

Bill Viola on St Paul's Cathedral commission: 'It flummoxed me'



Bill Viola has made the first moving images ever to be installed in St Paul's Cathedral.

A few years ago, the American artist Bill Viola got a mental block about the Virgin Mary. “I just couldn’t figure it out. I tried and tried and tried. It flummoxed me, and I had to back off”.

He is talking about an unusual and daunting commission. For over a decade, Viola has been pondering the task of making two video-art altar pieces for St Paul’s Cathedral, to stand at the east ends of the north and south choir aisles. Now, after over a decade of thought, they are completed, installed and will be seen for the first time by the public at evensong on Wednesday, May 21st.

This is a big moment in the history of religious art. Over the last two millennia, tens – even hundreds – of thousands of religious paintings have been placed on the altars of the world in numerous different media. But this is the first time that moving images will take a prominent place in one of the great cathedrals of Christendom.

When I talked to him five years ago Viola admitted to feeling a burden of responsibility. “It’s a really major thing”, he told me, “I think about it a lot, and I worry about it a lot”. Such anxiety, on the face of

it, is surprising. At 63, Viola is a towering figure in contemporary art. This summer, in addition to inaugurating the altarpieces in St Paul's, Viola also has a blockbuster exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris. At the end of last year, his video self-portrait was installed in the Uffizi, Florence, putting him side by side with the great figures of European painting.

Nonetheless, he found the St Paul's commission daunting. As we talked in his hotel across the road from the imposing baroque bulk of the cathedral, I suggested it was perhaps the weight of the innumerable representations of the subject in the past that had inhibited him when it came to thinking about the mother of Christ. "That's exactly what the problem was", he immediately agreed, "It was overwhelming in a very subtle way. And she's pretty tough".

In the end, he explained, "I just had to stop and say I can't do this right now. I went on to other things. St Paul's is a slow motion experience – like my works – so they were totally cool about it". In much of Viola's art, time is enormously extended. Thus *Five Angels for the Millennium* (2001) originated in footage of a person plunging into a pool of water, but in the final work the sequence is reversed and stretched out for minutes on end, so the figure seems to emerge from the deep and then soar upwards.

The intention is not only to slow down the action on the screen, but the viewer as well. "Time is the most valuable commodity. What we are doing is giving people time, the inner feeling of it: how you expand something, understand it and look at it". In other words, his work is an invitation to contemplation, which is an age-old goal of art and religion alike.

Viola is able to create new imagery that deals with deep experiences, but without using a traditional religious narrative. His works deal with primal experiences. In the case of his celebrated *Nantes Triptych* (1991), in the Tate collection, the subject matter is the most fundamental of all. In the left hand panel, there is film of a woman giving birth; on the right another woman is dying. In the centre a man floats in a swimming pool, drifting dreamily on the currents of life.

There is a sense in which Viola's works chart his own journey. Their preoccupation with water – emerging from it, plunging into it – is connected with a near-drowning experience in his childhood. The labour and delivery sequence in the *Nantes Triptych* was inspired by the birth of his first child; the dying woman was his own mother on her death bed. It was, Viola reflects, her death that began his engagement with the art of the old masters – the triptych being a contemporary art version of a fifteenth century altarpiece.

This ability to find fresh imagery for universal subjects is the reason why in the past he has succeeded marvellously in that most tricky of genres, modern religious art. As long ago as 1997, Viola's video piece *The Messenger* – in which a naked figure gradually surfaced from mysterious watery depths – was shown in Durham Cathedral to great acclaim. At the moment, five of his works, *The Passions*, are being exhibited in the cathedral of Berne, Switzerland. Often, but not always, the people in Viola's videos are actors, cast for their roles.

Such works, and also the new altarpieces for St Paul's, are not doctrinally specific. In the past, religious works often depicted a Biblical event, a drama in the life of a saint, or a theological notion such as the immaculate conception. That is not how Viola's imagination functions.

"I think we are really in need these days of searching for universals. Today various streams of the great human traditions are meeting together in a great reservoir, at the sea where all the waters mix". His own odyssey included an 18-month stay in Japan in the 1970s, simultaneously studying Zen Buddhism and video technology. He can imagine his works being placed in a Hindu temple or a Buddhist shrine, as well as in a church.

It is Christianity, however, that formed his background. "I am not a devout Christian in terms of my spiritual practice, but I am still a product of that cultural system. And of course, that cultural system is based on the body: the disintegration and transfiguration of the body".

He conceived the altarpiece dedicated to Mary to be about earth and birth, the other work is dedicated to The Martyrs (Earth, Air, Fire Water), is about death, release and ascension. It was this second work that eventually got the project started again. After a long pause, Kira Perov, Viola's wife and collaborator, decided to start again with this second work. She explained: "We pulled out all of Bill's notes, and found a drawing that he had made of the martyrs, and that's what we worked from; after that it came together very quickly. Once we can see it, we can make it".

In the past altarpieces dedicated to martyrs have tended to be rather specific about the details of torture and death: St Bartholomew being skinned alive, St Erasmus having his intestines removed with a windlass and so on. Again, Viola aimed for something different. On the four screens, four people are at first shown at peace, then each is assailed by a different element, one is licked by flames, the others by raging winds, erupting earth and a cascade of water. But all remain steadfast.

"There isn't any crazy movement", Viola explains. "Everything is held in, like in four pressure cookers. We pared it down so that we are showing people what it is like from the martyrs' point of view". The works, he feels, are among the best he has made. "Because of my age", Viola reflects, "I'm starting to see things in a much broader perspective. It's not at the micro level it was when you were in school. It's out there, and eventually it's going to go up there". He points upwards, through the glass roof of the hotel atrium at the blue London sky above and laughs. But he is not entirely joking.

Bill Viola's *Tiny Deaths* is on display at Tate Modern to coincide with the unveiling of the altarpieces at St Paul's

Martin Gayford - The Telegraph