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Visual arts: Out of the deep

By Clare Henry



Bill Viola, *Going Forth By Day*, 2002, 5-panel video/sound installation, dimensions variable.

Bill Viola, at the forefront of pioneering video for more than 30 years, made his name in the early 1990s with the Nantes Triptych, a powerful installation featuring birth and death - literally. The dying woman was his mother. She had spent three months in a coma due to a brain tumour and a few days before the end he trained his camera lens on her face.

"Making art was not on my mind," he told me. "I made the video out of pure necessity and the need to carry on. It's the closest I've got to using my creative abilities in the service of something larger, something much more important. I was witnessing a miraculous event. I was saddened but in awe; as though the curtains parted on the depth of life itself - *de profundis*. Death bed scenes in films, on TV, are hopeless. Nobody can simulate the real thing."

So how do you follow that? Viola agrees it's difficult. Intervening years have seen him triumph at the Venice Biennale, in Paris and Frankfurt, and with his controversial "The Messenger" at Durham Cathedral. His latest, most ambitious piece, "Going Forth By Day", is less convincing yet impressive. A modern-day articulation of the classic cycle of birth, life and death, it's divided into five acts, or films, projected simultaneously on to the walls of the darkened gallery. The projections are immense, so that as one weaves around between them, one is encompassed, even overwhelmed.

This narrative incorporates a more traditional deathbed scene (in the form of a tableau vivant) together with images of fire, fury and flood, plus a remarkable 36ft-long panoramic image, "The Path". Here a steady stream of humanity - young, old, fat, thin, black, white - walk in slow-motion through a summer wood, symbolic of each individual's progress on life's journey.

Technically complex, recorded in state-of-the-art digital-image, high-definition video, "Going Forth" required a production team of more than 160 people, 20 stunt men, 14 actors, (including Viola himself as gatekeeper) and a big budget. "We

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are doing pioneering encoding work here, multi-channel synchronisation stuff never done, even by MGM and Hollywood."

So why is this necessary? "It's the only way I can get that level of detail, high resolution of colour and quality of light. If I shot on DVD you couldn't see the emotion on each face, the lie of each collar. Video as a medium gives you the illusion that you push a button and master it right away. You can't master video any more easily than mastering oil paint. It's very hard to control - that's why movies cost millions."

Viola has been involved in the technical side of things from the start. "Video was not a bona fide art form when I was a student in the early 1970s. Happily, my university, Syracuse, had a TV department within the broadcast-journalism school. I also took a course in electrical engineering." After college he moved in with his parents - "I had no money" - but through contact with Nam June Paik and John Cage was soon hired as a technical person for one of Europe's first video art studios in Florence, then as cameraman for a PBS documentary on Siena, where he discovered a lifelong passion for 14th-century Siennese painting. "Siena is a vital part of my foundations. I take a lot of cues from the odd geometrics, compressed space and cutaway walls of early Renaissance art."

The piece has been called a 21st-century cinematic fresco. Certainly it's compositionally inspired by Italian Renaissance images, but other more ancient myths - the River Styx, Noah's Ark - also appear in updated mode illuminated by the crystal clarity and pure light of quattrocento super-realism. In some panels, Viola also utilises the quaint, forced perspective common in his favourite Siennese paintings, but engineered via wide-angle and telephoto lenses.

Much of the work coincided with the death of his father. "The path of life is relentless," Viola says. "We have our time on this stage and it's finite. 'The Voyage' is dedicated to my father. The scene where they are loading up the boat with household possessions was a re-enactment of the agony of my going through his possessions after his death. The old woman waiting patiently on the shore symbolises my mother, who died 15 years before him. As we filmed the couple embracing many of the crew were wet-eyed. I knew it was my father meeting my mum in heaven." In this vignette, the cutaway house is based on one in Giotto's 1316 Scrovegni Chapel frescoes, which Viola rates as "the greatest art installation", and the scene, he says, was inspired by a Siennese picture depicting the Death of St Monica by the Master of Osservanz.

The five videos, each 35 minutes long, play simultaneously on a continuous loop in a large Guggenheim gallery where sound from each individual panel mixes freely in the space. Sound is important to Viola, but in this instance can detract. Many viewers miss the couple's tender embrace because they are distracted by "The Deluge", a noisy, dramatic logistical tour de force requiring three days, four rehearsals, six takes of 40 minutes and millions of gallons of water. The finished image is enormous - 16ft by 12ft. Likewise on the other side of "The Voyage" is "First Light", a mis-en-scène featuring rescue workers around a pond from which a pale angel or Christ-like figure rises up in imitation of the Resurrection.

Viola, raised as an Episcopalian, embraced eastern religions as a student and much of his work contains a spiritual message. "Even today an artist's mission can be to reinterpret Christian iconography. Very un-cool, I know," he laughs.

So what of 9/11? Inevitably the footage of the World Trade Center Towers crashing to the ground, coupled with the scenes of actual panic, real despair and devastation, has taught us how idealised filmic versions of catastrophic events are. Post-9/11 film, from Hollywood commercial to art video, faces a higher hurdle.

"The Voyage" is the most painterly of all the images, while "Fire Birth" (originally made in black and white in the 1980s and newly coloured here with blood-red tints) is the most abstract, lyrical and least high-technological. "The Deluge" combines neoclassical architecture with Hollywood-style special effects, and "The Path" and "First Light" hover around the staged and sentimental. It's this disparate nature of the imagery which is troubling, for unlike a traditional fresco cycle there is no cohesive style, no characteristic thread, to hold the story together. Perhaps the post-9/11 climate is to blame.

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The catalogue begins with Viola's preliminary sketches for "Going Forth", opening with a quotation from the Koran: "God has inscribed Beauty upon all things." Viola says: "Post-9/11 I didn't change 'Going Forth'. I wasn't after horror. There are no stars in my film. The camera doesn't look at one person but at the crowd. I'm more interested in how we deal with disaster. I began work on this commission in 1998 and right from the start I was researching ideas around the theme of apocalypse in the Book of Revelations and how it has been visualised by artists; how Dante envisioned the Inferno and lastly the Egyptian concept of the hereafter, which provides the source of the title. As the soul is freed from the darkness of the body it can finally 'go forth by day'.

"The production was well under way when the planes struck. I believe tragedies can have a unifying role on society. The last image of the cycle is one of hope. The sun comes up, there's light. Life is a cycle, a wheel. For every unspeakable act there is a good deed. We have to believe that."

"Going Forth by Day" may not be Viola's best piece but its ambitious scope and technical range augurs well for his next production: "The Passion Series" - 20 works to be seen in January at the Getty, then London's National Gallery.

Guggenheim Museum New York, Until January 12 Tel: 212-423-3500 <http://www.guggenheim.org/>