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Extremities

The video passions of Bill Viola

by Doug Harvey

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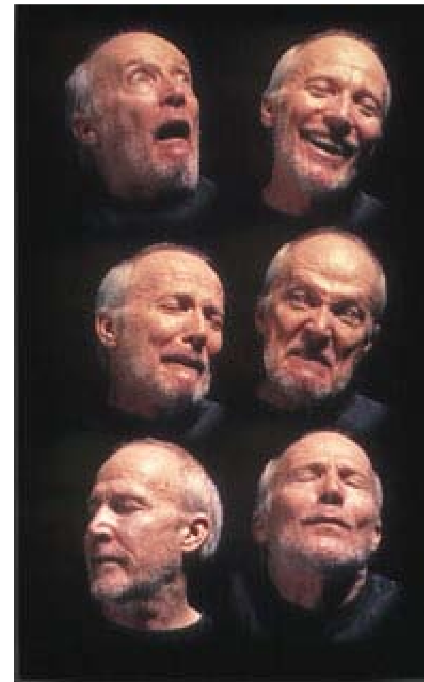
(Photo by Kira Perov)

I'M STANDING IN A PITCH-BLACK, CAVERNOUS room littered — for the time being — with dark, nebulous forms that must be dismantled packing crates. Taking up most of the facing wall is what appears to be an enormous backlit photographic transparency. Two women in vaguely Middle Eastern or Renaissance dress lie prone before some sort of elaborate box or altar, each lost in her own thoughts. They appear to be in mourning. Is this some kind of grave? Suddenly I detect a slight movement in one of the figures, and it becomes clear that this is actually an extremely slow-motion video. Abruptly, there is a commotion on the surface of the altar-thing, revealing it to be a well. The bleached, naked corpse of a drowned 20-something man miraculously rises straight up, lacy cascades of displaced water undulating to the ground. Slowly the women turn to witness this miraculous rebirth, their faces contorting into dozens of incremental expressions of amazement and bewilderment, joy and grief. Then, when the young man has reached his full height, their arms creep forward to catch his collapsing, still-lifeless body and wrap it in cloth. The screen goes dark for a moment, and the cycle begins again.

The illusion is broken as the crisp silhouette of an installation technician passes across the bottom of the screen, revealing the technology to be rear-projection of a resolution higher than I've ever experienced before. But I've seen enough anyway. Marrying state-of-the-art technology with a razor-sharp awareness of archetypal image-making as practiced by visual artists across the centuries; poised and teetering ambiguously between profoundly disturbing emotional extremes of loss and rejuvenation; hitting exact notes of formal aesthetic strengths, psychological depth and mystical spirituality, this heartbreaking 12-minute film can mean just one thing — Bill Viola has come to the Getty.

Well, not quite yet, actually — at the moment he's stuck on the 405 freeway, and I've got some time to look around and talk to the Getty Research Institute's Charles Salas as well as Getty director emeritus John Walsh, who has returned to curate "Bill Viola: The Passions," the largest group of contemporary artworks by a single artist the Getty has yet exhibited. Passing from the glaring, sunlit travertine expanses of the Getty Center's courtyard to the murky, grottolike enclosure of the half-completed installation in the Exhibitions Pavilion is a lot like entering one of Viola's celebrated video installations — disorienting at first, then, as your eyes begin to adjust, spooky and disconcerting. The overall design of the exhibit, which is composed of 13 works previously unseen in Los Angeles, has a similar dynamic, moving from fairly well-lit rooms with small, contained wall-pieces through progressively darker and larger chambers before reaching an overwhelming, immersive climax.

The first thing my eyes alight on is *Six Heads*, a small video panel — about 3 and a half feet tall and 2 across — fixed flat to the wall, displaying six head shots of the same aging actor going through a highly exaggerated range of emotional expressions. Considering the elaborate staging and technology, the piece has a strangely intimate and ephemeral feel, like a page torn from a Renaissance artist's sketchbook. It's also possessed with a creepy *Picture of Dorian Gray* vibe, these six little talking heads endlessly enacting their looped emotional contortions behind a plasma screen, without resolution.



