



BILL VIOLA / MICHELANGELO

Bill Viola's immersive video installations explore the depths of human experience, often moving audiences to tears. Now his spectacular works come into conversation at the RA with Michelangelo's powerful sculpture and drawings, in a poignant exploration of the cycle of life. In the following pages, we introduce Viola's work, and four writers respond to key themes revealed in the exhibition

Rise

&

fall

VIBESOUND INSTALLATION/PERFORMER JOHN HAV/COURTESY BILL VOLA STUDIO/PHOTO NIRA PERDY



BILL VIOLA / MICHELANGELO

Bill Viola Hon RA is widely considered the world's most influential video artist. Since the 1970s, his work has developed in tandem with technological advances in moving-image media, evolving from VHS and TV broadcasts to immersive environments and multi-channel, high-definition digital projections. Yet the extraordinary impact and popularity of the American artist's work comes through its continued connection to things unchanging: the universal aspects of the human condition.

His exploration of the inner life embraces art, ideas and spirituality from across Eastern and Western traditions, drawing from Buddhism and Sufism as deeply as ancient Greek mythology, Christianity and Carl Jung. His abiding interest in Renaissance art dates back to his early twenties, when he worked as a video technician in Florence, one block away from Michelangelo's *David*. Viola recalls: 'Personally, it was most important for me being [in Florence] to feel art history come alive off the pages of books, to soak into my skin. I probably had my first unconscious experiences then of art as related to the body, for many of the works of the period, from large public sculpture to the architecturally integrated painting in the churches, are a form of installation – a physical, spatial, totally consuming experience.'

In the RA's Main Galleries, visitors will encounter works from across Viola's career alongside Michelangelo's marble, the *Taddei Tondo*, and spellbinding drawings from the Royal Collection and British Museum. Small of scale but hugely powerful, the drawings reflect on love, loss and the cycle of life, and open a conversation between two artists separated by centuries. In the following pages, four writers discuss themes to which both Viola and Michelangelo relate.



Previous spread:
Tristan's Ascension
(*The Sound of a Mountain*
Under a Waterfall),
2005, by Bill Viola

This spread, above:
Nantes Triptych, 1992,
by Bill Viola

Left: Bill Viola, 2014

Birth

Art historian *Ingrid Rowland* reveals how both artists confront the particular and the universal in the cycle of life

The Royal Academy's exhibition 'Bill Viola / Michelangelo: Life, Death, Rebirth' presents what its co-curator Martin Clayton calls 'affective art', not only intimate creations like Michelangelo's drawings, but also works that engage some of our most powerful emotions by the magical transformation of what might seem to be the most aloof of media – Viola's stately, crystalline video projections and Michelangelo's hewn Carrara marble – into things that make our hearts burn within us.

The idea of exhibiting these two artists together came to Clayton, Head of Prints and Drawings at Royal Collection Trust, in 2006 when Viola, a careful student of the Old Masters, visited him at Windsor Castle, accompanied by Kira Perov, Viola's wife and studio director. The American artist was astonished by the very Michelangelo drawings displayed in the present exhibition. The two artists' work, centuries apart, explores the same universal themes, from emotional struggle and dreams to death and transcendence. Co-curated by Perov, the exhibition begins by confronting birth and motherhood through Viola's harrowing *Nantes Triptych*, of 1992 (above), alongside several of

MURIEL FAITHORNADE (PHOTO); MICHELANGELO (SCULPTURE); GETTY IMAGES



Michelangelo's variations on a favourite theme: the Virgin Mary and her son.

The *Nantes Triptych* was commissioned by the French Centre National des Arts Plastiques for exhibition in a deconsecrated 17th-century chapel, part of the Nantes Musée des Beaux-Arts. By juxtaposing three half-hour videos on three adjacent screens, Viola adapted a traditional format for medieval altarpieces – painted and carved – to video. On the left-hand screen, a young woman gives birth; on the right, Viola's elderly mother lies seemingly close to death in a hospital bed; and in the centre a clothed, middle-aged man floats suspended in bubbling water. The soundtrack mixes aquatic noises with crying and breathing, the endless cycles of life.

