use of oversaturation and Bill Viola's slowing down of time to achieve the final look. I transferred all these concepts onto own editing software and put a personal spin on them. Overall, the visuals turned out to be highly colourful, kinetic, and psychedelic. The source material is still visible but through heavy editing, the landscape is totally altered.

### 6.3 Audio

Audio isn't necessary for an abstract expressionist moving image artwork to belong to the genre. It is the artist's choice if they choose to include it or not, and how it relates to the work. Stan Brakhage, in *The Dante Quartet* and other works often didn't include audio as he believed the clicking of film reels served as a suitable soundtrack for his art. (Danks 2004.) Pipilotti Rist has a musical background, once belonging in a band, which is why her works often include music. (Guggenheim n.d.) Finally, Bill Viola chooses the natural sounds of water as a soundtrack for his work believing it would add to the immersive experience of the viewer. (BBC 2013.)

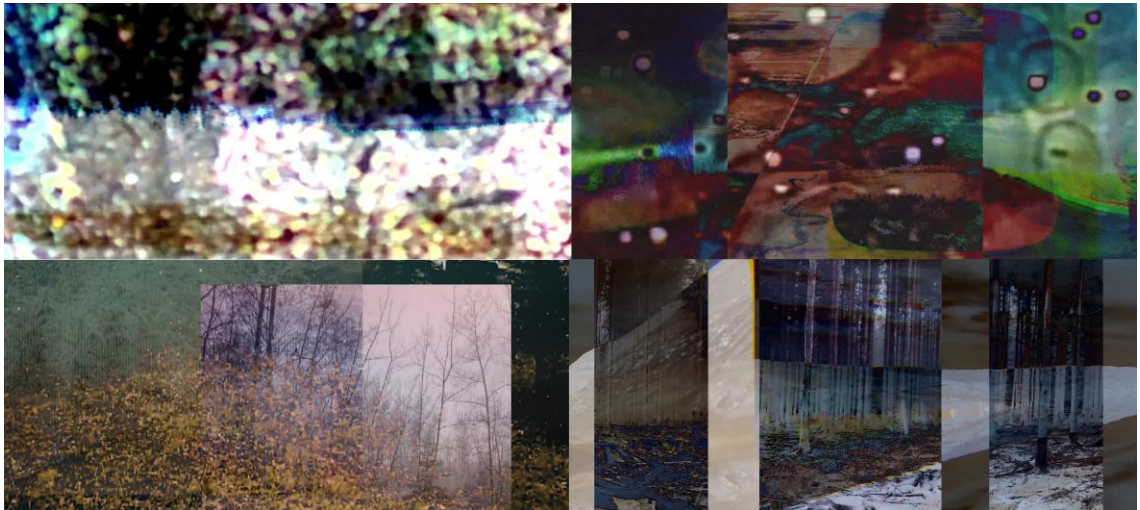
I chose to soundtrack my work due to my own musical background. I have limited experience in digital music creation; however, I used this opportunity to experiment and learn new skills in digital music production. Knowing I was going to use a soundtrack to complete my artwork, I recorded various field sounds to add to my work. I recorded sounds of the car driving along the road to provide a backdrop for the rest of the soundtrack to rest on. The clap-like noises that occur throughout the moving image work are sounds of a car tire rolling over a manhole treated with rapid reverb. I recorded the sound once in the city and used it in rhythmic intervals to break up the soundtrack. The base melody is that of a guitar being wrongly tuned. I recorded this for over nine minutes. The recording was then modulated beyond recognition with multiple filters and reverb. I layered the melody with various sample synth sounds that were treated and then reversed to add tension.

The final addition to the soundtrack was a voice recording. Sometime in the autumn of 2022 while I was working in northern Alberta, the community chief gathered the students and teachers to talk about tradition and native culture. I was granted permission to record and use this in an artwork. I processed this speech by chopping up segments, treating, reversing, and adding rapid reverb to the recording until it became almost unrecognizable. In the final product, the bits of speech echo over the soundtrack. They can only be caught in moments of silence and fill the gaps of the expansive sound work.

## 6.4 Themes

At the time of recording, I wasn't aware of it, but every piece of footage had an emotion attached to it. Every trip through Highway 88 is highly emotional and reflective. There is nothing but paved road and the repetitive landscapes attached to it, leaving me alone with my thoughts and emotions on the experience.

