

BILL VIOLA

**PALAZZO REALE, MILANO
24 FEBBRAIO - 25 GIUGNO 2023**

**For the first time in Milan,
a can't-miss exhibition dedicated to the genius
of video art: BILL VIOLA**

PRESS RELEASE

From 24 February to 25 June 2023, Palazzo Reale in Milan will present a major exhibition dedicated to the man who since the 1970s has been considered the undisputed master of video art: BILL VIOLA.

Promoted by the **Municipality of Milan-Culture**, the **BILL VIOLA** exhibition is produced and organized by **Palazzo Reale** and **Arthemisia**, with the collaboration of **Bill Viola Studio**. A survey of works from Viola's entire artistic career, it offers the public **fifteen masterpieces** in the halls at Palazzo Reale.

Born in New York in 1951 and of Italian-American origin, Bill Viola is internationally recognized as the artist who, through experimentation with video art, has produced unique works considered in all respects to be true masterpieces of contemporary art.

Through the early study of electronic music, the potentialities of performance art and experimental film, for more than 40 years Viola has made works that, through a new artistic language, consistently address life, death, and the intervening journey, to explore deeper understanding of humanity and its relationship with the environment, the influences of Eastern and Western philosophies, the iconic importance of the natural world, and many other themes.

For Viola, the experience of travel has been essential to the development of his work. Taking inspiration from the realities he encountered in his travels around the world with his wife Kira Perov, between the 1970s and the 1980s Viola outlined his artistic path and achieved the creation of works that envelope the viewer with compositions and sounds, seeking to depict the infinite possibilities of the psyche and of the human spirit.

Essential in these travels were the 18 months spent in Florence where he encountered for the first time Renaissance art. In 1997 during a Getty research project he continued to explore ancient Christian iconography, with a particular focus on Medieval, Renaissance, and Mannerist imagery in a continuous dialogue with altarpieces, polyptychs, and votive paintings by ancient artists. Viola then proposed a new composition of the image through the construction of elaborate theatrical scenes inspired by the Western historical and artistic tradition, cinematographic in the true sense of the word, with settings, actors, sets, lighting design, photography – and a director, too. Fire and water – symbolic elements for the transition from life to death, as well as from this life to the other; the digital world; an immaterial visual world; an existence dependent upon pulses of electricity: everything brings to mind the fragility and fleetingness of human nature.

The Milan exhibition offers visitors a path on which they find themselves contemplating the profound issues that Bill explores with slow-motion images in which light, colour, and sound can create moments

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of deep reverence. Emotions, meditation, and passions can emerge from his videos, taking the viewer on an inner journey.

This dimension emerges, for example, in his Passions videos (works that make clear reference to the Italian Renaissance), which in slow motion capture and extend details of human emotions impossible to see in real time, or in *Ocean Without a Shore* (2007), a work born in Venice in the small, deconsecrated church of San Gallo, which describes a metaphorical threshold of the moment of transition in which life becomes death.

Alongside these, there is also the virtual encounter between man and woman in *The Veiling* (1995); the sudden and terrifying flood at the centre of *The Raft* (May 2004), an installation that reminds us of the importance of human collaboration for surviving natural disasters or unexpected crises; and the Martyrs series (2014), depicting the courageous struggle of four people in the grip of the four natural elements, as they grow gradually able to accept their inevitable fate. And then there is the video diptych of projections on slabs of black granite – *Man Searching for Immortality/Woman Searching for Eternity* (2013) – and works, belonging to the Tristan series (2005), that depict the visual and auditory intensity of the transfiguration of fire and water, alongside works rarely shown in Italy like *The Quintet of the Silent* (2000), thus allowing the general public to enjoy a variety of exclusive content.

Thoughtfully curated by **Kira Perov**, the artist's wife and executive director of Bill Viola Studio, forty years of work are displayed through a careful selection of pieces, defining a unique event giving us the opportunity to reflect upon life, to set out on our own inner journey, and to immerse ourselves in an alternative world entirely different from the one we left behind at the entrance.

