

Space for cool, clear visionary

It's likely that Wagner, himself a daring and innovative artist, would appreciate Bill Viola's mysterious video installations, writes Matthew Westwood

THE British music critic Michael Tanner, in his study of Richard Wagner, makes a startling claim for the composer's opera *Tristan und Isolde*. He writes: "Along with Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, it is one of the two greatest religious works of our culture."

There is no disputing the case for Bach: the *St Matthew* solemnly re-enacts Christ's final hours, summoning the great mysteries of Christianity for its audience-congregation. *Tristan*, on the other hand, contains no reference to Christianity or any formal religion, tells a story of adultery, and expresses itself not in ecclesiastical tones but in lush and frankly erotic music, though Wagner does draw on Christian imagery such as the communal cup.

The US video artist Bill Viola has created an interpretation of Wagner's opera that also summons life's unknowables without reference to a specific faith. His installation piece *The Tristan Project*, showing in Sydney, depicts human beings in extremis: "the times when you fall in love, the times when you lose yourself, the times when you have a major experience".

The Tristan Project comprises three videos, each about 10 minutes long, that were part of a four-hour installation Viola made for Peter Sellars's production of *Tristan und Isolde* in 2005. One of the videos is showing from today at the Art Gallery of NSW, and two are screening on a repeated loop at St Saviour's church in Redfern, in inner Sydney.

"Wagner made a contemporary artwork out of a traditional theme, out of a myth, and we all know that myths are timeless," Viola says, sitting on a pew. "The nature of a myth is a story that exists outside of time; it's not about the latest information. So in a way, Wagner went back not to European history, but to mythology, pulled this story out and updated it for a contemporary audience."

St Saviour's Anglican church — in romantic style, with beautiful, unadorned Victor-

ian installation by author David Malouf, who lives in the area; the installation was made possible by Kaldor Art Projects. Viola and his Australian-born wife and executive producer, Kira Perov, attended the opening on Tuesday night.

In the darkened nave, a large, vertical screen is positioned where an altar painting might be placed. The first video, *Fire Woman*, begins with the silhouette of a female figure standing against a wall of fire (the soundtrack is not of music from the opera, but the intense roar of a conflagration).

It becomes apparent that the woman is slowly walking towards the viewer, and with arms outstretched she falls into a body of water. The image of reflected flames slowly dissolves into the pool's undulating surface.

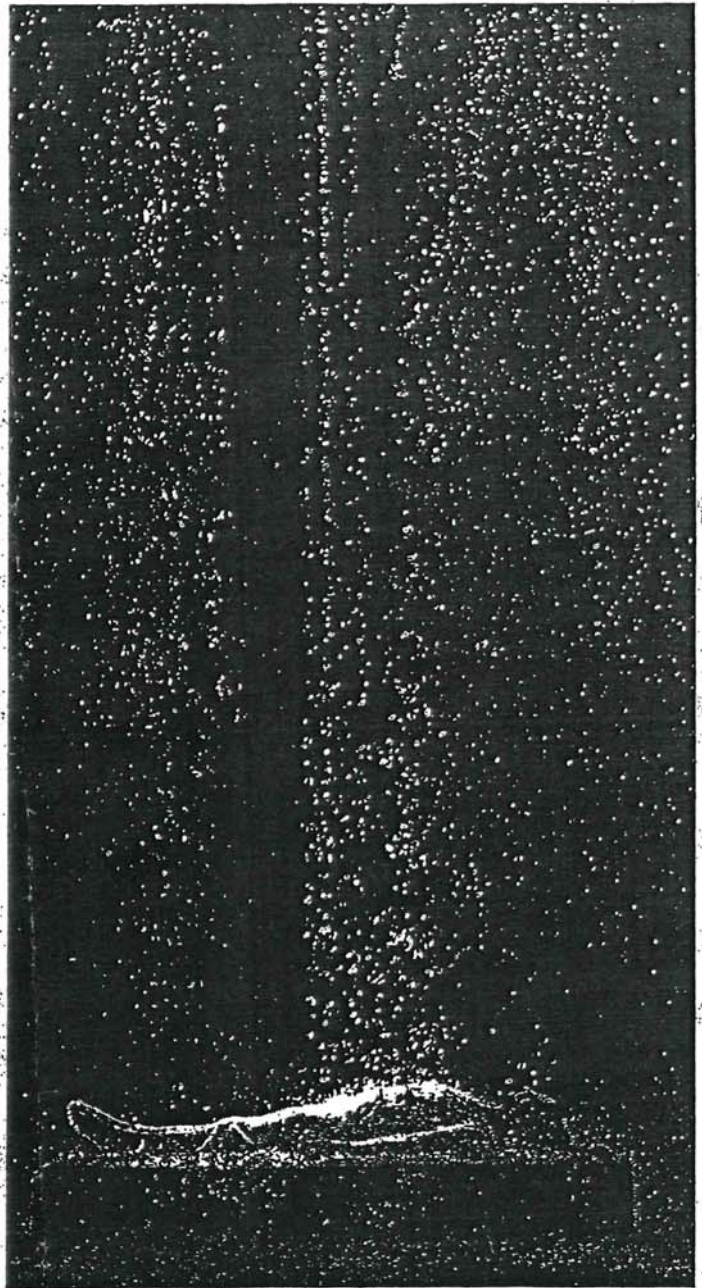
The second video, *Tristan's Ascension* (*The Sound of a Mountain Under a Waterfall*), begins with the figure of a dead man on a tomb. Droplets of water start to fall — upwards — and the stream becomes a cascade. The man's body begins to move and then lift up in a kind of watery resurrection. The water stops, leaving the image of an empty tomb.