Viola's central Everyman floats alone in his fluid atmosphere, but strikingly the triptych's scenes from the two extremities of life – birth and death – are scenes of loving companionship. The young mother, recorded in a natural childbirth centre shortly after the birth of Viola's own son, squats firmly between the legs of a man, presumably the baby's father, who gently strokes her hair as the pain of labour increases to its climax, and a midwife grasps the newborn child and hands it to its mother, the umbilical cord still a fat, throbbing blue vein connecting them. Instantly, the mother's transports of agony turn into pure ecstasy, and the video ends with the scowling baby sticking out its tongue, a personality already as distinctively formed as its tiny hands and feet.

A cord of another sort connects the dying protagonist

of the right-hand screen to a respirator. We see a woman lying open-mouthed on her back, shrouded in a white hospital sheet. We come to realise that she is a woman dearly loved, both by the elderly man who comes near to caress her face and hold her hand, and a younger man who mops away her saliva. The woman is Viola's own mother, the sorrowing husband is his father, and the younger man is the artist's brother. Viola was holding the camera, facing the impending loss of his mother the only way he knew how: through art. By focusing on her face, we see the occasional flutter of her unblinking eyelids and we know that she is still alive. As the shape of her mouth collapses into a triangle, the camera then pans up to show a paper decoration pasted to the wall: a child's drawing of a sunflower and the inscription: 'MOM YOU'RE THE GREATEST.'

At the very moment when the baby emerges into the light on the triptych's left panel and Mrs Viola's mouth goes slack on the right panel, on the central panel the floating Everyman comes up and we see his navel, the scar that marks us all as independent beings as it severs each one of us from the womb.

At times, while the 30 minutes of work tick by, this forced attendance upon a birth and an impending death seems like an unconscionable invasion of privacy. But the central panel, the stylised presentation of the floating man, turns heartbreaking particularity into universal human experience. MOM YOU'RE THE GREATEST, rather than an unbearably maudlin touch, reminds us that this dying woman inspires vivid passions. »

VIDEO/VIDEO WALL/VIDEO COURT/EST/BILL VIOLA STUDIO/PHOTO MUSEE DES BEAUX-ARTS DE NANTES

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» Michelangelo Buonarroti's mother died when he was six, and like most of his contemporaries, he was sent out to a wet nurse as an infant. Because the family lived in the marble-rich mountains above Florence, Michelangelo declared that his ability to carve stone stemmed from the fact that he had drunk in marble dust with his nurse's milk. He also drank in a human compassion that was expressed most intensely in his depictions of the Virgin Mary and Jesus, whom he showed both as a rambunctious baby in his *Taddei Tondo* (right) and as a dead child – his mother cradling that most terrible of burdens – in the heartbreaking sculptures he made of the *Pietà* (page 55).

In presenting the spiritual side of this great Florentine artist, 'Bill Viola / Michelangelo' also presents the social side of a man who was anything but a lone genius: he spent his exceptionally long, active life surrounded by crowds of friends, admirers and assistants (and complained in some of his poems about the irony of being an old man in love). Through his work, the motherless Michelangelo could throw his arms around suffering humanity as selflessly as any parent, but he could also stare down mortality with inimitable resolve. The *Taddei Tondo*, a small, private devotional image, dates from 1504, the same year as *David*, a colossal, glorious public monument to the Florentine Republic. Michelangelo carved marble more swiftly than his contemporaries, but he also took greater risks in carving. With *David* he turned a challenging block of marble into a triumph. With the *Taddei Tondo*, his chisel hit a flaw in the stone and produced a hairline crack that doomed any further progress. What survives, however, is more than enough to convey the torrent of thoughts that he and his contemporaries ascribed to the Virgin Mary. As a popular Tuscan preacher, Bernardino of Siena, said in 1427: 'I tell you, she saw and knew more all by herself than all the other creatures created by God', and that knowledge included the cruel, premature death of her son, signalled in the *Taddei Tondo* by the goldfinch clutched by the standing John the Baptist. A goldfinch is said to have removed a thorn from Christ's crown when he was carrying the Cross.