***Six Heads*, 2000**
(Tom Fitzpatrick)

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The first Getty contemporary exhibit that will tour internationally — to the National Gallery in London, then the Munich State Paintings Collection — "The Passions" has been culled from 20 works created over the last two years, and was inspired by Viola's participation in the 1997-98 Getty Research Institute Scholar Year. The annual residential symposium brings together 25 to 30 professional academics from around the world (with a sprinkling of artists) to focus their individual and collective talents on a specific theme — usually some thorny, divisive aspect of current academic discourse.

***Emergence*, 2002 (Weba Garretson, John Hay, Sarah Steben)**

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The theme of Viola's year, unsurprisingly, was "Representing the Passions." Says Salas, "I think the most *impassioned* area of disagreement — and this idea might have something to do with Bill's work — was the fundamental question about whether thinking about emotions is something that unites us or divides us. Do we think about emotions as something that we all share, that can be thought of as almost universal? We all get angry, we all get fearful, we all get joyful. Or do we think of them as essentially socially constructed, and varying from place to place and time to time? And in that case they act as a way of separating us one from another. We understand each other's thoughts — do we understand each other's emotions?"

Viola's work had always bucked the postmodern trend of ironic distancing by incorporating dreamlike

images of anguish and human frailty, keeping the verbal content in check, and rooting his work in the compassion-emphasizing mystical traditions of Zen, Sufism and Medieval Christianity. The work's emotional pitch had become only more pronounced after the birth of Viola's son in 1988 and the death of his mother in 1991, when it began to take on a stripped-down, archetypal urgency, emphasizing images of the human body undergoing transformative ordeals by fire and water. In *Stations*, created for the American Center in Paris in 1994 and exhibited at the Lannan Foundation's now-defunct Los Angeles showcase in 1996, five dim underwater video sequences of floating swimmers of various ages were projected upside down in a blackened gallery filled with burbling aquatic noises. As the viewer moved tentatively into this void, the images appeared right-side up, reflected in polished black funereal granite slabs that lay on the floor beneath each projection. Gradually, each of the swimmers bobbed off backward into the murk, and the screen fell dark, only to be pierced by a burst of light and sound as the figure reappeared, plunging again into the blue-black abyss.

Though curiously soothing and hypnotic, works like *Stations* and *Tiny Deaths* — another stygian multiscreen installation trembling at the brink between being and nothingness — had run their course by 1997. Viola was ready for a change. His 1997 LACMA retrospective (organized by David Ross and Peter Sellars for the Whitney) culminated with the 1995 piece *The Greeting*, based on a 16th-century Mannerist painting. Set in an indeterminate time and space — vaguely urban, possibly contemporary — *The Greeting* took a single, subtly awkward 45-second social exchange among three women and stretched it into a minutely choreographed 10-minute drama charting evanescent human emotions and social negotiations that normally remain beneath the threshold of awareness.

"That's what got me in," says Walsh. "When I saw that piece, I thought, 'This man is capable of finding a way to re-examine older art with much more surprising results than our historians or analysts or critics can produce.' Because what he seemed to do there was to open out these various complexities of relationships so that you can actually *look* at them."

***Quintet of the Astonished*, 2000**
(John Malpede, Weba Garretson, Tom Fitzpatrick, John Fleck,
Dan Garrity)

Enlarge Image

Originally a scholar in 17th-century Dutch painting, Walsh ran the Getty from 1983 until his retirement in 2000, overseeing the move from the antiquities-stuffed Malibu palazzo to the world-famous castle on the hill; the dramatic expansion of the Getty's role in the L.A. and international art worlds; and the museum's incorporation of contemporary art, an anathema to J. Paul himself. As he walks me through the partially installed Viola exhibit, I ask him if the insinuation of Modernism into what was meant to be a bastion of Old World stodge met with much resistance.

"I'd like to think that Getty is looking down and smiling, but he's probably pounding at his bronze casket. Still, things change. As to the board or the staff or anybody else, no. This is the most exhilarating thing you can do in a museum. We all feel that much contemporary art — looked at thoughtfully — has a way of changing everything you see, but older art in particular. And artists, sometimes very consciously, lead the way for you, and that's what Viola did. Viola, in midlife, feels himself empty and comes up dry, and decides to give himself a period of study — mainly of older art and older ideas — and discovers whole new subjects and a way to reconnect himself to what he was always making art about in the first place. Which is personal discovery, personal transformation — the big ideas of life, death, transcendence.

