

Bill Viola *A Retrospective*

September, 2017 | David Trigg

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Guggenheim Bilbao 30 June – 9 November

Bill Viola was among the very first artists to exhibit at the Guggenheim Bilbao during its inaugural year, 1997. The museum's arrival breathed new life into the Spanish city, kickstarting its postindustrial reinvention. Renewal and transformation are major themes for Viola, and so it's fitting that this retrospective is included as part of the Guggenheim's 20th anniversary programme. Yet for an exhibition claiming to offer 'a comprehensive overview of Viola's oeuvre', there are some gaping omissions. Pivotal works such as *Nantes Triptych* (1992) and *The Crossing* (1996) are not included, and surprisingly, neither is anything from the 1980s. Despite expectations of a far-reaching survey that joins the dots between the American artist's position as a 1970s video-art innovator and current status as a master of the grandiose spectacle, the majority of the show's 23 works date from the millennium. Nevertheless, the thoughtful selection is a convincing demonstration of why Viola is today regarded by many as one of the foremost proponents of moving-image art.

Visitors to Viola's 2014 retrospective at Paris's Grand Palais will recognise many works here,

though it's pleasing to find lesser-known works punctuating the showstoppers. Take *Slowly Turning Narrative* (1992), a mesmerising exploration of human consciousness where partially glimpsed images and chanted words envelop the viewer as a large mirrored screen rotates in the centre of the room. Elsewhere, tucked in a side gallery, is *Four Songs* (1976), a compilation of early videos that includes *The Space Between the Teeth*; this work, in which the camera repeatedly hurtles towards a screaming man, contains several elements familiar to Viola's practice: the notion of a passage between worlds; a human figure *in extremis*; purification by water (the man's image is literally washed away at the video's end). These motifs, which appear throughout the exhibition, are powerfully present in the monumental *Inverted Birth* (2014), a remarkable meditation on spiritual purification. A five-metre-high screen in a large, cavernous space shows a man covered in black liquid. Slowly, the fluid rises from his body, soon becoming a roaring reverse torrent that shifts from oily black to blood red to milky white and, finally, to clear water before the figure is left perfectly clean and dry.

Viola is a critically divisive artist who treads a fine line between exquisite lyricism and grandiosity. This is best exemplified by the epic five-part installation *Going Forth by Day* (2002), which addresses the complexities of existence through the themes of life, death and rebirth. In *Fire Birth* a human form emerges from a submerged world, while in *The Path* a stream of people process through a forest. Such imagery invites quiet contemplation, but one quickly becomes distracted by the activity of adjacent projections: the weary rescue workers of *First Light*, the raging flood in *The Deluge*. While the production values are superb, the power of each section seems diminished by the decision to exhibit them together in one space; one can't help feeling that, like the exhibition itself, the whole is somehow less than the sum of its parts. Indeed, while everything has been beautifully installed, it seems the very notion of a retrospective does not serve Viola well (it takes over five hours to experience the show in its entirety). As the strongest moments attest, the artist's works are at their most potent when shown in isolation. *David Trigg*



Inverted Birth, 2014, video installation, 8 min 22 sec.
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