

## A Rembrandt for the video age

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While Bill Viola's chosen vehicle is video, his art recalls another, centuries-old medium.

The most powerful show by a living artist to be seen in Britain today is at the Anthony d'Offay Gallery in London: 13 new works by the American Bill Viola, presented in near-total darkness. It is not given to many artists to be both dazzling and deep, least of all in the medium of video. But for the last quarter century, Viola has been using the newest technology to stir the oldest of emotions. Simply to describe his work as profound would be to neglect its startlingly inventive beauty.

At 50, Viola has become the Rembrandt of the video age, an artist who has done more than any of his contemporaries to advance the emotional and aesthetic content of his medium. Analogies with painting prove strangely significant in Viola's latest work. The first piece in this show, for example, takes the form of a hi-tech diptych: instead of hinged frames, two Panasonic televisions; instead of wooden panels, a pair of plasma screens.

What you see may be secular and modern - a couple having a row - but it connects back to ancient traditions of religious painting. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, the little local difficulty in this video escalates into a timeless Passion.

A man and a woman, in their separate frames, are locked in elemental anguish. As the film begins - silent, and in ultra-slow motion - it seems as though the man is launching some terrible accusation, arms spreading, mouth gaping, head flung down and back in cataclysmic outrage. She turns away, covers her ears, shudders with grief. Perhaps, you think, she is somehow to blame. But as the moments inch by, the movements stretch and swim into something less legible and far more ambiguous: are they in the same room; do they even hear each other; is he reacting to her accusations?

Opposed and yet joined: the medieval form of the diptych gives this video its metaphor. But this is no particular Adam and Eve. The extreme, almost glacial slowness of the images seems to disembody the action, to eternalise the spasm of anguish. His film visualises emotion in its universal state, all of us turning on the spit of pain, deaf to each other's suffering.

People wept to see this work on the day I visited the gallery, as if remembering their past. But the experience is also amazingly consoling, perhaps because of the beauty of these lifesize figures, shot in silver-grey, passing like astronauts or weightless divers through the ballet of their emotions. But also because the film releases you into a different future, one in which you have another chance not to cause - and thus be twinned in - misery.

This gift is not something you regularly receive from contemporary theatre or cinema, still less from a West End gallery. It might be argued that Viola borrows something from each, employing performers and assistants to film his art. But he simulates nothing. His colleagues are on their own, impelled by no more than an initial word. Which is, I think, why everything he makes is inflected by a sense of wonder and immediate surprise.

In the past, Viola has filmed mirages in the Sahara, shamen walking on red-hot coals, bison roaming the prairies. He was gripped by the renewing cycle of life, most literally in his film of the simultaneous birth of his son and passing of his mother in the great Nantes Triptych, now at Tate Modern. But Viola is not a narrative artist. His videos don't have a denouement, let alone a cinematic ending. They are phrased like music, pausing, proliferating, subsiding, only to begin again.

The medium, in short, is not his message. Although he was among the pioneers of American video art in the early Seventies, Viola had nothing to say about the squeaking gogglebox of the television age any more than the postmodern media of digicam. His images are as purely pre-rational as the painted animals in the Lascaux caves. What video gives him is the dimension of time, which he uses to spellbinding effect. In his art, a shot of a droplet gradually welling - and reflecting the world around it - can be as enthralling as any action movie.

One of the works in this show reverses the process by condensing a whole life in less than 15 minutes. Five tiny screens, about the size of a portable altarpiece, show the same women in the same room at different times of the day. The scale is renaissance and so is the scene: pale limewashed walls, bare wooden floor, a woman dressed in timeless clothes. She washes her face, takes up her sewing, writes a letter, lights candles and eventually retires to bed.

It might be the life of a saint, complete with iconographic props - the stem of lilies, the Virgin's blue cloak, the halo of candlelight silhouetting her head. But the pleasures it commands - peace, absorption, domestic ritual - aren't merely religious. Nor is this an essay on renaissance painting alone. Van Eyck, Vermeer, Utamaro, Van Gogh: each glimmering screen takes you over the threshold into the interior world of painting.

Catherine's Room is shot in real time. But the woman performs her tasks with such slow care that each screen, at any given moment, appears to be almost static. Through the window, the light shifts drowsily from morning blue to purple twilight, measuring her brief life in the sun. This is a masterpiece in miniature, compressing the richness of art, of religion, of contemplative philosophy into the short fraction of an hour. But more time is precisely what it grants in return for your attention, a pause for thought that extends far beyond the hour.

Questioned about the unusual power of his videos, Viola tends to give diffident explanations - 'The medium gives a full-body experience that is not intellectual... the technology is so sensual that people can just take pleasure from the form.' This, of course, could be said of any home movie or MTV promo; it hardly comes close to the immense skill of his work. Even when all the techniques are revealed - speed, angle, lumens, resolution - nothing is lost or explained away.

One can learn, for example, that the most affecting work in this show was made with the aid of a mirror and some water and yet none of its essential mystery is removed. Surrender is a modified diptych: one figure in a portrait-shaped screen above another, inverted, each engulfed in grief. Slowly they bow down, immersing themselves in the dark waters. Slowly they rise again, tears streaming from their eyes.

The configuration changes. The movements swim and convulse. Gradually the images break into ripples, shattered in the tidal emotion. You might see it as a human tragedy - two people forever converging, never quite meeting, locked in their own isolated minds. Or you might see it as a spiritual transfiguration, the cycle of suffering and resurrection eternalised. Either way, its overwhelming vision releases an identical grief - and accompanying compassion - in the viewer. It is the single most cathartic work I have ever seen in a gallery.