The show is accompanied by a catalogue edited by **Valentino Catricalà** and **Kira Perov**, which is intended not only as documentation of the exhibition, but aims to become genuine study material for future generations. The catalogue is edited by **Skira**.

The event's media partner is **Urban Vision** and its mobility partner is **Frecciarossa Treno Ufficiale**.

The exhibition is part of **Milano Art Week** (11 – 16 April 2023), the diffuse event coordinated by the Councillorship for Culture of the Municipality of Milan, in collaboration with **miart**, which networks the city's leading public institutions and private foundations active in modern and contemporary art, with a dedicated programming of exhibitions and activities.

THE EXHIBITION

The works of Bill Viola on exhibit at Palazzo Reale are arranged in a unified layout, part of an open dialogue with the space, which is reinterpreted and reconstructed from a new perspective, in the same way that the artist's video works invite new insights and interpretations inspired by the spatial dimensions of the site. The interplay of a reconstructed past and a foreseen future, of expenses of time, all reveal how Viola's distinctive work was meant, from the start, to be both an effort within the image (the video per se) and a reaching out (the video as a hybrid medium open to a dialogue with the space in which it is installed).

Unlike other artists of his generation, Bill Viola had already left behind excessive technological experimentation in the early 70's, returning to the fundamentals of video technology (the monitor and the camera), and then moving beyond the medium, to a study of the natural elements which bring any image into being, meaning light, time and space.

With Viola's work, video became a medium available to contemporary art, a new vehicle whose language could explore mankind and its relationship with the environment in depth, as well as the links between oriental and western traditions, plus the iconic importance of natural elements, along with many other themes close to the artist's heart. Returning to this transformative moment today, we see Bill Viola as a key figure not only in the history of video art, but in art history in general: an artist through whom we can understand the last forty years of visual culture.

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The central themes of the exhibition are touched on in the very first projection, *The Quintet of the Silent* (2000). A group of five men are seen standing close together as they undergo a wave of intense emotion that threatens to overwhelm them. The five individuals experience the rising emotional energy independently, with little direct interaction with their companions. The extreme slow motion makes visible the smallest of details and subtle nuances of expression, and creates a subjective, psychological space where time is suspended for both performers and viewers alike.

In the late 80's, Bill Viola went through a noteworthy period of creative crisis. This is when he began to think of a new approach to composing images through the construction of full-fledged, almost cinematographic scenes inspired by Western artistic tradition. Veritable films resulted, complete with sets, actors, lighting, photography and the role of the director. The best known, seminal work was *The Greeting* (1995), on display at the exhibition and inspired by Pontormo's *Visitation* (1528-9). Two women dressed in 16th-century clothing are talking to each other, when they are interrupted by a third woman who greets and embraces them. The movements, all of them in slow motion, occur in a setting evocative of Pontormo's painting, though Viola defines it as "industrial". The action, which took place in 45 seconds' time, is stretched out to more than 10 minutes. Kira Perov notes, in her preface to the catalogue: "*Time is malleable in the hands of Bill Viola, where every detail of movement and facial and body expression is visible, and a moment becomes an eternity.*"

From then on, the work of Bill Viola became increasingly identified with this style, in which the formalisation of emotions, one of his main focuses, played a key role.

Catherine's Room (2001) is a private view into the room of a solitary woman who goes about a series of daily rituals from morning until night. The woman's actions are simple and purposeful, and appear simultaneously in different times of day—morning, afternoon, sunset, evening and night. A small window in the wall reveals a view of the outside world where the branches of a tree are visible. In each panel the tree is seen in successive stages of its annual cycle, from spring blossoms to bare branches. The world outside the window represents another layer of time, transforming the scene from a record of one day into the larger view of a life bound to the cycles of nature.

