

Bill Viola breathes fresh life into the Renaissance

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Man Searching for Immortality/Woman Searching for Eternity
(installation view; 2013), Bill Viola. Courtesy Bill Viola Studio and
Blain|Southern, London

Video art and the Renaissance don't normally go hand in hand, but in Bill Viola's work they are inseparable. Born in 1951, Viola is part of a generation of artists who grew up with television, although he was one of the first to make videos without dabbling in other art forms beforehand. His highly symbolic, spiritual, and elaborately orchestrated scenes are so popular that he is the medium's best-known practitioner – a video artist for people who don't like video art, sniff his detractors, as if that is some kind of bad thing. What is clear from walking around this exhibition at Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, however, is how Viola's work rarely resembles video art. It is more akin to painting: Viola's videos often comprise a single-take shot from a static position; he frequently slows them down, so subtle movements, gestures, and expressions are emphasised; and they are rarely shown on monitors, but are instead projected large, in a vertical aspect ratio like a canvas. When Viola does do landscapes, as in *The Path* (2002), the projection stretches 10 metres across the wall.

While video artists aren't often granted museum retrospectives (although that is changing now), Viola has enjoyed plenty. So what makes this exhibition special? Firstly, Viola's large-scale installations are positioned alongside many of the Renaissance works that inspired them: re-reading the works in light of each other is one of the show's key pleasures. Secondly, Florence was pivotal to Viola in his early years as an artist. It was where art came alive for him; where he encountered many Renaissance masterpieces for the first time; where he wandered around and saw art on the streets and in churches; and where he formed his view that art was about telling 'highly recognisable stories within well visible spaces'. He has since installed his work in public spaces, including St Paul's Cathedral, as well as broadcasting it on television.

It's hard to imagine the grandiose fossil city of Florence as a ferment of contemporary art, but it was one in the 1970s. Photographs in the exhibition transport you back to a time when the streets were filled with student protestors rather than tourists. Viola arrived in 1974, drawn to the city partly through his Italian heritage, but mostly because the studio Art/Tapes/22 made Florence a nucleus for video art production in Europe. He stayed for two years. As a tribute to Viola, his videos are not just confined to Palazzo Strozzi, but can be encountered in other venues in the city (and one in Empoli), including the magnificent Santa Maria Novella.



The Flood and the Receding of the Waters (c. 1439–40), Paolo Uccello. Museo di Santa Maria Novella, Florence



The Deluge (Going Forth by Day) (video still; 2002), Bill Viola.

Courtesy Bill Viola Studio

One fresco from that church, Paolo Uccello's *The Flood and Receding of the Waters* (c. 1439–40), is part of the most dramatic pairing at the Strozzi. The painting, with its full-throttle depiction of carnage and its dizzying perspective that whisks us into the chaos, sits above the entrance to a room containing a giant projection of Viola's *The Deluge* (2002), from his *Going Forth By Day* series. The latter presents a flattened scene, dominated by the white, stone façade of a building. City folk wander past or amble down the staircase at its entrance until a sense of growing panic takes over. They begin to hurry past, grasping possessions. Suddenly water starts to flow out of the building, its volume intensifying into the flood of the title. If you stand back, Viola's modern interpretation of the biblical epic can be glimpsed alongside Uccello's version. Both are chilling depictions of the scramble for self-preservation amid the fury of the water. Viola's ends on a more eerie note: the water stops, revealing a pristine, sun-dappled scene with no human presence.



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(installation view; 2013), Bill Viola. Courtesy Bill Viola Studio and
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Mortality, and humanity's battle against it, is one of Viola's enduring concerns. In a video diptych, *Man Searching for Immortality/Woman Searching for Eternity* (2013), two elderly naked figures probe their flesh with spotlights; it is Viola's response to Cranach the Elder's *Adam and Eve*, on loan from the Uffizi (1528). The inevitability of death, as captured by Viola, feels all the more harrowing in contrast with the flesh of the young Adam and Eve, so smoothly represented by Cranach. Meanwhile Viola ingeniously echoes Cranach's deathly ink-black backgrounds by projecting on to tombstone-like slabs of dark granite. In other instances, such as *Catherine's Room* (2001) – which depicts the daily rituals of a solitary woman in a room across five panels – Viola's update wears its influence (Andrea di Bartolo's *Catherine of Siena with Another Four Blessed Dominicans*, 1394–98) and its metaphors (the cycle of life) too heavily.



Eve (1528), Lucas Cranach the Elder. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

The exhibition includes numerous examples of Viola's large-scale, multi-projection works involving lone figures thrown into some state of extreme suffering, of transcendence or rebirth, being subsumed or consumed by the elements. In the two channels that make up *The Crossing* (1996), the same man burns in one video and is inundated by a cascade of water in the other. *Martyrs Series* (2014) offers up all kinds of torture: being buried by earth, beaten by wind or water, or succumbing to fire. These violent spectacles are Viola's signature, and have become increasingly sophisticated and realistic as he has embraced technological advancements and increasing budgets and production scales. The most dazzling of them is also the most surreal, and a work that resists hasty interpretation: in *Inverted Birth* (2014) a man is drenched in different fluids (water, and what look like blood and milk). The liquids rise off him in a heaven-bound torrent that has a bizarre and savage effect, making it look as if the man's skin is being wrenched off him. The sound is deafening.

Another delight of the show is rediscovering the artist's early works from the 1970s. These small, grainy videos explore many of the themes that would later take hold of Viola, but in a more oblique, conceptual manner. In *The Reflecting Pool* (1977–79), which depicts the artist diving into a pool, Viola uses reflections and low-fi special effects to create a mystical scene. Occasionally parallels can be found here with his more recent work, and in particular those smaller, simpler installations that eschew more overwhelming spectacle. *Surrender* (2001), for instance, is an exploration of grief that shows two figures gradually taken over by extreme anguish; as they are, their images start to break down and ripple, revealed as watery reflections. The authenticity of the actors' performances is key here. Any hint of melodrama would have made this piece humorous; but to watch it is an achingly sad and mysterious experience.