The squirming Jesus and his scarcely less lively cousin John provide a contrast to Mary's composure: she knows that both will die for their faith and that she is condemned to outlive them, to endure the double loss. By giving birth to Jesus, she has brought on his death. In the meantime, she lets her baby exercise his chubby limbs, fully aware that one day the adult man will lie slack in her lap. For the devoutly Christian Michelangelo, however, death to this life meant rebirth in the next. During Carnival in Florence, he would have seen people costumed as skeletons singing:

If everyone dies by living
If every soul lives by dying
The Lord of all Lords
Has established this law:
You all have to join in.
Repent! Repent!

By the mystery of this faith, death could become, in the words of the modern Greek poet George Seferis, the 'birth pang of resurrection'.

Ingrid Rowland is a professor at the University of Notre Dame School of Architecture, and co-author of The Collector of Lives: Giorgio Vasari and the Invention of Art (Norton)



Above: *The Virgin and Child with the Infant St John the Baptist (Taddei Tondo)*, c.1504–05, by Michelangelo Buonarroti

Below: *The Risen Christ*, c.1532–33, by Michelangelo Buonarroti



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Emotional states

The novelist *Deborah Levy* asks what it means to surrender to our most intense and incoherent feelings

When I write a novel and create protagonists or avatars to embody my ideas and arguments, it is always desirable to access the unknowing parts of their minds, as well as their more conscious motivations. Likewise, it seems to me that at the centre of Bill Viola's lifelong visual investigation into all the dimensions of consciousness is his interest in human incoherence, the ways in which we misunderstand ourselves and others.

Viola searches for a physical grammar, channelled via the bodies of his protagonists, to interrogate enigmatic feelings, those emotions that are mysterious to ourselves as much as anyone else. I believe it is a radical and progressive project (in an increasingly disembodied, corporate world) to dignify the strange conversations that highly charged emotions have with the body and mind.

In Viola's 2001 video diptych *Surrender* (right) we see two protagonists reflected in water as they formally perform the rituals of some sort of undisclosed suffering. Perhaps the mirroring of grief is a nod to the myth of Narcissus (as told by Ovid) who was unable to separate himself from the allure of his own reflection. Yet, in Viola's telling, this is not a one-way conversation. Instead there is a (twinned) transmission of intense feeling, of emotions that are bigger than the protagonists themselves. Who have they lost, or what have they lost in each other, and what is the nature of their surrender? It is as if the spectator breathes with them as we gaze at their all too human struggle. If they reach for transcendence, or perhaps redemption, Viola wisely never offers the whole story. We encounter his protagonists caught in an extended, heightened moment of the story.

Our emotions often embarrass us because they subvert conscious knowledge and tell us something that is awkward to know, perhaps unacceptable to us. A Viola artwork is not shy of heightened states of feeling. And what do we make of his title, *Surrender*? To surrender is usually perceived as a personal or political defeat, whereas in Viola's work, the act of surrendering seems closer to acceptance. His corporeal, flawed protagonists dissolve and refigure in a looped choreography of death (or surrender) and resurrection, which is of course one of Michelangelo's great themes (*The Risen Christ*, c.1532-33; opposite).

I suppose the point of being a writer is to give life and language as many dimensions as possible. To do this it is essential to surrender to the idea that human incoherence, which is always twinned with coherence, is what keeps us curious, furious, confused and vitally alive.

