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Bill Viola's Martyrs, St Paul's Cathedral - exhibition preview

Martyrs, unveiled on Thu May 22, is the first of video artist Bill Viola's two-part permanent installation in St Paul's Cathedral. It recalls torture as much as redemption, says Ben Luke, and it's breathtaking



At the mercy of the elements: Earth Martyr, Air Martyr, Fire Martyr and Water Martyr, by Bill Viola

It's no exaggeration to say that video artist Bill Viola's Martyrs (Earth, Air, Fire, Water), a permanent new commission unveiled tomorrow at St Paul's Cathedral, is the culmination of a life's work.

In 1973, when Viola was 22 and a budding artist fresh out of Syracuse University in New York State, enthused by the new medium of video art, he came to Florence to work at Art/Tapes/22, one of the world's first studios dedicated to this emerging discipline.

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While in the Tuscan capital, he visited the early Renaissance masterpieces in its churches, such as Masaccio's Holy Trinity, and experienced an epiphany. He saw in these frescoes and panels "a form of installation; a physical, spatial, consuming experience", and identified with the young 14th- and 15th-century artists experimenting with new techniques, in their case with the discovery of perspective. Viola's reading of their synthesis of spirituality and humanist philosophy, illuminating the dialogue between the human soul and divine light, is always evident in his work.

So many of his videos have taken a religious format, the altarpiece being a favourite. His tremendously moving Nantes Triptych (1987), in the Tate collection, features three screens on which videos capture the birth of a child, a man immersed in water and a woman dying on a hospital bed.

And he has long shown his work in holy places: in 1996, he made The Messenger for Durham Cathedral, and in 2007, the three altars of the tiny Oratorio San Gallo in Venice featured his videos on the theme of resurrection. But Martyrs takes it to another level: it's the first of a two-part permanent video installation on the south side of the high altar of one of the great European churches (the north-side installation, to be titled Mary, is planned for next year).

It's apt that Viola and his collaborator Kira Perov, who is also his wife, have chosen for this first part the theme of martyrdom, explored in four seven-minute films, running on a loop, on four screens next to each other. Christian martyrs have long dramatised the walls, chapels, niches and altars of churches. They were the ideal form in which pious patrons and the artists they commissioned could reflect the glory of God: their grisly deaths in the name of Christianity were the ultimate evidence of faith, making them the holiest of intercessors between God and those who prayed to Him.

But while traditional Christian saints can be easily identified by the attributes that usually mark the brutality of their death and torture — St Catherine with her wheel set with knives, Saint Lawrence with the iron grid on which he was roasted alive — Viola's martyrs, characteristically, are "more generic", as he puts it. Both the artist and St Paul's recognise that visitors to the cathedral are multi-faith, or even non-believers, so the idea is that his protagonists' ordeal can inspire empathy in us all. This reflects Viola's personal world view: he is as interested in Sufism and Buddhism as he is in the more mystical aspects of Christianity.



Holy visions: Bill Viola

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Viola's work has been inconsistent and occasionally over-sentimental in recent years but *Martyrs* is a spectacular return to form. It recalls the spare, reductive imagery of one of his best works, *The Crossing* (1996), in which one figure is doused in water while on the reverse side of the screen another is engulfed in flames.

The four films of *Martyrs* depict three men and a woman, all barefoot and plainly dressed, enduring trials by the four elements: a man immersed in dust; a woman bound at her hands and feet and subjected to furious winds; a seated figure consumed by fire; and a man hung by his feet with a rope and deluged with water.

Though deliberately timeless and placeless, the connection with the torture and persecution we encounter frequently today in the news media is unavoidable but, curiously, the work is never harrowing. The figures are becalmed, all of them initially sleeping or in meditation, never expressing emotion at their trial. The man who sits amid raging flames, for instance, meets our gaze insistently yet impassively.

That the films are touching rather than unsettling is also down to their sheer beauty. The dust that rises in slow motion from the man immersed in earth is lit in such a way that it glisters — a form of alchemy, as base material becomes almost celestial. What you take from them is up to you — they're easily readable as a story of Christian redemption, as all the sequences end with the figures bathed in light, their heads turned towards the heavens, other than the man doused in water, who literally ascends off the screen.

But Viola also taps into ancient symbolism, where the four elements are metaphors for life; and light has always evoked much more than God in his work. This is as much a hippie message as it is a Christian one, about a journey to self-knowledge, the light within as much as from above.

Light is crucial in the way we experience the work, too. The screens sit on an elegant steel stand designed by Norman Foster, beneath one of the vast, spectacular windows with which Sir Christopher Wren made St Paul's such a luminous space. Reflections of the architecture are initially frustrating but are necessarily part of the installation, eventually enhancing it — walk around it and you can place Viola's figures within Wren's arches and between his columns, as if the videos and architecture are one.

Neatly, the installation is placed above the spot where Wren is buried. How fitting that this dramatic work should occupy a kind of limbo, between the St Paul's creator's mortal remains and the infinite sky he framed through the window above.

Martyrs is at St Paul's Cathedral, EC4 (020 7246 8350, stpauls.co.uk) from tomorrow. Open Mon-Sat, 8.30am-4pm. Admission to the cathedral, £16.50; concessions available. Until the end of 2014 Art Fund and Tate members receive 50 per cent discount.