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Art

Doomed lovers' odyssey

By Tim Adams



View from Bill Viola's Tristan Project, 2005

Bill Viola shows touches of the Pre-Raphaelite spirit as he tackles the big questions in his latest video - a colourful and dramatic work inspired by Tristan and Isolde.

Fashionable taste might smirk a bit at Bill Viola's earnestness; cynics will baulk at his theatrical sense of awe and wonder; but it would take a very flinty eye not to be enthralled by his extraordinary visual imagination.

The Tristan Project began life as the backdrop for a Paris National Opera staging of Wagner's opera Tristan and Isolde. Few artists would have approached the brief by trying to out-Wagner Wagner but Viola has no fear of operatic emotion. Love and death, and even eternal life, are his stock in trade and he does all three with the gusto of a true believer.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

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His pair of doomed lovers emerge, in a trademark gesture, from the ocean, naked water sprites swimming up an X-chromosome of light, holding their breath, before drowning in sensuality. This moment of dappled blue transcendence, on the first, downstairs screen at the Haunch of Venison gallery gives way quickly to a weighty sense of life passing by on the floors above. In a compulsively slow diptych of films an hour long the lovers, their flesh beginning to sag in middle age, become framed in stone porticos, approaching the camera from the very far distance, then undress and are washed, water again providing a moment of sexual shock, before kneeling to contemplate their place in the flow of life, and their presence in a Viola video.

Suitably, given the subject matter, the show then involves a physical odyssey, from north to south of the river by grimy underground, the sleekness of the Mayfair gallery giving way to the more sombre dilapidation of the abandoned St Olave's school building near Tower Bridge, where there are four rooms heavy with mortality. The most dramatic of these is in the pitch blackness of the old galleried school hall, where on a vast, floor-to-ceiling screen Viola imagines Tristan's resurrection. To begin with, the hero lies flat and grey on a slab on to which water begins to fall from a great height. As this Niagara increases, the sound in the hall becomes overwhelming, a torrent of noise as slowly but surely the dead man is raised through the waterfall. His element then changes to a sudden orange inferno, reflected on a lake into which he finally plunges once more to begin the cycle again.

When they work as dramatically as this one it is hard to dismiss Viola's films as stunts. They offer a choice: total immersion or walk-out, but he defies you to be in a room with them and not be seduced at least by the play of light and colour, and perhaps by the almost medieval sense of mystery they promote. Some of this has to do with scale, some with skill, but most of it is a product of Viola's almost subversive seriousness.

Less convincing are some of the sub-plots to this central triumvirate of images. In another room the lovers, naked or in white robes, force their way through a dark forest, while Viola captures them on a hand-held Blair Witch video. In the absence of high production values, the sentiment becomes somewhat low-budget too, and when the lovers plunge into unlikely waves, you are thinking more Calvin Klein ad than proper obsession. Likewise, some of the behind-the-scenes apparatus of these narratives, the artist's sketchy graphs of 'a mountain range as a form of time', or the greeting-card prayers and poems taken from his notebook - 'the self is an ocean without a shore' and so on - detract from what he is best at: discrete blockbuster movies.

Viola has been compared with many old masters, from Titian to Rembrandt, but really he is a contemporary pre-Raphaelite, intent on cleansing the art world of its obsessions with trivia, parody and disgust by finding meaning and even transcendence in form and colour. There is a Rossetti-like flourish in his determination to confront the bigger questions, and also a comparable arrogance of technique. Both qualities make him a natural for the Tristan myth - Arthurian emotion also enraptured the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood - and it is his expression of both which makes this love affair at times so spectacular.

Bill Viola: Love/Death: The Tristan Project

Haunch of Venison, London W1 and St Olave's College, London SE1, until 2 September