Deborah Levy is a Fellow at the Columbia Institute for Ideas and Imagination, Paris. Her new novel, The Man Who Saw Everything, will be published by Hamish Hamilton in 2019

Right: *Surrender*, 2001,
by Bill Viola



BILL VIOLA / MICHELANGELO



Mortality

The former bishop *Richard Holloway* writes that art and religion are driven onwards by the fact of our death

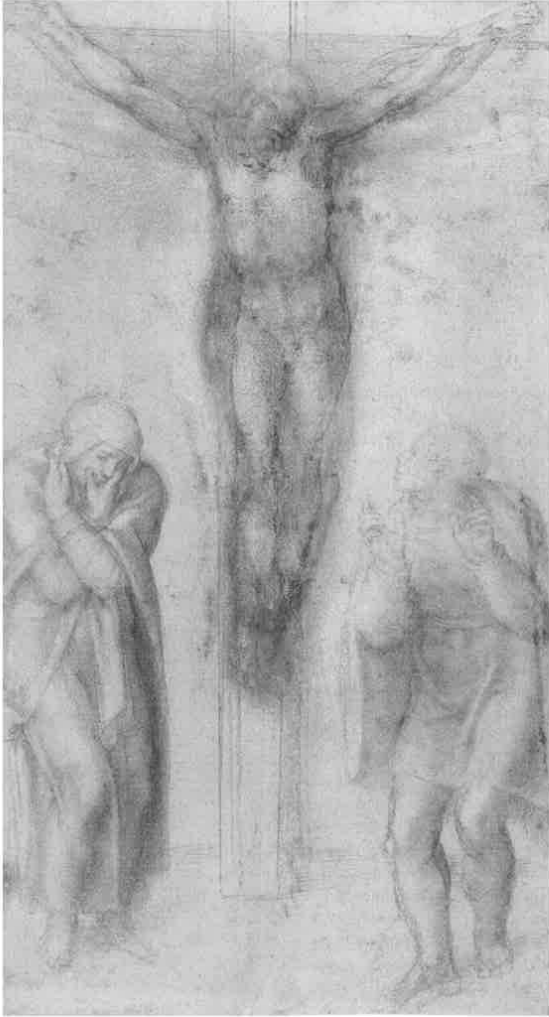
In *Waiting for Godot* Samuel Beckett reminded us that our mothers gave birth to us 'astride the grave'. We all know that, sooner or later, that's where we will finish. On Earth, maybe even in the whole universe, this knowledge seems to be unique to us. It is hard to fathom the inner lives of the other animals on our little planet, but they do not appear to live with the constant knowledge that one day they will die. We do. And it accounts for our obsession with the health of our bodies and whether they are showing any of the signs that presage our dissolution, hauntingly captured in Bill Viola's video installation *Man Searching for Immortality/Woman Searching for Eternity* (2013; above), in which an elderly man and woman use torches to explore their bodies for evidence of illness.

And it is the pressure and pain of this knowledge of our own mortality that seems to have got us thinking about

ourselves and the world into which we were thrust at birth. We are passing guests on Earth and we can't help wondering where we came from and where we will go when the visit is over. Is the grave it, a literal dead-end? Or is it a portal to other kinds of life beyond? These insistent questions have spurred two separate but related compulsions in us.

One is the urge to ponder and pour over the meaning of our own existence. The American philosopher Arthur Danto described the human animal, in a Latin phrase, as an *ens representans*, a being that endlessly repeats its experience of life back to itself, picturing it, telling its story. Give children crayons and paper, and they'll draw their mummy and daddy and the cat on the mat before the fire. Listen to people on the bus going home from work, and they'll be telling their day over again to their friends. Novelists possess this urge for representation to an obsessional degree, rehearsing the complexities of the human condition in a form many of us constantly return to, even though the plots go on repeating themselves. Artists are also compulsive reflectors of what is presented to them in life. Cézanne even said the landscape *thought* itself in him. All art flows from this need to reflect the tumultuous realities that present themselves to our senses, to wonder at them and seek patterns of meaning in them.

