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## Bill Viola's religious experience

By Rachel Spence



Still images from Bill Viola's 'Martyrs' (2014), for St Paul's Cathedral

Most people remember the first time they see a video by Bill Viola. In a world where so many artists are concerned with what Robert Hughes once witheringly described as the "infra-mince" – matters of such frail import they are barely worth discussing – the US video artist's only themes are the big ones: birth, death, love, anger, ecstasy, suffering, fear. His mission is to explore what it means to be human, present in the world yet conscious that the minutes are ticking towards the void.

My first encounter was at the Pompidou Centre in Paris. There, in a darkened room, his five-screen video "Five Angels for the Millennium" (2001) unfurled. Like almost all Viola work, its protagonists are minimal: fire, water and solitary figures who emerge and dissolve out of these elemental, orgasmic beginnings as if they are simultaneously dying and being born.

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As Viola's figures blossom and wither it is as if they are being dispatched and delivered from "the undiscovered country". The only other visual artists who had rocked me so powerfully were the great protagonists of the Quattrocento – Masaccio, Masolino, Bellini – and the 20th-century abstractionist Mark Rothko.

More of Rothko later, but that Viola's vision should chime with that of the Italian masters is no coincidence. Nor that, in two weeks, St Paul's Cathedral in London will unveil "Martyrs". The four-screen video by Viola will be the first moving-image work of art to be permanently installed in a British cathedral. (A second Viola installation, entitled "Mary", is also planned.)

"Martyrs" and "Mary", to be installed behind the High Altar next to the American Memorial Chapel, are the latest in a series of works whose presence underscores the cathedral's determination to remain resonant some 300 years after it was built. Other permanent residents include Henry Moore's "Mother and Child" (1983) and the 2004 installation of James Horrobin's Churchill Memorial Screen. Meanwhile, a rich temporary programme has seen pieces by Rebecca Horn, Antony Gormley and Yoko Ono make appearances over the past decade.

Although Viola professes no particular faith, his work is as grounded in religious iconography as that of Rembrandt. Born in Queens, New York, in 1951, he grew up in a world revolutionised by the new technologies of TV and video. "First of all, I didn't want anything to do with those guys [the old masters]," he told me when I interviewed him a few years ago.

By the mid-1970s, however, he was living in Florence in order to make work with the video studio Art/Tapes/22. On witnessing first-hand the Renaissance paintings made to measure for their niches and chapels, his thought was that they were preludes to 20th-century installation art. "A physical, spatial experience of total immersion," as he put it. These narrative melodramas, played out within an angular frame and aiming to communicate as directly as possible with their audience, struck Viola as the ancestors of television.

But it was not until the early 1990s that he really integrated Christian imagery into his work. The catalysts were personal: the birth of his second son and the death of his mother. One morning, wandering through the Art Institute of Chicago, he found himself standing in front of a painting by 15th-century Flemish painter Dieric Bouts of a crying Madonna. "It opened up a whole new dimension of grief for me," he recalled.

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Over the next two decades, the distillation of emotion and form that characterises Renaissance art has run through Viola's oeuvre like a mineral seam. In "Emergence" (2002), a marble-hued body surges from a sarcophagus into the arms of two women in a translation of Masolino's Pietà. In "The Greeting" (1995), the encounter between three women on a Florentine street talks back to "The Visitation", by 16th-century Tuscan

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painter Pontormo, which shows the revelatory encounter between Mary and Elizabeth. Sometimes Viola shoots a lone face against a plain ground, like a latter-day Byzantine icon, as it surrenders to a journey from agony to ecstasy. In one work, he subjects his protagonists to visions similar to those experienced by medieval saints and later painted by 17th-century Neapolitan artist José de Ribera.

The result is a body of work that chronicles those moments when a crisis of feeling acts as catharsis. Often, his films bear witness to the transcendence of limits. (One, from 1996, is actually entitled “The Crossing”.) That sense of threshold is endemic in Christian art. From the Annuciation, whose protagonists are almost always placed either side of a doorway, to the numerous paintings which chart the journey Christ must make across death to his resurrection.

Do not think, however, that Viola is simply transposing one era’s art into another. For Renaissance painters, clarity of narrative was all. Their audience were largely illiterate; the theology of their day had its foundations in the eighth century, when the Council of Nicaea’s decision to legislate in favour of icons because they provided “confirmation that the becoming man of the Word of God was real and not just imaginary”. In other words, paintings sustained Christianity’s faith in the incarnation of the divine in human form.

Viola, on the other hand, has spoken of his own fascination with another less familiar strand of Christian thought. Known as La Via Negativa, it is embodied by Christian mystics such as Dionysius the Areopagite and St John of the Cross yet it also resonates with the teaching of Buddha and Sufi, eastern belief systems that are also crucial influences on Viola.

La Via Negativa teaches that God is unknowable to the human mind and, as such, indescribable. God cannot be represented visually or verbally so the way to discovery is not to look outward but inward. The only map that will help you is a cartography of love. “Through love, the soul unites itself with God,” Viola has explained.



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Viola’s ‘Ocean Without a Shore’ (2007), an installation in the Church of San Gallo, Venice

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The artist then finds himself in an insoluble bind. His task, Viola once pointed out to me, sounding mournful and entranced in equal measure, was “to represent invisible things”. Realism, he continued, could only take you so far. Suddenly, I understood why he reminded me of Rothko, who also used his shimmering veils of colour as portals to a metaphysical world. Like Viola, Rothko knew that a sacred space – in his case, the Houston Chapel – would offer them a true home.

Viola’s awareness that “the base of my work is the unknowing, doubt, loss of self, questions not answers” is what makes him an inspired choice for the St Paul’s commission.

“At the end of the day, the language of theology is not the language of information,” says Reverend Mark Oakley, canon chancellor of St Paul’s. “It’s the language of formation. Of human becoming. So that each step has to be undone for us to grow more. And the Via Negativa is about never arriving. Good art, like good religion, is there to question our answers, not answer our questions. The cathedral brings together a vast number of different people,” he continues, “[with different] faiths, doubts and questions yet a shared language of concerns. Viola touches on all the things that we undergo: birth, death, love. He offers us a shared way into the mysteries.”

Yet Viola’s refusal to relinquish realism matters too. The first element of his St Paul’s commission, “Martyrs”, shows four figures who are submitted to intense physical trial by fire, earth, water and air. Just further torture you might think, watching a torrent cascade over one powerless form hanging by rope from his ankles.

“All of the martyrs have already made their decision to make the ultimate sacrifice and this is their darkest hour through death,” says Kira Perov, who is Bill Viola’s life partner and a crucial collaborator in his work. Yet these scenes also have the mood of a transformative ritual from which the body will emerge stronger, lighter, closer to divinity. By staking his vision on the real, Viola has suffered accusations of grandiosity. But when he shows physical bodies placed under intolerable pressure, he denies us the possibility of responding with knowing distance of an art lover: we identify on a visceral human level with his protagonists’ trauma. Both their suffering and their epiphany is ours.

Oakley has no doubt that Viola’s elusive mysticism will resonate within the cathedral setting. And visitors to St Paul’s might find the immortal a little less invisible in the future.

*‘Martyrs’ is unveiled on May 21, St Paul’s Cathedral, London [stpauls.co.uk](http://stpauls.co.uk)*