

Bill Viola: Martyrs review – let the unbelievers come

Bill Viola's mesmerising new video installation at St Paul's Cathedral should silence his critics



Bill Viola's installation *Martyrs*, at St Paul's Cathedral: 'The effect is spectral.' Photograph: Andy Rain/EPA

In the distance, down the long south aisle that stretches all the way to the far end of St Paul's, is an altarpiece that seems to be moving. The figures in each of its four panels are slowly shifting. And just as gradually, light is building out of darkness with a silvery gleam quite unlike the London daylight through the window above.

The effect is spectral – ghostly images hovering on screens, pale in the sepulchral gloom – until you come close, at which point reality penetrates the illusion. For these four figures are contemporary people, three men and a woman, undergoing separate ordeals but united in their suffering. They are Bill Viola's *Martyrs*.

As the film-cycle begins, the woman is roped up by her hands and one of the men roped down on the ground. Another is buried alive, as it seems – only one hand and part of his head visible beneath a mound of earth – and the last tied to his chair. All is still, until gobbets of fire begin to fall in a circle around him.

A wind stirs and the woman begins to twist and turn. Drops of water slowly turn into a deluge as the roped man is hauled upside down by his feet. The fire grows into a blaze, and the earth begins to rise upwards, like sparks in a chimney, exposing the buried man, who seems to be gradually awakening from death. Something parallel (literally and metaphorically) is happening to the others too.

It gives nothing away to say that an apotheosis is achieved simply through the combination of lighting, composition, and expression, with the additional element of time. For all its advanced effects (*Martyrs* was shot in a film studio) this is in some respects a most traditional work.

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At 63, Viola is the venerable master of a video art that has long since transcended its own technology. All of his trademarks are on display at St Paul's – ultra slow-mo, cinematic lighting, bodies under extreme pressure, ascending and descending, in motion and at rest, a beautiful use of silver, blue and white against velvety darkness; above all, as direct an appeal to the heart as the mind.

Martyrs is candidly open in its ideas and elements – earth, air, fire and water, specifically – and even more in its methods. Nobody watching it could be in any doubt that the amazing Lazarus-like raising of the figure out of the earth happens by simply reversing the film, or that any of these events are actually simultaneous.

In that respect, as in others, it is just like painting. Multi-panel altarpieces were always showing scenes from the lives of the saints as if they were happening at the same time. St Peter is catching fish, being crucified upside down and rising to heaven all at once.

Indeed nothing Viola is doing in this very careful, very pensive piece could possibly be regarded as radical. But what he can do – what he does – is to take the imagination a little further.

The seven-minute cycle, for instance, is so visually mesmerising one watches it over and again to discover that the meaning deepens each time. On second viewing it seems that these people are not awaiting martyrdom but already dead, that their suffering appears in continuous flashback, and that what is visualised is something more like the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting, as described in the Creed.

Or that the film (and the performers) are trying to imagine the scarcely imaginable stoicism of the early martyrs, personified by the woman left dangling in the windblown wilderness, or the seated man whose gaze remains perfectly steady as the flames rise around him. He does not die (of course: this is only film) but that too goes to the martyr's faith in the afterlife.

The form meets the content; the illusions are matched to the miracles. Death loses its power, the dead rise, light is born out of darkness. You do not have to be a believer – Viola's work is entirely syncretist – to be moved by the faith of others, and *Martyrs* puts you on the spot, into the suffering and endurance of these unknowable souls of the long ago past.

Viola's art has been much criticised as cornball, pretentious, obvious, too religious, not religious enough (the only direct allusion here is to St Peter), too Californian, too moralising, too populist, artificial or worse. Some people weep in front of the *Nantes Triptych* (owned by Tate Modern, which has given *Martyrs* to St Paul's Cathedral on permanent loan), with its vision of the first and last moments of life; others recoil.

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But *Martyrs* is in a different realm. It was commissioned specially for St Paul's and it speaks to the religious art around it. It does not insist upon a feeling so much as appeal to what is there (or not) within the viewer's imagination through silent images. Like the paintings around it, it functions both as a work of art – violent yet graceful – and an object of contemplation.