



Jake Gyllenhaal wears Boss shirt, \$175, and pants, \$1,095 (sold as a suit), hugoboss.com.

## Jake Gyllenhaal: In Deep

No playing it safe for the Hollywood darling. Jake Gyllenhaal is plunging into uncharted territory—starting with this collaboration with the video artist Bill Viola.

November 20, 2014 8:00 AM | by [Lynn Hirschberg](#)

Photography by [Bill Viola](#)  
Styled by [Patrick Mackie](#)

“I like the feeling of walking into a place and not knowing what’s going to happen,” Jake Gyllenhaal said as he entered the artist Bill Viola’s studio in Long Beach, California, on a clear day in early fall. He was wearing loose khaki cargo pants and a black T-shirt, and he was with his father, Stephen, who was one of his first directors. Gyllenhaal, who is 33 and lives in downtown Manhattan, grew up in Los Angeles and began acting in plays when he was a student at the prep school Harvard-Westlake. He landed his first major film role at 15, in *October Sky*, and from that point on was considered to be an emerging leading man. For a while he went along with that notion, starring in blockbusters like *The Day After Tomorrow*; but, beginning in 2005, with Ang Lee’s *Brokeback Mountain*—for which he received a best supporting actor Oscar nomination for his heartbreaking portrayal of a cowboy in love with another man—Gyllenhaal has gravitated toward offbeat, less “heroic” characters. In his latest film, *Nightcrawler*, he plays a misfit who films crime scenes in Los Angeles and sells the footage to local news stations. Gyllenhaal shed more than 25 pounds from his already lean frame for the role, which gave him the tightly coiled look of a snake—sleek, inscrutable, and possibly dangerous.

“Actually, I saw my character in *Nightcrawler* as a worm,” Gyllenhaal explained as he sat down at a long table that Viola and his wife and creative partner, Kira Perov, had piled high with books documenting their work, including a catalog from Viola’s exhibition last summer at the Grand Palais in Paris. “My character wasn’t thin in the script, but I added that element. I saw him as an animal that came out at night, hungry for food. It was interesting—we shot for only 25 days, and even when we weren’t shooting, I was still living in the fictional world of the film. I was working nights, and I wasn’t eating much, so it was hard to shake the character. In my work, I am constantly looking for that extremity of feeling—whether it be discomfort or excitement or hate or love. I like to feel something big.”

Depth of emotion is what attracted Gyllenhaal to Viola’s artwork. Viola is also interested in extremes: His medium is video, and he creates scenarios that have biblical undercurrents, usually involving fire or water. When he was a child, Viola, who is now 63, nearly drowned. Instead of clinging to life and trying to make his way to the surface, Viola said, he enjoyed the dreamy sensation of being in a beautiful underwater world. “I wanted to stay, but I was saved,” he told me. Viola has revisited that state of complete surrender in his work, filming people of all ages submerged in a tank—but until this shoot, he had never worked with a celebrity. “I could feel the tension when I walked in,” Gyllenhaal said, sounding gleeful. “I find tension intriguing.”

Viola, who is an enthusiastic man, explained his process to Gyllenhaal: The actor would lie down in a tank of warm water—which resembled a rectangular bathtub made of clear Plexiglas—and hold his breath in darkness as the lights slowly came up. There was a death-to-life feel to the idea, but Viola rejected the notion of his art having a narrative. “I have to disagree,” Gyllenhaal said. “I have an incredible emotional response to your work, and that’s due to the structure. Whether you know it or not, you are a storyteller! All the artists I love are storytellers.”

Since completing *Nightcrawler*, in November 2013, Gyllenhaal has made *Everest*, which is based on two accounts of an ill-fated attempt to climb the world’s tallest mountain, and *Southpaw*, the story of a boxer. He spent six months training for *Southpaw*, and though he had to give up boxing during the filming of his latest movie, *Demolition*, he says he will definitely go back to it. As he went upstairs to change clothes for the shoot, Gyllenhaal showed Viola some boxing photos on his phone. “I think I’ll box for the rest of my life,” he said. “There’s something so clear about it: You’re completely in that moment or you’re knocked out.”

After putting on black pants and a button-down shirt, Gyllenhaal went to the set, which was in a soundstage. The tank was elevated, and Perov stood at the far end, where Gyllenhaal’s feet would go. As he went under for the first time, his father told me, “Jake is a very determined kid. If he doesn’t get it right away, he will keep going. He seems easygoing, but he has tremendous discipline.”

As it turns out, holding your breath and then opening your eyes underwater is not easy. In Viola’s pieces, you can sense the various moods of the submerged subjects—some are peaceful and contemplative; others look tense and restless. “I now understand the anxiety you see in some of the subjects,” Gyllenhaal said afterward. “I didn’t expect the sensations—the water would go up my nose and out my eyes, which made it difficult to keep my eyes open. There’s a panic that sets in, because you’re running out of breath. And even though you can hear Kira talking, telling you to move your arm or open your eyes, mostly you’re in your own head. You feel very alone.”

After two different setups and seven takes, Perov felt they had what they needed, but Gyllenhaal wanted to go again. “When I was underwater, I thought I should be doing more. I thought, I should die for this.” He was only half-joking. Viola helped him out of the tank and gave him a hug. “Part of me never wants to see this piece,” Gyllenhaal said as he wrapped himself in a bathrobe. “It reminded me of when they make a body cast for a film. You have to breathe through a straw while they cover you in plaster. There’s always a moment when you want to scream, ‘Stop it!’ But then you find great calm. These days, I’m trying to value the emotional experience above all else.”

Executive producer/assistant director: Kira Perov. Producer: Genevieve Anderson.  
Director of photography: Harry Dawson.

URL: <http://www.wmagazine.com/people/celebrities/2014/11/jake-gyllenhaal-actor-nightcrawler-bill-viola/>