

## ARTS



# 'Mary' by Bill Viola

**Pat Kane** reflects on the work of Bill Viola (born 1951) and his video installation: 'Mary' at St Paul's Cathedral, London.

**Bill Viola's work** can be understood as a longing to recreate the 'Paradise' which he saw during a formative childhood experience at the age of six when he almost

drowned. Falling to the bottom of a lake, he saw a beautiful place which was full of light 'like Paradise'. Perhaps this also accounts for his very sensitive use

of light and water in his works, the slowing of time, and his focus on a particular moment.

In an interview he made the point that before Newton the big question for humanity was 'why?', but that in the technological age this question often becomes 'how?' Viola uses technology to express our shared human experiences such as birth, death, consciousness and the search for meaning. Together with the artist we are invited to ask the fundamental question, 'why?'

The contemplative aspects and the intensity of much of his work has been informed by Zen Buddhism, Christian mysticism and Islamic Sufism. In 'Mary' we can see that he has clearly been inspired aesthetically by western medieval and renaissance devotional images. The video installation is made up of multiple adjacent screens, reminiscent of a medieval altarpiece. The videos run concurrently, and as they change each expresses a chapter in the life of Mary, from her early life weaving

fabric, the Annunciation, to her place at the foot of the Cross. Real time is slowed down. Movement and gesture are more poetic, helping us enter each narrative more fully and meditate on that particular moment. 'The world has got too fast', says Viola. 'We try to slow people down.'

Shown here, we immediately recognise the theme of 'pieta', in particular the similarity to the sculpture by Michelangelo. In the moving video image Mary gently cradles her dead son with the same tenderness she had at his birth. Taking his hand, kissing it lovingly, she looks at his lifeless body. We are before Mary Desolate.

*'Mary is a universal female figure present in nearly all spiritual and religious traditions. She maintains an infinite capacity to absorb and relieve the pain and suffering of all who come to her. She is the personification of the feminine principle, related to ideas of creativity, procreation, inner strength, love, and compassion.'*

**Bill Viola**

Kira Perov is executive director of Bill Viola Studio, managing and assisting the production of all videotapes and installations, and is married to Bill Viola.

If you would like to see 'Mary' it is possible to enter St. Paul's specifically to view the Bill Viola installation by requesting entry for this only, in which case there is no fee. Otherwise the entry fee for the whole cathedral is quite high. I would recommend choosing a quiet time to make a visit! 🍷



Photo: © Bill Viola Studios

Bill Viola, *Mary*, 2016.

When Bill Viola spent time in Japan studying Zen Buddhism, he realised:

*‘Could my precious art exist in service to something else, something much broader and deeper? Until that moment my measure of success in art resided within the confines of exhibiting in museums, galleries and alternative art spaces. In Japan it was beginning to sink in that perhaps art resided in life itself, that as a practice it derives primarily from the quality of experience, depth of thought and devotion of the maker. Everything else—virtuosity with the materials, novelty of the idea or approach, innovation in craft or technique, skill of presentation, historical significance, importance of the venue—in short, almost everything I learned to value in art school—was secondary.’*

Some websites worth visiting:

<http://www.billviola.com/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EsCx5FU9GnQ>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYay\\_DDL3eA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYay_DDL3eA)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7P9ltmwFOE>