During the process of making the video, I reflected on my connection to the landscape and what it meant to me. I conveyed this through the visuals, editing and audio. When I went through the footage, it started to make sense to me as to what clips belonged together when overlaid, or how to treat a certain section to convey my own emotional attachment to that particular area. There are 10 distinct segments in the 9-minute video. Each segment follows a visual and emotional narrative.



PICTURE 9. Emmaline Ewe: Highway 88, 2023, multiple stills from the Raw degree show at Gallery Himmelblau.

The first theme is nature. The top left of PICTURE 9 shows the opening shot of the moving image work. It depicts an inverted view of a forest from the side of the road overlaid in fractals. These fractals occur throughout the piece very often and it is the most used overlay in the video work. I use it to convey a sense of confusion and mystery, and to replicate extreme imperfections in vision. This footage was taken as the sun was setting and the landscape felt very mysterious at the time. The top right of the image depicts nature as it is barren and wasted by

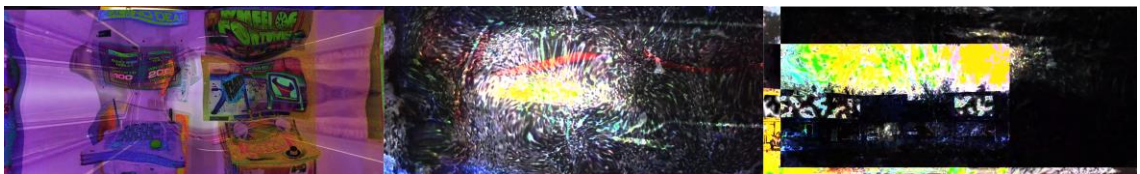


farmland and industrialisation. I overlaid this with bodily fluids due to an illness to communicate disgust with the landscape. The bottom two stills depict nature and road coexisting beautifully in amongst the frost. These segments communicate my feelings of attempting to appreciate landscapes as I see them.



PICTURE 10. Emmaline Ewe: Highway 88, 2023, multiple stills from the Raw degree show at Gallery Himmelblau.

The next theme is the daytime sun. I overlay the sun over segments of road that I felt happy driving through. This includes the large bridge depicted in the left and right stills from PICTURE 10. In the middle image, the sun is overlaid over a car park and street views in the city. In each of these segments, I was close to civilization, and familiar ground which is why I edited these scenes with a lighter motif.



PICTURE 11. Emmaline Ewe: Highway 88, 2023, multiple stills from the Raw degree show at Gallery Himmelblau.

The final theme is the midnight sun, or perverted light. In the left still of PICTURE 11, I manipulate video of the road to give it a moon in the centre. The midnight sun represents uncertainty and anxiety. The moon road is transformed with highly saturated disco-like colours overlaid with game machines from a run-down street side parlour. The middle still shows the never-ending bridge. Unlike the bridge from PICTURE 10, this bridge is the last bridge I cross before arriving up north. It is dark almost every time I arrive here, and the midnight sun appears in the form of headlights from another car. The fractals return conveying tiredness, mystery and confusion. Finally, on the right side of PICTURE 11, we see a roadside strip mall. The area is tiny and depressing. Highly industrial and ugly. I overlaid a

zoomed in video of the moon to juxtapose the lights emanating from shop lights with have been covered with computer generated fractals.

Overall main themes of nature, daytime sun and midnight sun separate segments of the installation piece and convey my emotions on certain areas of the journey. Each scene and segments are heavily to heighten my personal view on the footage, and to share these emotions with the viewer.

### **6.5 Highway 88 and abstract expressionist moving image**

By researching abstract expressionist moving image as an art form and analysing the works of Stan Brakhage, Pipilotti Rist and Bill Viola, I was able to bring a perspective to the creation of Highway 88. I set out to create a moving image work that would fit into the discipline and hopefully get viewers interested in exploring works of a similar breadth, or perhaps make their own abstract expressionist moving image work. I believe my research informed me on the background, ethos, and style that my artwork should follow to be considered an abstract expressionist moving image work.

