

## Bill Viola: Life, death, ego and video

CHRISTOPHER ALLEN, THE AUSTRALIAN, MARCH 14, 2015 12:00AM



Bill Viola's *The Messenger* (1996). Picture: Kira Perov Source: Supplied

**THE fact a survey of Bill Viola's work is divided between three venues as different as an art gallery, a theatre and a cathedral tells us something about the diverse inspiration of this artist, who is one of the foremost exponents of the video medium and who employs it to express ideas that would be hard to articulate in any other art form.**

These ideas concern life and death and spiritual or even mystical experience, and it would have been natural to discuss them after Matthew Barney's *River of Fundament* in Hobart. Barney's work, inspired by Norman Mailer's *Ancient Evenings* (1983), is everything that Viola's is not: grotesque, hysterical and ultimately, like Mailer's original, rehearsing but failing to transcend the futile suffering of the modern ego.

The Viola retrospective, however, runs for a very short period and, while the AGSA part will be open until the end of this month, the other two close tomorrow, with the conclusion of the Adelaide Festival. So Barney will be discussed properly next week and is mentioned here only to bring out the contrast between these two artists, particularly in regard to a matter that will be touched on next week.

The ego is not all bad. When Jacob Burckhardt famously described the Renaissance as “the rediscovery of man and nature”, the first part of that proposition referred to the rediscovery of the individual and of the power of the ego. Leonardo da Vinci’s remarkable assertion about the value of being alone would have been familiar to antiquity but foreign to the Middle Ages and incomprehensible in traditional tribal cultures.

The ego is a source of enormous dynamism, but it is most effective when, as in all functioning cultures to varying degrees, framed by the conventions of a social and political community. For best results, the energy of the individual needs to be yoked to the common good. The trouble with the contemporary consumer culture that has spread from the US is that it combines an ideology of the unyoked ego, invited to satisfy its selfish urges, with a reality of economic constraint and mass conformity.

The combination of an ideology of individualism with the reality of a mass society that negates the individual is a recipe for ingrown narcissism and neurosis or even, in the most extreme cases, psychosis; drugs provide the emasculated ego with an illusory escape, but aggravate its misery in the longer run.

Wisdom, as philosophers in the East and West have long recognised, consists not only in maintaining the ego within appropriate social boundaries — being a good citizen, fulfilling family duties and so on — but ultimately in learning to overcome its tyranny over our minds; learning to detach ourselves, in Buddha’s terms, from desire or, as Epicurus taught, fear: precisely the horror that engulfs Mailer’s narrator at the opening of *Ancient Evenings*.

Viola is an artist whose vision is profoundly steeped in Eastern philosophies such as Zen Buddhism and Sufi mysticism, and his work has long been preoccupied with the constitution and the transcendence of the ego, as well as with the related but more metaphysical question of the passage from life to death, from being to nothingness or perhaps rather to the amorphousness of being that precedes entry into the world of becoming.

But he is an artist, not a philosopher or a spiritual master, so his thinking on these matters takes the form of powerful and suggestive images that act as something like guided meditations for those prepared to watch them patiently. Although, like all video art — it is the most common convention of the genre — his too are shown in a repeating loop, most of them have a clear beginning and end.

It would be ideal to watch these works from the start, but in practice you are likely to come in somewhere in the middle and have to watch until you get back to the same point. The works can bear this kind of viewing because ultimately they all concern cycles and recurrent patterns of change or transformation.

One piece that does not stop and begin again but flows seamlessly from apparent end into a new beginning is *The Messenger* (1996). If you were to come in at the point that could roughly be called the beginning — we might think, taking a cue from the work itself, of the point of maximum exhalation — you would see a white plasma-like form of constantly changing shape, floating in a dark blue sea.

As you watch, the shape grows in size and in definition, and we can soon make out the form of a man, slowly rising up from the depths to the surface of the water. Then he emerges, with a deep breath and a look of wonder on his face. He floats for a few moments, breathing in and out, belly expanding and contracting, then gradually submerges again, breathing out, sinking, melting back into the amorphous white form we saw at the beginning.

As the increasingly shapeless white form sinks away from us, tiny residual bubbles that dot the surface make the water look like the starry night sky. It is as though we have witnessed the emergence of the self as a distinct individual consciousness, then its dissolution again and its dispersion into the cosmos.

Similar ideas are explored through different metaphors in *The Crossing* (1996), in which two different videos are projected simultaneously and back to back, so the viewer has to walk from side to side to follow their parallel unfolding. In each case the same young man advances to the foreground, but then on one screen water begins to drip on him while in the other little flames begin to lick around his feet.

Gradually the water becomes a deluge and the flames a terrifying conflagration; the two contrary elements, one traditionally male and the other female, each result in the same outcome, the destruction or at least dissolution of the individual.

Viola is fond of these elemental themes and the most spectacular use of water is in *Tristan's Ascension*, subtitled *The Sound of a Mountain Under a Waterfall* (2005). This is, incidentally, the only work shown sequentially with another piece instead of having a screen and projection space to itself, and not surprisingly the piece with which it is twinned is *Fire Woman* (2005).

In *Tristan*, we first see the dead knight lying on a stone slab; we assume that the camera is running and that time is passing but the absolute immobility of the unbreathing figure shows that it is in fact a still shot. Then it begins to rain. Drops splash on to the slab and the earth around. But as the drops grow heavier, we realise that it is not raining in the usual way, that is down from sky to earth. It is raining up: the rain becomes torrential and the ground is flooded around the slab, but the water appears to be rushing upwards.

The idea that is evoked is matter is somehow being drawn heavenward by an irresistible force of attraction, like an inverse, spiritual form of gravity. As the paradoxical storm intensifies, Tristan's body begins to rise slowly with the water, becoming diaphanous and ascending at last out of our sight.

Water and fire are clearly the elements most evocative of change and transformation, and water is used by Viola in another way too, as a kind of barrier or frontier between the worlds of the dead and the living. It was employed in this way in a three-screen work that he made for the Venice Biennale in 2007.

In the Lady Chapel at St Peter's Cathedral is a single-screen work in which Viola revisits this idea. In *Three Women* (2008) the performers are a mother and her two daughters, so that there is a natural bond between them as well as a family resemblance. Their movements have been carefully choreographed so that they start as a tableau of small grey figures, looking almost like statues. They advance towards us, in slow motion as always. Then the mother is the first to lead the way through the water into the world of light and life; and after the girls have come through too, the mother is the first to return to the darkness. There is no pause or stasis, only the movement of coming into this world followed by the movement of return. As the three women depart, there is a muted but irresistible pathos, their graceful figures each representing a phase in a woman's life, from childhood to maturity to motherhood.

As suggested, you have to give these works time. How much time does art need? British art historian Kenneth Clark, when asked how long it takes to look at a picture properly, is said to have replied about the same time it takes to peel and eat an orange. Having just timed this activity, I can report that it is about four to five minutes. By this measure, most of Viola's pieces would require about two oranges.

This is important because Viola's works are not about something so much as they are something. They don't inculcate a lesson; rather they induct the viewer into an experience that has the potential to make subtle changes in the way we see the world, to recalibrate our sensibility, if we only have the patience to lend ourselves to the work, to answer its invitation.

### **Bill Viola: Selected Works**

Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. Until March 29.

Queen's Theatre and St Peter's Cathedral. Until tomorrow.

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<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/bill-viola-life-death-ego-and-video/story-fn9n8gph-1227260114196>