VIDEO INSTALLATION/PERFORMERS: LUIS ACCINELLI, PERELOPE SAFRANEK/COURTESY BILL VIOLA STUDIO/PHOTO PETER MALLETT, COURTESY BLANKOUTHERN



This page, above: *Christ on the Cross with the Virgin and St John*, 1560-64, by Michelangelo Buonarroti

Opposite page: *Man Searching for Immortality/Woman Searching for Eternity*, 2013, by Bill Viola

But the art form we call *religion* reverses this process. The founders of religion did not hold up a camera to the universe to copy and reflect on what they saw. For them it was the other way around. They thought of themselves as conduits specially chosen by the creative intelligence behind the universe to reveal its meaning and purpose to them and through them to *us*. For most religions we are characters in a story crafted by a transcendent author over whose intentions we have little or no control. And it is always death that drives the plot: how we pass our sojourn on Earth will determine what awaits us on the other side of death's dark portal.

But there is a mysterious rumour in religion that gives this narrative another twist. Either there is no meaning to the world's sorrow because no mind meant it and no hand wrote it, and we live and die within that absurdity. Or there was an original author that knows itself guilty of creating such woe and it dies in the fall of every sparrow. This idea of the dying or crucified god that takes to itself the sins of the world appealed to the spirituality of Michelangelo. He glimpsed the truth that it is the creator, not the creature, who must bear the blame. This is not a truth that can be easily explained, which is why theologians distrust it. But sometimes artists get it and try to express it, as Michelangelo does in his drawing *Christ on the Cross with the Virgin and St John* (1560-64; left). Through the shifting, indeterminate shapes of the crucified a redemptive sorrow expresses itself.

Even if you believe the 'revelations' of prophets only unveil the contents of their own unconscious fears and longings, religious stories still have much to teach us. A good way to think about religious revelation is as a Rorschach test that maps humanity's psychic geography. And the big reveal is always our anxiety about death and where it might take us. Death is religion's great prompter in the wings.

Which brings me to our other death-driven compulsion. Not sure where we came from or where we are going, we can at least leave a mark or sign on the Earth to show that once we were *here* - something else the other animals don't bother about. Like us, they leave their dust behind, but we leave more than our dust. We leave the books we wrote to try to explain ourselves to ourselves. We leave pictures of lovers whose beauty once stole our fading hearts. And, in Bill Viola's words, we leave 'the enormous resonant stone halls' of the medieval cathedrals we built centuries ago to bear witness to our enduring ache for a transcendence that may or may not be waiting for us when we die. Through us the world has been filled with art that long outlives our own brief and transient being. And when we are long gone it will make us present again to generations yet to be born astride the graves that we will have already fallen into.

So, isn't it worth a thought that death has been art's greatest patron and curator? Death that stimulates our deepest longings? Maybe it's worth more than a thought. Maybe it is even worth a thank you.

—
Richard Holloway is a writer and former Bishop of Edinburgh. His latest book is Waiting for the Last Bus: Reflections on Life and Death (Canongate)

Transcendence

Poet and novelist *Ben Okri* argues that art's power lies where understanding leaves off, beyond thought and word

Maybe the highest function of art is to act as a bridge between worlds, between realms. One of those realms is the here and now, that most commonplace of aspects of the numinous, that most mysterious of realities which we call the real, that most misunderstood of phenomena. If art reconciles us to the here and now, it would already have done one of the most difficult things it can do in the experience of life.

For what is closest to us is often what is farthest and people often have to travel round the world, go through extreme experiences, undergo suffering in order to encounter the magical quality of the here and now. For the here and now is really only a veil over the intensity or the dimness of our consciousness. All reality is in our consciousness of it. Hence all the great spiritual traditions speak of waking us up. But it is not a waking us up from sleep as such, but from the dream of everyday life that obscures the higher life. The first point of the triangle of transcendence is not in our stars, but in us, in our awareness. The moment after a car crash that you survived, reality looks different. The convalescent often perceives life freshly. When you receive news of the death of your mother the world looks smashed up and new. Nothing has changed out there, but our consciousness has, our perception has. In that sense here is the home of the eternal. Now is the nest of transcendence.