In the setting of St Saviour's, the images of purification and rebirth — fire and water — become loaded with associations that may or may not have anything to do with either Wagner or Christianity.

The third video, which is showing at the AGNSW, is called *The Fall into Paradise*. It begins as a single point of light that in close-up reveals a man and woman entwined. They crash through a watery surface, rushing towards the viewer.

Video art, especially when such arresting images are shown with startling clarity, serves Wagner's music-drama well. The composer developed the theory of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*: the total work of art that would incorporate music, dramatic action and all the elements of scenic design in a unified performance.

Ahead of his time in so many areas of the performing arts, Wagner, we can conjecture,



Spellbinding: *Tristan's Ascension* (*The Sound of a Mountain Under a Waterfall*), by Bill Viola

video and computer-generated imagery offer. After all, his most ambitious work, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, depicts nothing less than the world's beginning and end.

Tristan und Isolde offers no less scope for the imagination. So much of the action is internalised, as Tristan and Isolde sing of their longed-for *liebste*: transcendent love in death. The music, revolutionary in its day, all but abandons traditional harmony in

These two elements of the opera find echoes in the symbolism and slowed-down, fluid movement in Viola's video work. Viola began creating video art in 1970 and came into contact with other pioneers in music and video: David Tudor, pianist for composer John Cage; and the Korean-American artist Nam June Paik. Recognised now as one of the world's leading practitioners in this field, Viola has presented video works in sacred



Video as part of life's fabric: US video artist Bill Viola in front of his installation *Fire Woman*, at St Saviour's Church in Redfern, Sydney
Picture: Bob Finlayson

'We thought that the video would bring (the opera) almost into the vernacular of our time'

Bill Viola, video artist

Ocean Without a Shore, was created for the 15th-century chapel of San Gallo for the Venice Biennale last year.

He started shooting footage for *The Tristan Project* in 2004. Before that, he and Perov had wide-ranging discussions with Sellars, the opera's director, and conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen. Viola says he and Sellars began their preparations by listening to the 1966 Bayreuth recording, with Birgit Nilsson and Wolfgang Windgassen. "There were these voices bellowing and I just got panicked a bit," he says. "I thought music will be important in the editing room, because editing is structuring time: it's the visual art equivalent of a composer, who structures time. But the story is where the images are. So I put the music away and focused on the libretto, and let the images come."

One of the scenarios — the video at St Saviour's now called *Tristan's Ascension* — had been devised by Viola before his involvement in the opera. But others were created especially, and filmed in a giant aircraft hangar in California that Viola says has been used to manufacture parts for the space shuttle.

The work was first presented, in concert performance with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, at the Walt Disney Concert Hall in December 2004. The first fully staged performances were at the Paris Opera in April 2005. The videos served as backgrounds to the singers and stage action.

