

PROJECT 17

Bill Viola

2008

Fire Woman

Tristan's Ascension (The Sound of a Mountain Under a Waterfall)

9 April – 30 May, 2008

St Saviour's Church, Redfern, Sydney

BIOGRAPHY

Bill Viola has been experimenting with video art since the early 1970s, and has been instrumental in its development as a major contemporary artform. Viola's unique style and imagery, expressed through his extraordinary range of works, has defined a new language for the moving image, using its fluid, ephemeral nature as a means to explore life and death, the reach and limitations of perception and cognition. In exploring universal elements of spiritual themes, his works often echo medieval and Renaissance paintings, seeming at once contemporary and timeless meditations on the human experience.

FACTS

- Viola is inspired by Zen Buddhism, Christian mysticism and Islamic Sufism.
- In Australia, two works from Viola's series *The Tristan Project – Fire Woman*, 2005, and *Tristan's Ascension*, 2005 – were presented nightly at St Saviour's Church in Redfern on a 6m x 3m screen beneath an arched ceiling.
- St Saviour's Church was built in 1885 designed in a Romanesque revival style. It is a unique location for both its architecture and its connection to the local Aboriginal community.
- Viola and his partner Kira Perov travelled to Australia to create the installation at St Saviour's Church and to install *The Fall into Paradise* at the Art Gallery of NSW.
- All works were originally created for the Los Angeles Philharmonic presentation of Wagner's 19th century opera *Tristan and Isolde*.
- The works shown in Sydney were created for the opera's final act, in which the two lovers are united in death.
- Viola drew inspiration from elemental transformations described in the *Tibetan book of the dead*.
- *Watching the contemporary art scene converge on an exhibition in St Saviour's on the unfamiliar turf of a neglected, minority community, and witnessing members of that same community arrive at their church to discover a contemporary video artwork featuring archetypal images of disintegration and resurrection, made it one of the most personally meaningful exhibitions of my career.*

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

Bill Viola has developed a unique body of work since his first experiments with film and video in the early 1970s and is celebrated today as one of the world's leading video artists. For Project 17, two works from Viola's 2005 series *The Tristan Project* were presented nightly at St Saviour's Church in Redfern, Sydney, in April and May 2008. The darkened church was lit with a larger-than-life projection of *Fire Woman* and *Tristan's Ascension* (*The Sound of a Mountain Under a Waterfall*), mesmerising images of catharsis and ascension accompanied by resonating sound.

Over almost four decades, Viola has developed a unique symbolism expressed through an extraordinary range of works. He has been instrumental in the development of video as a major artform and has defined a new language for the moving image, using its fluid, ephemeral nature as a means to explore life and death, the reach and limitations of perception and cognition. Exploring the universal elements of spiritual themes, his works often echo medieval and Renaissance painting, sometimes wavering between figurative scenes and flickering shadows and abstractions. Dreamlike, they seem at once contemporary and timeless meditations on the human experience.

Viola's installation at St Saviour's Church screened *Fire Woman* and *Tristan's Ascension*, while a third work, *The Fall into Paradise*, was shown at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. All of the works were originally created for a Los Angeles Philharmonic presentation of Wagner's 19th-century opera *Tristan and Isolde* in collaboration with director Peter Sellars and conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen. The works shown in Sydney were created for the opera's final act, in which the two lovers are united in death. Viola drew their inspiration from elemental transformations described in the Tibetan book of the dead. *Fire Woman* depicts 'an image seen in the mind's eye of a dying man', while *Tristan's Ascension* portrays 'the ascent of the soul in the space after death'.

The display at St Saviour's retained the dramatic quality of the original presentations. Shown at night on a 6 x 3 metre screen, beneath a soaring arched ceiling, alongside stained-glass windows and brick columns and accompanied by a multi-channel soundtrack (of fire in one work and water in the other), it created a breathtaking ambience. In the night-time setting of St Saviour's, these arresting images and sounds created a trance-like meditative state, an experience of contemplation and discovery shared by art-world visitors, locals and passers-by alike.

Kaldor Public Art
Project 17: Bill
Viola, *Fire Woman*,
St Saviour's Church,
Redfern, Sydney,
9 April - 30 May,
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Photo: Kira Perov



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