In the polyptych *Four Hands* (2001), the hands of a young boy, a middle-aged woman and man, and an elderly woman are seen as they slowly and deliberately form a series of predetermined gestures. The gestures are influenced by a variety of sources from Buddhist *mudras* to seventeenth-century English *chirologia* tables. The symbolic patterns of the motions of three generations of hands—son, mother and father, grandmother—describe a timeline that encompasses both the parallel actions of the individuals in the present moment and the larger movements of the stages of human life.

Emergence (2002) takes its inspiration from a fresco by Masolino da Panicale titled *Pietà* (1424), originally created for the church of Saint John the Baptist in Empoli. It depicts Christ rising from his tomb, assisted by the Madonna and Saint John. In *Emergence*, a young man is similarly rising, but from a cistern overflowing with water, water here representing both life and death, simultaneously a drowning and a birth.

Ocean Without a Shore (2007) is about the presence of the dead in our lives. Three altars upon which the screens are placed become portals for the passage of the dead to and from our world. Presented as a series of encounters at the intersection between life and death, the video sequence documents a succession of individuals slowly approaching out of darkness and moving into the light.

Recorded independently, the images of a man and a woman never coexist in the same video frame. It is only the light from their images that intermingles in the fabric of the hanging veils. The cone of light emerging from each projector is articulated in space by the layers of material, revealing its presence as a three-dimensional form that moves through and fills the empty space of the room with its translucent mass.

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In *The Raft* (May 2004), a group of people from a variety of ethnic and economic backgrounds are suddenly struck by a massive onslaught of water from a high-pressure hose. Some are immediately knocked over and others brace themselves against the unprovoked deluge. Water flies everywhere, clothing and bodies are pummeled, 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 natural elements return with a vengeance in his videos from the *Martyrs* series (2014), in which four immobile individuals are gradually disturbed, and ultimately overwhelmed, by the respective elements that each represents. The work also depicts the final acceptance of death.

“Martyr” comes from the Greek word for “witness”, and the artist sees these individuals as witnesses to our culture’s fundamental values. In today’s world, the mass media turns us all into witnesses to the suffering of others. The martyrs’ past lives of action can help illuminate our modern lives of inaction. They also exemplify the human capacity to bear pain, hardship, and even death in order to remain faithful to their values, beliefs, and principles. These four works represent ideas of action, fortitude, perseverance, endurance, and sacrifice.

In *Man Searching for Immortality/Woman Searching for Eternity* (2013), through two separate frames, a naked man and woman appear to emerge from the stone and walk toward us. They arrive looking directly into our eyes with clarity and awareness. Slowly, each turns on a small light and begins a familiar daily ritual, carefully searching his or her body for evidence of disease or corruption, searching for death. When they are finished, they each turn off their light, thankful for life.

Fire Woman (2005) is an image seen in the mind’s eye of a dying man. The darkened silhouette of a female figure stands before a wall of flame. After several minutes, she moves forward, opens her arms, and falls into her own reflection. When the flames of passion and fever finally engulf the inner eye, and the realization that desire’s body will never again be met blinds the seer, the reflecting surface is shattered and collapses into its essential form—undulating wave patterns of pure light.

Tristan’s Ascension (The Sound of a Mountain Under a Waterfall), 2005, describes the ascent of the soul in the space after death as it is awakened and drawn up in a backwards-flowing waterfall, jostling the man’s limp body and soon bringing him to life. Finally, his entire body rises off the slab and is drawn up with the rushing water, disappearing above.

PRESS MATERIAL AVAILABLE AT > https://bit.ly/BILL_VIOLA_MILANO

Information and bookings

T +39 02 892 99 21
www.palazzorealemilano.it
www.arthemisia.it

Official Hashtag

#BillViolaMilano

Press offices

Arthemisia

Salvatore Macaluso
sam@arthemisia.it | M. +39 392 4325883
press@arthemisia.it | T +39 06 69380306

Press office, Municipality of Milan

Elena Conenna
| elenamaria.conenna@comune.milano.it

External relations, Arthemisia

Camilla Talfani | ct@arthemisia.it
Mob. +39 335 7316687 | +39 345 7503572

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