The other realm that art leads us to has no name. Some call it the emotions, some call it dreams, some call it the realm of the heart, and some call it the mysterious territory of the soul. Some maintain that it leads us to the unconscious or it leads us from the unconscious. Whatever the realm is that art leads us to, it is certainly a place where we feel something of our spirit's enlargement, something of our inner magnificence. This is concealed from us most of the time by what we call real life. We live in this real life so much that we think there is no other. We accept and work with this situation of ourselves within the provisional realm of the senses, and we navigate our way through life with intermittent fits of reason, which we take to be the defining and the persistent truth of our lives. Occasionally we dream, but we perceive dreams to be in some way erratic, and possibly even an aberration of consciousness. We love and perhaps fall in love and even the seaswell of that emotion, bursting the banks of real life and its acceptable definition, we soon bring within the realm of reason. The fine madness which love ought to bring, its immeasurable inspiration, itself then becomes canalised by the conflicting, the restricting, impulses of civilisation. We conduct our lives as if it were a business, within the four square walls of the real.

It is out of this living coffin, this prison in the flesh, that art leads us. The real question is: does it lead us out or does it lead us in? Art is always an allegory of our sunkenness in the human condition. Some might say that the world is an allegory. In which case art is an allegory of that allegory. All true allegories are felt before they are understood.

And what it is they make one feel cannot be put into words, because they belong to a realm that transcends words, a world of pure being and within that a deep veiled inner knowing. Which is to say we know but do not know that we know. Hence that inward disturbance. The disturbance is there because we have blocked the feeling's journey towards transcendence. Often we block it with our heads. We block it with our attempts at understanding. It is one of the errors of rational civilisation that everything ought to be explained. Our humanity begins where understanding leaves off.

This is not an attempt to denigrate the very noble and necessary task of understanding and grasping the mysteries of our world. Science makes its great progress from this relentless application of the limits of reason to the limits of the world. But art has much of its power in that which cannot be expressed, in that which is invisible to us, that which is intangible in us. No caliper can measure the dimensions of spirit that we rise to in moments of a Beethoven symphony or a Mozart sonata. Those feelings are incommunicable and inexpressible to anyone else. They are unique to us and unique inside us. You can't thrust your hand into your heart and pull out the feeling and display it throbbing in your open palm. That incommunicable something is the beginning of the secret dimensions of the human. The trouble with the pathology of understanding that which surpasses the understanding is that we always try to fit the dimension of the human within the purely measurable and explicable. Every human being is greater than the size into which they can be measured, whether that structure be a coffin or a dress. We have, with space exploration, exhausted the outward journeys and perhaps discovered that, wonderful as distant planets with their unyielded secrets might be, some day with study and measurement we will find that they are no more mysterious or wonderful than Earth is itself. And even then we will still carry that something that feels wonder and experiences the mysterious, that something which is always, in words from *The Great Gatsby*, 'commensurate to our capacity for wonder'. Maybe we need to exhaust all the outer journeys before we embark, objectively, on perhaps the greatest journey of all, the inner journey, the journey that was at the heart of all the allegories and all the mythologies, that has hinted at the immeasurable magnificence of the human.

'A work of art is awoken by us just as much as the work awakens us. This is transcendence'





Left: *Fire Woman*, 2005,
by Bill Viola

Art, like us, is a double being. This is perhaps why, like us, it puzzles and fascinates us. That is why it changes with our changes. That is because half of the reality of a work of art is in the work itself. But the other half is in us. In those intersecting circles of art and our consciousness reside both the greatest mystery of art and the greatest mystery of us. The greatness of a work of art is really the extent of those intersecting areas between the work and our consciousness. A work of art is awoken by us just as much as the work awakens us. This is transcendence. And there is sensory transcendence as much as there is conceptual transcendence. But if there is no transcendence, there is no art. For transcendence is not an add on; it is not something that you can put into a work that might become a work of art. It is at the heart of its conception and realisation. It is perhaps what pleases in the beginning and it is certainly that which is at the heart of a work's endurance through the centuries. In an odd way transcendence in a work is what makes it constantly relevant to us. A work of art may have spoken to its times through contingent concerns, but it speaks to us centuries later through speaking to its times.