Video enables tricks of the eye, but its magic can be obtrusive.

Last weekend, another production of *Tristan und Isolde*, from the Metropolitan

Australia as part of the Met's terrific HD Live series of digital broadcasts.

The transmission was directed by Barbara Willis Sweete, who was overly enthusiastic in her use of split-screen effects, close-ups of the singers and multiple viewpoints. The rectilinear form of Sweete's video windows jarred with the free-flowing contours of the music.

Viola's video accompaniments for *Tristan und Isolde* — seen by this writer in Los Angeles last year — were spellbinding when he used metaphor and symbol, but fell flat when he tended towards literal representation. For the famous Act II love duet, Viola had a man and a woman standing face to face while the camera circled around them.

So prosaic and sentimental, it killed any possibility of triggering the viewer's erotic imagination.

At one of the performances in Paris, Viola recalls, a woman walked out of the theatre screeching when the video depicted a man and a woman undressing.

"People are uncomfortable about a lot of things," Viola says. "The contemporary art world is uncomfortable with some of the images, because they felt it was too romantic, but I really wanted to play with that. I wouldn't have done exactly the things I did, with the performers I work with, had it been for an (art) museum."

Nevertheless, Viola says, audiences responded positively to a video screen in the opera house, particularly for such a progressive opera as *Tristan und Isolde*.

"When we took on this project, we thought that the video would bring (the opera) almost into the vernacular of our time: everyone understands the electronic image now," he says.

"Video was avant-garde when I started 35 years ago, but today it's like part of the fabric of life. And the audience was right there, from the very first frame."

The *Tristan Project* is at the Art Gallery of NSW until July 27, and at St Saviour's,

Plunge into love's passion

Fire and water create an immersive experience in this video-art backdrop to Wagner's *Tristan And Isolde*.

VISUAL ART JOHN McDONALD

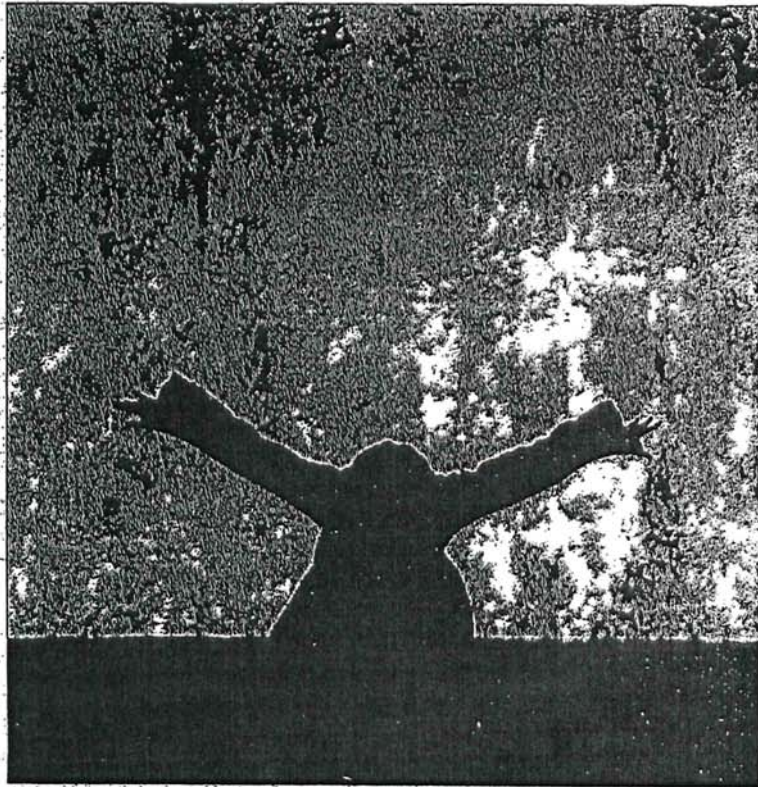
Bill Viola:
The Tristan Project
The Fall Into Paradise
Art Gallery of NSW, until July 27
Fire Woman
Tristan's Ascension (The Sound
Of A Mountain Under A
Waterfall)
Kaldor Art Projects at St
Saviour's Church, Redfern
(6.30-10.30pm) until May 23

NO VENUE could be more appropriate for Bill Viola's *The Tristan Project* than a church. An intimation of Eastern spirituality in the American video artist's early works has grown into an overpowering sense of religiosity, as Viola uses high-tech means to explore the same Christian traditions that provided subjects for the artists of the Renaissance and the Middle Ages.

