

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Moving Image World

By Bill Viola

from the Publication *Tristan und Isolde* for l'Opéra national de Paris, under the direction of Gérard Martier

"The wound is the place where the light enters you." – RUMI

Richard Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* is the story of a love so intense and profound that it cannot be contained in the material bodies of the lovers. In order to fully realize their love, Tristan and Isolde must ultimately transcend life itself. This theme of the spiritual nature of human love is an ancient one whose roots can be traced out beyond the specific medieval origins of the Celtic legend and deep into the Hindu and Buddhist traditions of Tantra that lie submerged in the Western cultural unconscious. It was Peter Sellars who first made me aware of this connection to Eastern sources that have long preoccupied me. I was soon drawn into Wagner's 19th century work by the latent traces of their magnetic pull and the stark but rich simplicity of his conception.

In terms of working method, I first listened to various versions of the music and then worked primarily from the libretto to visualize an image world flowing within and without the dramatic storyline being enacted on the stage. Moving images live in a domain somewhere between the temporal urgency of music and the material certainty of painting, and so are well suited to link the practical elements of stage design with the living dynamics of performance. I knew from the start that I did not want the images to illustrate or represent the story directly. Instead, I wanted to create an image world that existed in parallel to the action on the stage, in the same way that a more subtle poetic narrative mediates the hidden dimension of our inner lives.

The images are intended to function as symbolic, inner representations that become, to echo the words of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "reflections of the spiritual world in the mirror of the material and the temporal." They trace the movement of human consciousness through one of its most delicate, poignant states: the surrender to an absolute, all-consuming love. The range of experience of this power extends over an entire lifetime, from the excited, naïve heartbeats of a teenager's first love to the expansive realization of a larger Love as a fundamental, universal principle of human existence, glimpsed later in life and described in detail by saints and mystics in all cultures throughout history.

The images in the three acts contain interweaving, recurring threads but are distinct in reflecting different stages of the lover's path towards liberation:

- Act I presents the theme of Purification, the universal act of the individual's preparation for the symbolic sacrifice and death required for the transformation and rebirth of the self. The mutual decision to drink death plunges the lovers beneath the surface to reveal the infinite ocean of an invisible immaterial world.
- Act II concerns The Awakening of the Body of Light – the release, through the cleansing illumination of love, of the luminous spiritual form encased within the dark inertia of the material body. The theme is bringing light into the world, but when the outer world finally

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encroaches on their ecstatic union, a temporal and material darkness descends on the lovers whose only release lies in the pain of separation and self-sacrifice.

- Act III describes The Dissolution of the Self in the stages of dying, the delicate and excruciating process of the separation and disintegration of the physical, perceptual and conceptual components of conscious awareness. We are plunged into the agony and delirium of death and suffering, replete with visions, dreams and hallucinatory revelations that play across the surface of a dying man's mind. When the flames of passion and fever finally engulf the mind's eye, and desire's body can never be met, the reflecting surface is shattered and collapses into undulating waves of pure light. Finally, the lovers ascend in turn and are drawn up in peace to a realm beyond the polarities of male and female, birth and death, light and darkness, beginning and end.