

# PROJECT 21

## Bill Viola

### 2010

#### *Fire Woman*

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

8 October – 23 October 2010

St Carthage's Church, Melbourne

#### *The Raft*

8 October – 23 October 2010

Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Melbourne

## 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.
- Two works from Viola's series *The Tristan Project – Fire Woman*, 2005, and *Tristan's Ascension*, 2005 – were presented nightly at St Carthage's Church in Melbourne on a 6m x 3m screen beneath an arched ceiling.
- Both works were originally created for the Los Angeles Philharmonic presentation of Wagner's 19<sup>th</sup> century opera *Tristan and Isolde*.
- The works shown 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.*  
- Bill Viola

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#### PROJECT OVERVIEW

Bill Viola is considered a pioneer in the medium of video art and is internationally recognised as one of today's leading artists. He has been instrumental in the establishment of video as a vital form of contemporary art and, in so doing, has helped to greatly expand its scope in terms of technology, content and historical reach. In collaboration with the Melbourne Festival and Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Project 21 presented Viola's haunting video installations *Fire Woman* and *Tristan's Ascension* inside a church in Parkville. A second work, *The Raft*, was also presented at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image as part of the project.

For 40 years Viola has created architectural video installations, films, sound environments, electronic music performances, flat panel video pieces, videos for television broadcast as well as for music concerts, opera and sacred spaces. His single-channel videotapes have been widely distributed on DVD, while his writings have been extensively published and translated for international readers. Viola's video works masterfully utilise sophisticated media technologies while exploring the spiritual and perceptual side of human experience. Focusing on universal human themes of birth, death and the unfolding of consciousness, they have roots in both Eastern and Western art, as well as the spiritual traditions of Zen Buddhism, Islamic Sufism and Christian mysticism.

Viola visited Melbourne for his installation at St Carthage's Church, screening his 2005 works *Fire Woman* and *Tristan's Ascension*, and to install a third work, *The Raft*, 2004, at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image. The works shown at St Carthage's were originally created for a Los Angeles Philharmonic presentation of Wagner's 19th-century opera *Tristan und Isolde* in collaboration with director Peter Sellars and conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen. They 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'. After a successful presentation in Sydney for Project 17 in 2008, these works were installed a second time in this new setting for Project 21.

The work installed at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, *The Raft*, showed a group of men and women from various ethnic and economic backgrounds, waiting in a line, they are suddenly struck by a massive onslaught of water that knocks over some, while others brace themselves against the unprovoked deluge and fight for survival. Water flies everywhere, clothing and bodies are pummelled, faces and limbs contort in stress and agony against the cold, hard force. Then, as suddenly as it arrived, the water stops, leaving behind a band of suffering, bewildered and battered individuals. The work unfolds in extreme slow motion to reveal subtle nuances of light and colour in the explosive impact of the water and the individual expressions and gestures of the figures faced with the overwhelming assault. Described by the artist as 'an image of destruction and survival', this powerful and extremely moving work is a symbol of hope in the difficult times we find ourselves.

Kaldor Public Art  
Project 21: Bill  
Viola, *Fire Woman*,  
St Carthage's  
Church, Melbourne,  
8 October - 23  
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