Every evening from 6.30 to 10.30, until May 17, the Church of St Saviour's in Young Street, Redfern, is hosting two parts of *The Tristan Project*: *Fire Woman* and *Tristan's Ascension (The Sound Of A Mountain Under A Waterfall)*. This is the latest in a long line of John Kaldor art projects, dating back to the time Christo and Jeanne-Claude wrapped Little Bay in 1969. Viola (b. 1951) has long been a favourite artist for Kaldor and his wife, Naomi Milgrom, and few of the art events they have sponsored will have been more satisfying.

The third part of the project, *The Fall Into Paradise*, can be seen at the Art Gallery of NSW - the recent beneficiary of the gift of Kaldor's \$35 million collection of contemporary art.

St Saviour's is an Anglican church with a close connection to the local Aboriginal community. It is also one



In his element ... detail from Viola's *Fire Woman*.

of Sydney's most surprising pieces of architecture, built in 1885 from a design by A. and C. Blackett in a style that could only be described as Romanesque revival. Since the heyday of the Romanesque was about 1100, it feels strange to be entering such a building in Redfern, across the road from a high-rise housing estate. Add a dark and stormy night and the effect is uncanny. Inside, you walk down the aisle in darkness, conscious of the soaring height of the ceiling and a six-metre by three-metre vertical video screen looming where the altar should be.

Instantly the screen is lit up by roaring flames with the sound coming at you from all sides. A silhouette of a hooded figure stands motionless in front of the conflagration, finally plunging

forward with an almighty splash. For the next few minutes flames and water intermingle until the liquid element has won the battle.

In the second part of the work we see a young man dressed in white lying motionless on a slab. Water begins to trickle down from the top of the screen, gradually increasing in force. The figure is sucked upwards and out of the picture by the torrent. The downpour subsides, leaving only the bare slab.

The entire presentation takes 20 minutes, although the action occurs in excruciating slow motion - one of Viola's trademarks.

At the Art Gallery of NSW we stand in a darkened room, watching a tiny pinprick of light loom larger and larger, until the figures of a man and a woman plunge explosively into frame. Our own

vantage point is suddenly revealed as being under water and we watch the figures revolve slowly, wreathed in bubbles. The sounds of the splash and the frantic release of bubbles are loud and dramatic. Gradually, they begin their ascent to the surface.

These three scenarios are all there is to *The Tristan Project* as it is being seen in Sydney. They are extracts from a four-hour video work created by Viola as a backdrop for Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan And Isolde*, directed by Peter Sellars, who may be remembered for his brief, unhappy tenure as director of the Adelaide Festival of Arts. The work was first presented over three successive nights at the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles in 2004 and given a full stage production the following year at the Opera Bastille in Paris.

The *Tristan* extracts may be summarily described but they carry a monumental burden of meaning. Viola describes the opera as "the story of a love so intense and profound that it cannot be contained in the material bodies of the lovers. In order to fully realise their love, Tristan and Isolde must ultimately transcend life itself."

This is a textbook way of looking at one of the most powerful and influential works of art in the Western canon. Based on a Celtic legend, the story revolves around the impossible love between Tristan, the nephew of King Marke of Cornwall, and the Irish princess Isolde, who is to be married to his uncle. The couple drink a powerful love potion believing it to be poison and consummate their passion with the thought of death running through their minds. This linking of love and death is the major theme of the opera, reaching its apotheosis in the famous *Liebestod* (*Love-death*) aria as the work nears its tragic - but transcendental - conclusion.

The full story is more complex, filled with echoes of past misdeeds, acts of treachery and noble sentiments. In the original



Deep ... a still from Bill Viola's *The Fall into Paradise*.

myth, the love potion provided an explanation for a morbid passion that would have been condemned by the Church. For Wagner, the potion is nothing more than a device that allows Tristan and Isolde to reveal the true nature of their feelings. In a highly modern way, he introduces a disturbing set of psychological and sexual elements into the towering metaphysical edifice of the opera.

