

The art of Bill Viola

Visions of dreams

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WHEN he was six years old Bill Viola, now the grand old master of video art, almost drowned on a boating trip.

What he saw at the bottom of the lake was, he said, "the most beautiful world".

"I sat at the bottom, completely relaxed and I just was waiting—I said to myself, 'Ok , this must be the next thing.' And then my uncle realised I wasn't on the raft and pulled me out."

The incident, he says, has shaped the kind of art he creates.

"Everything to do with water always is very very connected to me. I have a real affinity towards it. And that's how my art started, really. And of course when you're a painter (I was painting in art school), guess what? You're using water."

JAMES COHAN GALLERY



In the basement of Blain Southern's new gallery in London hang "Dreamers", a series of seven plasma screens showing people apparently sleeping underwater.

They form part of the first exhibition of Mr Viola's work in London in six years. Their aqueous beauty makes them the undoubted star of it. Stare at them as you may (and you will), and you will be unable to work out if these people are alive or even breathing. Their upturned faces are stuck in a state of perennial epiphany, gently smiling or lost in some internal dialogue. Their clothes flutter, their hair eddies to and fro. Occasionally a bubble escapes their lips. They seem alive but frozen, recalling the stasis of dreams in which time seems suspended.

If contemporary art has become a new religion then Mr Viola, aged 62, dressed in its vestments of grey jeans, sweatshirt and sneakers at the launch of his show, is one of its respected elders. Few contemporary national collections don't contain his works. In this year alone his work features in 18 different exhibitions around the world, from Norway to Japan.

Speaking in the tones of a Shaman, he considers the dream-like quality of his work.

"In the daylight, we do what we need to do. In the nocturnal dimension it's a whole different world, and that's really where the essence of my work lives—in the place that you can't see. It's down at the emotional centre. It's down deep."

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"Mystery," he adds, "is one of the most important aspects of my work. Mystery is the time when you open the door and you close it, and you don't know where you are. And you're lost. Being lost is one of the most important...precious things in the universe—the moment when you don't know."

He explains that the aim of this work is to "reunite and reacquaint the head, the mind and the heart".

It is hard to know what roots you in front of his works in a semi-meditative trance. Feelings? Wonder? Curiosity?

There is a formula to these pieces which rewards patience. Nothing much happens in them for what seems like an eternity, but then there will be a blast of brief and often shocking activity. One work features a man sitting reading a book trying to ignore some banging outside his room. After five minutes or so, he opens the door and meets a mirror image of himself (his soul, says the catalogue) in front of which a pane of glass comes crashing down.

In another, a woman and man face each other in silence for an age until she slaps him across the face. It is surprising how addictive this release from the suspense, or the boredom of waiting, can become.

Mr Viola and his wife, Kira Perov, who technically manages many of the shoots, used a new kind of camera for the work in this show. As a result the films are very sharply defined, with miles of space flattened into mere feet.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY



This works particularly effectively in some videos of people walking across the Mojave Desert in a heat haze. As in Mr Viola's water portraits, the heat fractures the figures, turning them into mysterious shrouds as they walk silently across the barren terrain toward the viewer. The beauty of the desert is the star of these screens; stripes of turquoise, sand, tan and taupe meld into each other as if in a painting.

The weakest work in the show is curiously the pieces that inspired the title of the exhibition—"Frustrated Actions and Futile Gestures"—a series of tableaux featuring the rituals of everyday life: folding clothes; opening and closing doors. The centrepiece is a film of someone filling a jug that has a crack in it. In another, a man repeatedly pulls a cart up a hill only to let it go when he reaches the top.

Based on the myth of Sisyphus, these films are meant to make viewers ponder the poignancy of seemingly pointless human actions. But the unfortunate result is to make viewers reflect on the pointlessness of filming them.

"Frustrated Actions and Futile Gestures" is at Blain Southern in London until July 27th