More than 35 years ago, Bill Viola joined the contemporary art world with a new kind of artistic expression: electronic images and sounds that explored themes of love, death and rebirth. Today, the title “video artist” could be claimed by any kid with a camera, but the label rightfully belongs to Viola, who harnessed the potential of high-definition technology to produce evocative and startling snippets of video for museums and installations.


His latest honor is the Eugene McDermott Award in the Arts, given by MIT’s Council for the Arts, which brings a $75,000 stipend and a chance to spend a weeklong residency at MIT. Viola could be seen rushing through the corridors of MIT, wearing a bulging backpack that helped him blend in with the student and faculty. While admitting he is “a very concrete way how changing a land surface will alter its microclimate. Explains Ishii, “It bridges the gap between the digital world and the physical world.”

Viola is pleased at how the lab has turned touch into a computer interface. “I think Hiroshi is on to something truly radical,” he says. “Most people don’t quite believe it, and they don’t quite understand it. But is soon engaged by the objects in the Tangible Media Lab and the work of Hiroshi Ishii, the associate director of the Media Lab and the Muriel R. Cooper Professor of Media Arts and Sciences. The lab has created perfume bottles that are “filled” with music. Pulling a stopper out of a bottle triggers a riff of classic music or jazz. “How did you get those musicians into those little bottles?” Viola asks, with only a hint of smile. Actually, the bottles utilize a seemingly invisible interface that Ishii believes could be introduced into household objects. Viola opens another bottle, which is silent — a glitch, Media Arts and Science graduate student Jamie Zigelbaum explains, adding, “The musicians got out.”

Moving to another area, Viola runs his fingers through the fine gravel of what looks like a wired sandbox. This is “Sand-Scape,” an interface for designing landscapes through computational simulations. A computer projects contour lines representing wind and shadows onto the sand’s surface. As Viola manipulates the sand, the projected lines change, illustrating in a very concrete way how changing a land surface will alter its microclimate. Explains Ishii, “It bridges the gap between the digital world and the physical world.”

Viola expresses his worries that technology has allowed photographers to alter images too much. People tend to believe a photograph reflects reality unlike, say, a painting, yet photos may be no more real than any other form of artwork, he says. Still, both he and Durand agree that the popularity of programs like Photoshop have taught the public not to accept all images at face value.

Viola leaves Durand’s office reluctantly but is soon engaged by the objects in the Tangible Media Lab and the work of Hiroshi Ishii, the associate director of the Media Lab and the Muriel R. Cooper Professor of Media Arts and Sciences. The lab has created perfume bottles that are “filled” with music. Pulling a stopper out of a bottle triggers a riff of classic music or jazz. “How did you get those musicians into those little bottles?” Viola asks, with only a hint of smile. Actually, the bottles utilize a seemingly invisible interface that Ishii believes could be introduced into household objects. Viola opens another bottle, which is silent — a glitch, Media Arts and Science graduate student Jamie Zigelbaum explains, adding, “The musicians got out.”

Moving to another area, Viola runs his fingers through the fine gravel of what looks like a wired sandbox. This is “Sand-Scape,” an interface for designing landscapes through computational simulations. A computer projects contour lines representing wind and shadows onto the sand’s surface. As Viola manipulates the sand, the projected lines change, illustrating in a very concrete way how changing a land surface will alter its microclimate. Explains Ishii, “It bridges the gap between the digital world and the physical world.”

Viola is pleased at how the lab has turned touch into a computer interface. “I think Hiroshi is on to something extremely powerful,” he says. “The average person — certainly not the people who work here — has a mistrust of technology. If you can’t see it, if you can’t touch it, they don’t quite believe it, and they don’t quite trust it.”

By the end of the residency, Viola — like so many visitors to MIT — says he has seen the future. But he is not sure all of it works. Once, he says, he was like other MIT students, eager to use the latest imaging technology. “Now, I tend to talk a lot less about technology and a lot more about the use of that technology, which ultimately is all about human moral, ethical and spiritual decisions.”