The music is of a similar magnitude to the drama. With its revolutionary approach to harmonics and orchestral colour, *Tristan And Isolde* (1865) has been seen as the culmination of the Romantic era and the gateway to the music of the 20th century.

It was Rossini who famously quipped that Wagner had great moments but dreadful quarter hours, and many exhausted concertgoers have echoed that verdict. Yet there is no composer who inspires such fanatical devotion. Like the leader of a powerful cult, Wagner expects us to enter fully into his musical and dramatic universe. Even for those of us who resist treating Wagner's operas as a religious experience, they are still

After a pause for reflection, Viola's *The Tristan Project* seems remarkably uncomplicated.

aesthetic events of a high order. The love-death of Tristan and Isolde finds its echo in a musical score that demands the total immersion of the listener.

Was this how Bill Viola first started thinking about Wagner - as an immersive experience? Nothing could key in more precisely with the kind of imagery that he has been exploring for more than a decade: videos of people emerging like rockets from pools of water, created by simply running the film backwards.

As with Wagner, Viola has some dreadful quarter-hours in his back catalogue. As I've stood in a darkened room watching a scene

changing ever so slowly, I've had plenty of time to reflect on the meaning and intentions of Viola's work. Despite some memorable, breathtaking moments, too often his videos fail to sustain the grandiose expectations they set in motion. In this instance, it would be fascinating to see the rest of the project as part of a full production of *Tristan And Isolde*. Only by pairing Viola's video sequences with Wagner's music might we get the full measure of their profundity or banality.

As it is, the three parts shown in Sydney - with appropriate roaring, surging, dripping sound effects - represent the simplest of visual metaphors. In Viola's own words, the fiery projection at St Saviour's, while the watery piece shows the ascension of the soul. *The Fall Into Paradise* at the Art Gallery of NSW shows Tristan and Isolde literally "taking the plunge", into the affair that will be their undoing.

Viola's notes in the brochure are straightforward and a big advance on curator Tony Bond's essay, which wanders off into a discussion of conceptual art and

contains such propositions as "Floating between worlds can induce a state of reverie." Yes, quite. All that is missing is "Don't try it at home."

Proceedings need not be so convoluted. After a pause for reflection, Viola's *The Tristan Project* seems remarkably uncomplicated. So much so that it hardly does justice to the complexities of the opera or to Wagner's *Liebestod*. There is a certain justice in the fact that the work was first seen in a concert hall named after Walt Disney because Viola's brand of religious symbolism is pure Disneyland. In common with the quasi-Romanesque church of St Saviour's, *The Tristan Project* is an elegant pastiche. It is beautifully constructed and presented, makes a powerful first impression but - on the evidence of these three small segments - it is as far removed from Wagner's vision as our secular society is from the religious fervour of the Middle Ages; or latter-day Redfern from the medieval city of Mainz. It is unsettling, though, to enter a church and find a gigantic video screen where we might expect to find God.

