

# We, the Oracle

## Seven Prophecies at Long Beach Museum of Art

BY ROBERT PAYNE

Prophecy nowadays is rarely taken seriously. The most conspicuous predictions of the future, those proclaiming some supernatural knowledge of things to come, tend to dwell either on astrology or biblical doomsaying. One can easily write off augury as just another attempt to construct the future—and our lives—as a coherent, dramatic Hollywood narrative supporting the predispositions of our ideology. But Stuart Bender and Angelo Funicelli's new video installation, *Seven Prophecies*, now on view at the Long Beach Museum of Art, urges us to think again. Bender and Funicelli aren't immediately interested in the accuracy of divination. Instead, they investigate the interplay between fragmentary oracular sayings and the inferences of the audience.

The installation begins with the viewer's journey through a narrow, winding hallway that empties into the "oracle room." The atmosphere of the closed, dark chamber evokes the sanctity of a chapel. There, a video monitor radiates its cathode rays from the opposite wall. An altar-like railing divides the viewer from the monitor, and upon the railing buttons glow with the titles of the seven prophecies: *The Might of Nations*, *The Bonds of Kinship*, *The Eye of the Storm*, *The Day of Judgment*, *The Balance of Power*, *The Ringing of Changes* and *The Race of Men*. By pushing a button the viewer may choose which

five-minute video prophecy will be screened. All seven blend intriguing imagery with bewildering narration (read by Nancy Buchanan and Douglas Wichert). Bender's plentiful imagery and Funicelli's minimalist music are linked by the character of the Sibyl (sung by soprano Mary Daval) whose floating face vocalizes the old prophecies, fragments of the future ranging from the Old Testament to Black Elk.

Prophecy frequently implies a specifically supernatural knowledge of the future channeled through the human prophet, so *Seven Prophecies* unavoidably confronts concepts of the divine. The religious ambience of the "oracle room" reverberates in the ethereal image of the Sibyl. Because she opens each video reverently elevated in a tableau the artists call the "altar room," the Sibyl clearly evokes prophecy's religious ties. But although the installation goes to great lengths to establish a mystical or religious viewing environment, the videos proceed to demolish any narrative authority that might endow the prophecies with a religious aura: riddles of the future mingle with voices recollecting bygone events, and found footage from decades past is layered upon Bender's recent video images. Past and future converge in the viewer's present.

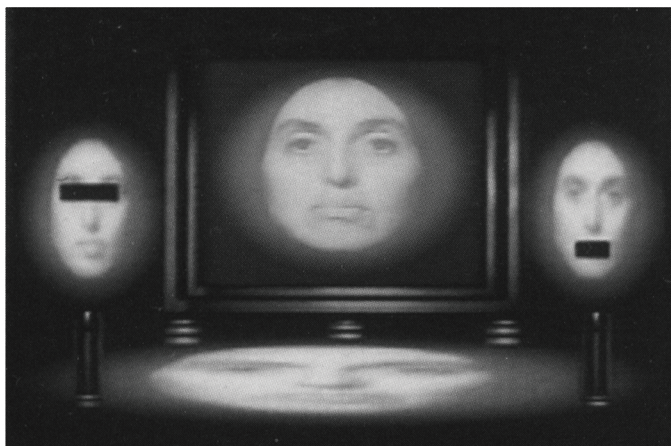
*Seven Prophecies* reminds us how closely our perceptions of time are bound to our perceptions of narrative, how our sense of duration is wedded to memories

of the past and prospects for the future. The concept of prophecy as a linear progression of unavoidable events conveniently confirms the passage of human life as a one-dimensional storyline. But *Seven Prophecies* defiantly collapses past and future, memory and augury, into intersecting planes of coexistence. The synthesis of these purportedly oppositional realms yields no dramatic conclusions, since this would also confirm the linear concept of prophecy that Bender and Funicelli work against. Instead, the undulations of sound and image intimate new levels of perception and audience activity unconstrained by the linear narrative.

Rather than accusing enigmatic augury of swindling the spectator, *Seven Prophecies* delights in the fluidity between the ambiguous premonitions and the viewer's subjectivity, which is crucial to create meaning. Instead of confirming an incontrovertible concept of divinity, the installation returns us to questions of time and perception: Where does the prophetic voice exist within time? Is the narrating perspective completely set apart from the passage of hours as perceived by the present-bound human? What do these strange voices and images have to do with my life and experiences?

By redefining prophecy as the unfixed flow of interpretation, Bender and Funicelli reassess the powerful control over the future traditionally assigned to an omniscient deity—and they attribute it to the viewer. Because our own perceptions and actions shape the future, *Seven Prophecies* intimates that we each share the ability to interpret and thus control events to come. The power of prophecy sings in us all. ■

*Seven Prophecies* by Stuart Bender and Angelo Funicelli through April 29 at Long Beach Museum of Art, 2300 East Ocean Blvd., Long Beach.



Stuart Bender and Angelo Funicelli, *Seven Prophecies* (video detail), 1990, video installation, at Long Beach Museum of Art, Long Beach.

**Artweek**

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