Highway 88 is an abstract expressionist moving image work due to a multitude of reasons. Firstly, abstraction is achieved by digital manipulation through the use of overlays and time remapping. The original footage is at times, unrecognizable, or given movement that differs from its initial state. Radical colour correction alters the visual landscape and gives each scene a heightened perception of reality using unnatural palettes. Emotion and personal expression are also a large part of the work. The stretch of road that was recorded holds a personal significance, and the footage is altered to heighten that sense of feeling. The body and nature are themes that make an appearance in Highway 88.

The audio, though not necessary to a work of this genre, informs the themes apparent in the moving image artwork. Lastly, the source footage as well as much of the editing process is radical and improvised. Footage is low definition and captured on the fly whenever landscapes stuck out to me. I knew intrinsically when a segment of footage should be shot by following my personal reaction to

seeing an area. This method is akin to that of Stan Brakhage or Pipilotti Rist who capture their video serendipitously or by using found footage. Overall, I believe self-expression through abstraction was achieved through the use of moving image which is what the art form calls for.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

The aim of my research was to define abstract expressionist moving image artwork. I used definitions of abstract expressionism and moving image to break down the two components, and then explained the genre. I analysed the works of Stan Brakhage, Pipilotti Rist and Bill Viola. Each artist came from a different time and perspective, and each artist brought their own version of abstract expressionist moving image to the table.

The abstract expressionist moving image can vary visually as seen by the 3 artists analysed in this thesis, however each of them share common features in their work. Brakhage is the most classic artist in the field, in the sense that his artwork invokes a painterly feeling akin to a moving abstract expressionist piece. The Dante Quartet is highly abstract, but still expresses his inner thoughts and perceptions of the world. Brakhage also challenges the medium of moving image by manipulating film itself. Rist lies somewhere in between. Stir Heart, Rinse Heart is colourful and can be compared to the paintings of many feminists abstract expressionist artists. Her artwork is abstract and highly intimate, but clear views of figures can still be seen, and a storyline is clearer. She pushes the boundaries of video by sculpting projection while manipulating colour and magnification. Her work is deeply personal, expressing dreams, nature, and the body. Lastly Viola tackles abstract expressionist moving image in the relatively least abstract way as compared to Brakhage and Viola. However, Five Angels for the Millennium pushes the medium by playing with frame rate and perspective. He still uses water and colour to evoke a sense of abstraction. What categorises him as an abstract expressionist moving image artist is his highly expressionist approach to the format. He includes many personal themes, as well as the most personal visual and conceptual theme of water.

By examining the theme as well as the artworks of Brakhage, Rist and Viola, I was able to inform aesthetic and conceptual decisions during the making of Highway 88. By exploring the genre, I learned new techniques and stylistic choices when approaching moving image art. The research heightened my interest in abstract expressionist moving image, encouraging me to explore it further in the

future. I often veer towards abstraction and moving image, but often ignore expressionism. Tackling a personal subject matter while reflecting on my experiences during the editing process allows me to expand my horizons when it comes to creating art.

According to feedback on Highway 88, I received positive affirmation on the artwork and the goals I set for myself. My moving image piece was likened to that of Stan Brakhage, and viewers commented on the abstract nature of the work while letting me know that the work also managed to evoke emotions and personal interpretations. Overall, Highway 88 was received well by audiences, and I feel successful in creating work worthy belonging in the field of abstract expressionist moving image.

The genre of abstract expressionist moving image is not highly discussed in the field, but it is there and waiting to be explored. I hope to create more artworks of this nature in the future and explore ways I can express myself through this art form.

