

# ARTIST ROOMS

## Bill Viola

Bill Viola (born 1951) is a pioneer of video art and has been one of the medium's most important practitioners for more than forty years. Recognised around the world as one of today's leading artists, Viola has been instrumental in the establishment of video as a vital form of contemporary art. In doing so, he has greatly helped to expand its scope in terms of technology, content and historical context.

Viola seamlessly merges a profound creative imagination with cutting-edge technologies. His work is renowned for its precision and simplicity while fusing the influences of painting, photography and cinema. Since the early 1970s Viola has used video to explore universal human experiences and consciousness, birth and death. Interested in world religions from an early age, Viola has often suggested that his practice is driven by a broad interest in the existence of a spiritual realm, rather than by the creed of any particular faith. Viola believes that art has an enlightening and redemptive function, saying: *'Images have transformative powers within the individual self ... art can articulate a kind of healing or growth or completion process.'*

The three works in this exhibition are from the *Passions*, a series of video works whose theme is the expression of emotions. Viola began to explore this new direction in 2000, following his year-long study residency at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles. The *Passions* is influenced by Western and Eastern spiritual practices and religious art, and Viola's personal experience of loss following the death of his parents.

*Surrender*, *Catherine's Room* and *Four Hands* were all created in 2001 and are inspired in large part by Viola's study of European religious paintings of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. They are a departure from his museum installations of the late 1980s and 1990s with multiple projections and sound. Silent and intimate in scale, they appear like moving paintings. Viola turns his camera to actors and uses extreme slow motion to explore states of consciousness and shifts in human expression. His psychologically intense depictions of the faces and bodies of his performers inspire empathy in the viewer. The three works are sustained meditations on time, ritual, and human emotions.

# ***Catherine's Room* 2001**

Colour video polyptych, 5 flat panel displays

18:39 minutes

Performer: Weba Garretson

ARTIST ROOMS National Galleries of Scotland and Tate. Acquired jointly through The d'Offay Donation with assistance from the National Heritage Memorial Fund and Art Fund 2008  
AR00042

*Catherine's Room* is inspired by a late fourteenth-century predella by Sienese artist Andrea di Bartolo depicting five scenes from the life of St. Catherine of Siena. Predellas typically appear at the bottom of large altarpieces and take the form of a sequence of small narrative paintings depicting the lives of the saints.

Viola provided actress Weba Garretson with material for her to study that would evoke the spirit of a solitary pious woman. Her everyday actions are coloured by associations with European history and traditional images of sanctity and duty. Yet Catherine moves about mindfully in the Buddhist sense, her attention fastened on the ordinary tasks she is performing, thereby making of them a spiritual practice.

Image caption: Andrea di Bartolo *St Catherine of Siena with Four Dominicans of the Third Order* c.1400

Credit: Sailko, licensed under CC BY 3.0

***Catherine's Room*** is a private view into the room of a solitary woman who goes about a series of daily rituals, from morning until night. The woman's actions are simple and purposeful and appear simultaneously in parallel ... In the morning she is seen preparing for the new day by doing yoga exercises. In the afternoon she mends clothes as sunlight pours in through the window. At sunset she struggles to overcome a block with her intellectual work as a writer. In the evening she enters a reflective state by lighting rows of candles to illuminate her darkened room. Finally, at night she prepares for bed: she puts out the lights, removes her clothes, and slowly drifts off to sleep, alone in the still dark room.

A small window in the wall reveals a view of the outside world where the branches of a tree are visible. In each panel the tree is seen in successive stages of its annual cycle, from spring blossoms to bare branches. The world outside the window represents another layer of time, transforming the scene from a record of one day into the larger view of a life bound to the cycles of nature.

- Bill Viola

# ***Surrender* 2001**

Colour video diptych, 2 flat panel displays

30:51 minutes

Performers: John Fleck, Weba Garretson

National Galleries of Scotland. Presented by Anne & Anthony d'Offay  
through the Art Fund 2003

GMA 4683

*Surrender* depicts an extreme emotional trajectory for the male and female actors, who convey deep anguish through choreographed movements of face and body. Viola uses slow motion and inversion to intensify their extraordinary actions and adds a metaphorical element – the water in which they are each reflected. Long before he shot this piece, Viola called it 'Crying – Returning to the Source of Tears', suggesting one association for the water.

Water is a recurring element in Viola's work. He explored the surface of water in *The Reflecting Pool*, describing the reflections as 'a world of virtual images and indirect perceptions': water can deceive us, then drown us.

Image caption: Bill Viola, *The Reflecting Pool*, 1977-9

Photo: Kira Perov © Bill Viola Studio

*The man and woman perform three synchronised prostrations of increasing emotional intensity and duration. At first, this appears to bring them physically closer to each other as if to embrace or kiss. However, their actions reveal the presence of the water's surface below at the edge of the screen, and they physically penetrate the surface face-first. As they emerge, their sorrow and anguish appear to increase along with the undulating disturbances on the surface of the water that they have caused. When the images of their bodies themselves begin to break up into rippling, wavering forms, it becomes apparent that we have been looking at their reflection on the surface of the water all along ... This 'image of an image' becomes more violent and distorted each time they enter the water, until finally their extreme emotional and physical intensity peaks and their visual forms disintegrate into abstract patterns of pure light and colour.*

- Bill Viola

## ***Four Hands* 2001**

Black and white video polyptych, 4 flat panels

Continuously running

Performers: Blake Viola, Kira Perov, Bill Viola, Lois Stark

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Four pairs of hands, each filmed separately, trace and retrace the lines of a family. The first hands belong to Bill's son, Blake; the next are those of Blake's mother, Kira; Bill's hands are next to Kira's hands; and the pair at the end of the sequence are those of an actress but imply Bill's own mother. These hands represent youth and age, male and female, and demonstrate doubt, affirmation, nurturing, offering and hope. The relations between the hands are musical, the sequencing elusive. The range of gestures are performed, some with Christian associations of prayer or supplication, others from the long tradition in Asia of symbolic gestures of Hindu and Buddhist *mudras*. Viola also drew inspiration from a seventeenth-century engraving of a vocabulary of hand-gestures.

Image caption: Detail of chirogrammatical table, engraving from John Bulwer *Chirologia: or the natural language of the hand* 1644

Credit: Wellcome Library, London, licensed under CC BY 4.0

*Shot with a black-and-white low-light camera, the hands of a young boy, middle-aged woman and man, and an elderly woman are seen as they slowly and deliberately form a series of predetermined gestures. The gestures are both familiar and strange, influenced by a variety of sources ... The symbolic patterns of the motions of three generations of hands – son, mother, father, grandmother - describe a timeline that encompasses both the parallel actions of the individual in the present moment and the larger movements of the stages of human life.*

- Bill Viola



ARTIST ROOMS presents the work of international artists in solo exhibitions drawn from a national touring collection jointly owned by the Tate and National Galleries of Scotland. Its programme reaches audiences across the UK and is developed through local partnerships.

This exhibition has been organised by National Galleries of Scotland and Tate and realised in collaboration with Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery.

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