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Moving images that freeze time

The work of US video artist Bill Viola, on show in Paris, has an otherworldly quality that astonishes



Dream states: "First light", a detail of "Going Forth By Day" by Bill Viola (2002). Private collection. Photograph: Kira Perov

The silhouette of a woman emerges from a wall of fire, then collapses headfirst into a reflecting pool. The flames subside into electric-blue ripples, signifying the end of desire.

In another video by the US artist Bill Viola, bubbles rising from a corpse lying on a slab of stone build to a reverse waterfall that eventually lifts the body heavenward – the ascension of the soul after death.

More than 30 screens are included in the Grand Palais retrospective of Viola's work, some small, some monumental. Human figures advance in slow motion through the heat of a desert mirage, come together and part. Nine transparent veils hang from the ceiling in another room, where projectors throw ghostly images of a man and woman starting at opposite ends, walking towards one another, melding in a flash of light.

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Viola's work is about fire, water, birth, death, journeys, meetings and partings – virtually every human experience except sex.

"Viola touches on universal aesthetic forms and themes," says Jérôme Neutres, the curator of the exhibition, which covers four decades of the preeminent video artist's work, at the Grand Palais in Paris until July 21st. "As with all great moments in art, there is something here that touches everyone. Viola's art is an emotion machine."

Viola's art also represents a kind of fusion culture, blending Buddhist mysticism, the Italian quattrocento, the experimentalism of Viola's video precursors Nam June Paik and Andy Warhol, the attitude of the Haight Ashbury-Woodstock generation. It's not surprising that it's produced in California, the tectonic plate where US and European culture meet Asia – and which never forgot the 1960s.

At the press conference launching his exhibition, Viola doesn't talk about the instruments he uses, including an old bank surveillance camera he likes because it creates grainy images, and infra-red night vision equipment. He doesn't tell us how he designed the eight-metre-high tree with holes in the branches – a giant gas-burner – to create the wall of flame in *Fire Woman* (2005). He doesn't explain how a tsunami sweeps through a house, bursting through windows, spitting out humans and furniture, in *Going Forth By Day* (2002), which required 120 technicians and more than 200 actors.

In the course of a 45-minute peroration, Viola tells us there are three parts to humanity: "The unborn people that will come after us, the dead to whom we pay our respects all the time" and "Another place – the middle one. That's us: the living."

In a sculpture titled *Heaven and Earth* (1992), two old cathode television tubes are fixed vertically, face to face, like the top and bottom of a waffle iron. One television screen shows a newborn infant, the other a dying woman. Because they are projected on glass, the images reflect each other.

Viola is more philosopher than video geek, though he likes to say he was born in 1951, "the same year as video". With his tall, thin frame and bald pate, he resembles St Francis of Assisi in Giotto's frescoes, which he considers the ultimate artistic reference. He and his entourage wear Tibetan mala prayer bead bracelets.

Egyptian funerary text

Giotto inspired *Going Forth By Day*, whose title was taken from an ancient Egyptian funerary text. Five 35-minute videos representing birth and the four seasons are projected

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simultaneously on the walls of a large room, like Renaissance frescos. In one panel, "The Voyage," two young people hold vigil at an old man's deathbed. The characters wear modern clothes, but the house is cut away like those in Giotto. An old woman waits on the shore below, while furniture is loaded on to a boat. It belongs to Charon, the ferryman of Hades, whom Viola often refers to.

Viola regards video art as a means of "sculpting time", of retrieving the beauty of his childhood, when time was slower. "I always dreamed of being able to slow down time," he says. "When I discovered slow motion video, it was a revelation. Video is the medium that enables you to stop time. When you slow images, the sensation becomes mental and spiritual."

In *The Quintet of the Astonished* (2000), for example, four men and a woman stand close together. Their solemn faces are gradually transformed into lamentation, over more than 15 minutes. In similar fashion, it takes 18 minutes for the man and woman in *Surrender* (2001) to dissolve into anxiety and sadness.

Viola is an absent-minded creator who quotes Ananda Coomaraswamy's philosophy of art when he loses his train of thought. His Australian-born wife and studio director, Kira Perov, fills in the blanks and provides the infrastructure and organisation.

Perov and Viola lived in Japan and India in the early 1980s. In Asia, they studied state-of-the-art video and Buddhism. This mix of 2,500-year-old mysticism and 21st-century technology has shaped their work ever since.

In an interview with the art critic Renaud Faroux, published in Faroux's pamphlet on "The Human Mysticism of Bill Viola", Viola quotes Buddha's first teaching: "All life is change."

Viola even links Buddha to cinematography: "He described a human being as a moving image, before cinema, before anything else. He understood that we are moving, transforming, changing, growing. This constant motion which is around us at all times is the life force, the essence of our existence."

Humans under water are a constant theme of Viola's oeuvre, referred to as Viola's "Ophelia trip" by Faroux. For example, in *Dreamers* (2013), seven individuals seem to sleep on a riverbed, rocked gently by the current.

"I was lucky because at six years old, I had a near death experience," Viola explains. "I fell in the water and went down to the bottom. My uncle realised I wasn't there and he dove in and pulled me out. I was pushing him away. I saw the most beautiful world with these plants moving slowly, the blue light coming down. When you are under water it is absolutely beautiful. There is no gravity. I wanted to stay there."

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Cartesian rationalism has robbed us of the “fairies and elves and golems and creatures of the forest which are really our imagination,” Viola told Faroux. “That was erased from our daily lives because of these idiots who decided that intellect was more important than the heart.”

Asked whether he believes in God, Viola says “no”. He rejoices in a survey that shows a majority of young people now consider themselves spiritual but not religious. His own interest is in spirituality and ritual; not religion. His five-screen series *Catherine's Room* (2001) shows the daily rituals of a woman meditating, sewing, writing, lighting candles and sleeping. It has the grace of Fra Angelico's frescos in the convent of San Marco.

Viola says avant-garde art takes 150 years to become traditional. In his case, avant-garde and tradition have overlapped. Among other museums, he has exhibited at MoMA, New York, London's National Gallery, the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, and the Guggenheim.

“Two months ago, the Uffizi in Florence acquired its first video art for its permanent collection, and it's Bill Viola,” says Neutres, the curator.

“Viola chose to hold his biggest retrospective in these same rooms, where we've recently shown Monet, Hopper, Turner, Braque . . . We erased Braque's name on that wall to write Bill Viola's.”