## REFERENCES

- Amos Rex. 2021. Bill Viola: Inner Journey. Amosrex.fi. Read 21.5.2023. <https://amosrex.fi/en/exhibitions/bill-viola/>
- Arya, R. 2013. Bill Viola and the Sublime. Tate Research Publication. Read 23.5.2023. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/rina-arya-bill-viola-and-the-sublime-r1141441>
- BBC & Arts Council England. 2013. Bill Viola, The Dreamers. Blain Southern. Watched 22.5.2023. <https://youtu.be/tGNSyDI2NWo>
- Boaden, J. 2013. Revisiting Brakhage 4: Abstract Expressionism, Nature and the Radical Aspiration of Film. Lux. Read 24.3.2023. <https://lux.org.uk/revisiting-brakhage-4-abstract-expressionism-nature-radical-aspiration-film/>
- Danks, A. 2004. Across the Universe: Stan Brakhage's The Dante Quartet. Senses of Cinema. Read 25.3.2023. [http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2004/cteq/dante\\_quartet/](http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2004/cteq/dante_quartet/)
- Frampton, H. 1973. Stan and Jane Brakhage Talking. Artforum, 79.
- Freed, H. 1974. Video and Abstract Expressionism. Arts Magazine, 67.
- Guggenheim Museum. N.D. Pipilotti Rist. Guggenheim.org. Read 27.5.2023. <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/pipilotti-rist>
- Louisiana Channel. 2016. Pipilotti Rist Interview: Color is Dangerous. Louisiana Museum of Modern Art. Watched 3.5.2023. <https://youtu.be/NdLuwX2uRTM>
- Louisiana Channel. 2019. 11 Artists Interview: Working with Moving Images. Louisiana Museum of Modern Art. Watched 20.3.2023. [https://youtu.be/3aENk32qk\\_M](https://youtu.be/3aENk32qk_M)
- Louisiana Channel. 2019. Pipilotti Rist Interview: Freeing the Wonderlight. Louisiana Museum of Modern Art. Watched 3.5.2023. <https://youtu.be/VjmmAzS63H8>
- New Museum. 2016. Pipilotti Rist: Pixel Forst. Newmuseum.org. Read 2.5.2023. <https://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/pipilotti-rist-pixel-forest>
- Nunn, E. 2017. Stan Brakhage | The Untutored Eye. Alpha-Alpaca-Pack. Watched 23.3.2023. <https://youtu.be/-3rSP3-iWvs>
- Paul, S. 2004. Abstract Expressionism. Department of Education, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Read 27.4.2023. [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/abex/hd\\_abex.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/abex/hd_abex.htm)
- Pimenta, J. 2017. The Medium as Process: Moving Image in Contemporary Art. Doctoral dissertation. Harvard University, Graduate School of Arts & Sciences.

San Francisco Museum of Modern art. 2004. Pipilotti Rist: Our hearts are “rinsed” every second. SFMoMA.org. Watched 4.5.2023.  
<https://www.sfmoma.org/watch/pipilotti-rist-our-hearts-are-rinsed-every-second/>

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. 2004. Stir Heart, Rinse Heart/ Pipilotti Rist. SFMoMA.org. Read 4.5.2023. <https://www.sfmoma.org/exhibition/stir-heart-rinse-heart/>

Scott, A. O. 2003. Stan Brakhage, Avant-Garde Filmmaker, Is Dead at 70. The New York Times. Read 24.3.2023. <https://www.ny-times.com/2003/03/12/arts/stan-brakhage-avant-garde-filmmaker-is-dead-at-70.html>

Sotheby's. 2023. Abstract Expressionism. Sothebys.com. Read 15.3.2023.  
<https://www.sothebys.com/en/art-movements/abstract-expressionism>

The Artist Editorial. 2023. What Is Abstract Expressionism? – Expression and Vitality Over Perfection. The Artist. Read 31.5.2023. <https://www.theartist.me/art/abstract-expressionism-definition/>

## PICTURES

PICTURE 1. Helen Frankenthaler, Riverhead, 1963  
<https://awarewomenartists.com/en/magazine/helen-frankenthaler-le-triomphe-de-la-couleur/>  
 Retrieved on 16.3.2023

PICTURE 2. Andy Warhol, still from Outer and Inner Space, 1966  
<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/321332>  
 Retrieved on 16.3.2023

PICTURE 3. Stan Brakhage, reel from The Dante Quartet, 1987  
<https://glasstire.com/2013/07/19/large-scale-experimental-films-on-35mm/>  
 Retrieved on 24.03.2023

PICTURE 4. Pipilotti Rist, Stir Heart, Rinse Heart, 2004  
<https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/pipilotti-rist-stir-heart-rinse-heart-2004/VAGqujkOxeTkyg?hl=en-GB>  
 Retrieved on 4.5.2023

PICTURE 5. Bill Viola, prints of Five Angels for the Millennium, 2001  
<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/bill-viola-five-angels-for-the-millennium-portfolio>  
 Retrieved on 23.5.2023

## APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Highway 88 video

<https://youtu.be/OLDn3hrvjvI>