This precise paradox can be seen in the works of Michelangelo. We know that his massive sculpture, *David*, was addressing the contemporary concerns of Florence at the time; *David* was meant to be symbolic of the courage of Florence in standing up to its enemies. But that is not what strikes you about this giant sculpting if you see it with your own eyes at the Accademia in Florence. What you see is this colossal figure. You see the calm of his limbs and the anxiety of his knitted brow. And you might notice a certain glow round the figure. It is not caused by any lighting. It is perhaps caused by the way the sculpted body, in the perfection of its shaping, gathers to itself an inexplicable light, a palpable aura, the force and presence, the mythic force and the mythic presence, of a great personality. That aura, that mythic force, is transcendence, the sum total of craft and art and spirit that went into the work, and which the work then acquires in the centuries of being admired and being the object of constant aesthetic pilgrimages. But transcendence calls to transcendence, magnetises it. And no work can draw to itself a transcendence that it doesn't already have, which it reveals in us in the aesthetic wonder of our encounter, whether it be for the first or the thousandth time.

The first sighting of the *Pietà* (page 55) in the Vatican, made when Michelangelo was still in his twenties, causes in one a revelatory gasp that one never quite recovers from. It is perhaps the single most beautiful piece of sculpture in the world, barring perhaps the anonymous Greeks, and encountering it sets up in the soul such a charge of wonder and awe and pity and tears and joy and immortal longings that perhaps the soul itself overflows with the immeasurable beauty of its achievement.

Perhaps one can say that transcendence in a work of art is the combination of qualities that perceived as a whole »



Left: *Archers Shooting at a Herm*, c.1530, by Michelangelo Buonarroti

Below left: *Pietà*, 1498–1500, by Michelangelo Buonarroti, in St Peter's Basilica, the Vatican



» stops the mind in its restless tracks, brings analysis and cogitation to a halt, stills the million cogs of attempted understanding, and in the stillness, in that cessation of thought, in what Joyce calls 'aesthetic arrest', the mind, rendered incapable of dealing with the enchantment that has held its process in abeyance, now becomes transparent to the higher and more mysterious revelations of the spirit, things without word or thought, where the individual, for a moment, is lifted far beyond themselves, into a numinous state, where they experience what can best be called the bliss of the soul, which the mind interprets as beauty.

Transcendence in Michelangelo is inseparable from the ideas that animated him, the new ideas which were

in fact rediscoveries of ancient ideas, the rediscovery of Greek form in sculpture, the translation of the Egyptian-Greek texts of the *Corpus Hermeticus* by figures like Ficino, and the re-entry of the philosophy of Plato into Western thought after its quiescence in the culture. The works that artists create can be no greater than the central ideas that animate them, that give their work its resonance. But the artist has to be ready for those ideas, has to be of such a level of artistic and spiritual development that the ideas embody themselves naturally in the forms that realise them. The best artists of the Renaissance were particularly receptive to the possibilities of transcendence because the key ideas infiltrating the culture were ideas that magnified the human, that linked the human with the divine, best exemplified in that mysterious code of the *Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus* of the *Corpus Hermeticus*: 'As above, so below.' This Hermeticisation of Christianity, this Hellenisation of Christianity, created an unprecedented conjunction. For the first and last time these great bodies of thought came together in an extraordinary synthesis, a kind of rare cultural alchemy, and Leonardo and Michelangelo are the chief hierophants of this golden realisation of the magnification of the human. The magic of Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, for example, or in those late gigantic unfinished sculptures, is the way he gives a new stature to the possibility of the human. The light of that sacred knowledge shone in Western art for a while and then it never blazed with quite that concentrated brilliance again. There is no getting away from it. Art reveals the greatness or the poverty of what a people truly believe or what they take to be their highest truths.

—
Ben Okri, Man Booker Prize winner, is a poet and novelist. His latest novel is The Freedom Artist (Head of Zeus)

● **Bill Viola / Michelangelo: Life, Death, Rebirth**
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● **Friends Previews** 23 Jan, 10am–10pm; 24 & 25 Jan, 10am–6pm; free; booking required at roy.ac/friendsevents or call 020 7300 8090