BILL VIOLA

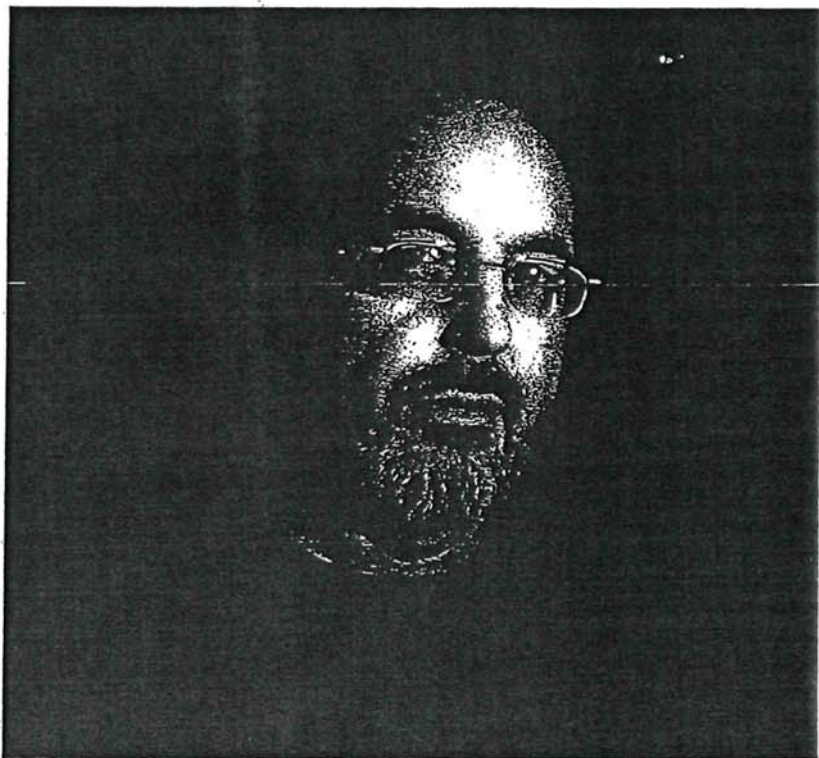
Story Prue Gibson

Video pioneer Bill Viola explores universal concerns of love and mortality with exhibitions in an inner Sydney church and the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

BILL VIOLA, whose heavenly video apparitions will be shown at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and Redfern's St Saviour's Church this April, had just made a cup of tea and was "happy as a clam" to talk to Artist Profile about his much-lauded video visions of passion and loss.

Kaldor Art Projects and the AGNSW have collaborated to exhibit three pieces from Viola's respected Tristan Project for the two Sydney venues. The Tristan Project began in 2004 as a collaboration between Viola, stage director Peter Sellars and conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen to produce a new, multimedia version of Richard Wagner's 19th-century opera *Tristan und Isolde*. It was presented first in concert form by the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 2004, then as a fully staged opera in 2005 by the Paris National Opera. In 2006, Viola subsequently created a suite of stand-alone video artworks based on the opera images but without Wagner's music.

Working on the opera allowed Viola to extend his lifelong engagement with the human condition into ancient themes of life, love and death. He says, "Tristan and Isolde is a myth which goes back into the recesses of time and explores the fundamental equation of the male and the female. It is a story that has been told in many different ways in most ancient traditions, from East to West. It is ubiquitous but it boils down to the simple, profound, fundamental question: would you be willing to die for love?"



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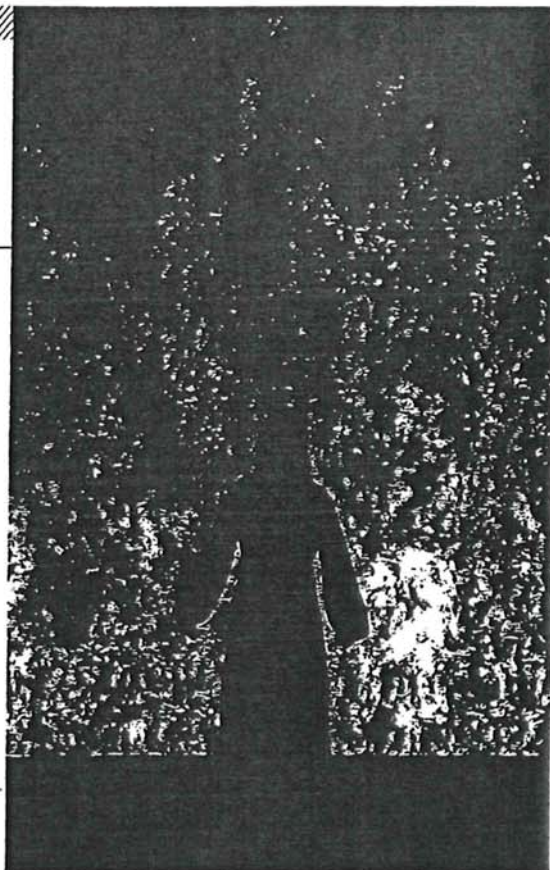


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Bill Viola has had a lifetime to ponder such questions. He is a pioneer of video art and one of the leading artists of our time. In a career spanning 36 years, he has created videotapes, architectural video installations, sound environments, electronic music performances and works for television broadcast. His work can be found in major museums and art collections worldwide. He has also created images for live music performances, including by rock band Nine Inch Nails in 2000. Viola began with an equal interest in art and music, performing throughout the 1970s with avant-garde composer David Tudor in his Rainforest ensemble. He credits his early musical experiences as a drummer in a rock band and a composer of electronic music in providing a solid foundation for his work with the time-based medium of video, which places equal emphasis on image and sound.

Viola's video works have been shown globally, the most recent being *Ocean Without a Shore* at the 2007 Venice Biennale. They have had a profound effect on a younger generation of technologically savvy artists. When asked what is the most important aspect of his work, he says: "The phenomenon of the threshold. We are confronted our whole lives by thresholds and transitional states – the passage from day to night, waking to sleeping, joy to sorrow, presence to absence, life to death. We are the only animals to live constantly with the knowledge of our own mortality. This fact, what we call 'the human condition', has been a theme for artists since time immemorial."

In the three works to be shown in Sydney – *Fire Woman*, *Tristan's Ascension (The Sound of a Mountain Under a Waterfall)* and *The Fall*



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into Paradise, all from 2005 – the earthly forms of the lovers, whose desires in this world could never be fulfilled, are transformed to an ethereal existence where life's ultimate sacrifice leads to an embrace in eternity. In the course of this process, Viola's figures move through elemental states of fire and water. Viola, who nearly drowned in a lake at age six, says: "The threshold between life and death is as a fragile as a soap bubble. Death is not a wall you break through in a struggle. We are constantly oscillating between the physical and the metaphysical dimensions of our beings. It is so easy sometimes to go too far and let go – to slip through into the other world."

Viola watched the shafts of light and the swimming fish from the bottom of that upstate New York lake. "For what seemed like an eternity, I was in a peaceful, calm, blissful state," he says. "I didn't know I was dying." This delicate, exquisite shifting between life and death is poignantly detailed in his three videos. They present us with mystical, mythical apparitions – figures that fall forwards with arms outstretched, levitate from a stone with torrents of water or float as lovers entwined in a slow, watery dance.

Clearly, there are strong religious or spiritual references in Viola's entire body of work – but not to one particular religious text or doctrine. Viola's imagery is universal and relates more to interdisciplinary, cross-cultural myths of life and death, loss and hope, than a churchy morality tale. He was brought up in the Episcopal Church but tossed aside any connection once he started university. However in 1980, he and his long-time working partner Kira Perov (whom Viola describes

The threshold of death has interested me all my life. We live constantly with the knowledge of our own mortality.

as central to his art and ideas, and whose 'voice' reverberates through the work) travelled to Japan for an exchange fellowship. There, they met a Zen Buddhist teacher, Master Daicn Tanaka, a wandering sage, who changed their lives. Through this direct experience of Asian religion, Viola discovered a new depth to his own tradition. He explains: "Discovering these non-Western religious traditions opened a new perspective for my art and life practice – formally, conceptually and temporally. My experience with Tanaka taught me the importance of living, or becoming the words, the knowledge, rather than simply reading or memorising them – making it reside in your body, not just your head. In this way it is of the present,

- 01 Bill Viola Photo: Wouter Vandenbrink, 2006
- 02 The Fall into Paradise, 2005, video/sound installation
- 03 Fire Woman, 2005, video/sound installation
- 04 Fire Woman, 2005, video/sound installation
Video stills: Kira Perov



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alive, and not past and dead. I began a long-term process of studying some of the sacred texts from Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic and Christian sources, what certain scholars call the "wisdom tradition". I dislike the word 'spiritual' – it reminds me of the 'spiritualism' of the 19th century, basically a form of ignorance about the true nature of Eastern and Middle Eastern teachings. I place 'New Age' in this category, too. Although their institutional forms have become calcified, corrupted and/or oppressive, the roots of these traditions are like clear streams. They are what they say they are – 'wisdom traditions', vast reservoirs of some of the deepest knowledge human beings can have. This is why it is sad but understandable to me that when you mention the word 'spiritual' in contemporary art circles, eyes roll and open minds close. The irony is that most of art history is devoted to the practice of creating something unique and profound for a source or presence higher than the self."