***Surrender*, 2000**
(John Fleck)

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"He goes back and looks at how older artists have struggled with all these matters — including profound grief and other powerful emotion. He goes to the galleries, though, and he doesn't see what I'm going to see. I'm going to see how artists solved certain problems with the aid of other artists in the past — based on some givens and the needs of a client — and I'm going to look at a painting and say this represents a certain step in one direction, a certain discovery of something. Bill looks at the same picture — let's call it *The Madonna Head and Shoulders With Tears Rolling Down Her Face* — and doesn't see a historical advance in the iconography of the Madonna and Child; he sees the expression of an almost incomprehensible grief, and power of a still image to bridge all gaps and connect without words or logic or history. And he will be thinking, 'What freakishly high resolution.'"

IT'S BEEN A LONG JOURNEY FOR VIOLA FROM THE small fringe world of video art in the early 1970s to his current position as one of the most highly regarded artists working in any medium, but his odyssey has always been closely tied to the cutting edge of technology. Born in Queens, New York, in 1951, he was the captain of the "TV squad" in his public school, and by the time he was a junior at Syracuse University was already exhibiting nationally as that newly minted creature, the Video Artist. Syracuse was a flash point for the emerging medium, and Viola helped install one of the first campuswide cable-TV ä systems there, accumulating extensive technical expertise in the process. During the same period, future Whitney/ SFMOMA director David Ross occupied the world's first video curatorial position at the campus museum, and hired Viola as a techie. Two years later, Viola was included in the Whitney Biennial.

"That's what happens when you're fortunate enough to be in the right place at the right time and a new thing is changing," says Viola when he finally appears at the Getty. "I was assisting artists right out of school,

because I was a tech-head at the time. I was helping established artists do their tapes, and I got a job in Florence, Italy, in a video-art studio that this crazy and wonderful Italian woman set up, and worked with some European artists there. It was more than being an assistant to a painter, where you might stretch canvases and stuff; this was more like engaging with someone collaboratively. That was my grad school."

We're in the very darkest passageway in the exhibition space, the gloom broken only by one of his assistants aimlessly waving a flashlight between us. Filled with workers installing the show, and the whine of power tools, the hall echoes — almost all the new pieces are silent, so there's little soundproofing — and conversation is difficult. We move on to a classic wood-and-leather conference room with remote-controlled window blinds, a 1941 portrait of J. Paul by Armando Dreschler hanging at one end, and much brighter lighting. Though he's made his home in Long Beach for the past 20 years, Viola's skin remains pale — perhaps due to the genetic heritage of his English mother or years spent in video-editing cells. (He has a full eight-hour session booked later.) His round face, wispy goatee and wire-rim spectacles give him the curiously appropriate look of Eastern sage mixed with technology geek, and his manner likewise varies between measured deliberation and synapse-snapping enthusiasm.

Sound has always been a key element of Viola's work. He spent seven years alongside David Tudor in the Composers Inside Electronics collective in the 1970s, and the absence of sound is one of the most surprising features of "The Passions." I ask him about his descent into silence.

"It wasn't a decision I actually spent a lot of time on," he says. "It just intuitively became obvious to me that these works weren't about sound. Once I started moving from the stage of general interest in late-medieval/early-Renaissance panel painting and the passions and emotions, into the technology itself of these new LCD flat panels, I realized that the kind of thing I was after was something that emanates from a human being, from within; whereas in a lot of my earlier work I was always looking in *this* world — the outer world — for the *evidence* of things that emanate from within. In this case I was literally at the moment where things were arising and coming out, i.e., external expression, and I felt that sound would be in the way and might become redundant or illustrative. You could look through glass at somebody suffering, and you could have this incredible reaction. It transmits in that way: That's why those paintings work so well. And once I started working with the actors, I realized that someone screaming in silence, for example, is incredibly powerful: It just rings in your brain, and that's probably the loudest scream I've recorded — in that piece *Silent Mountain*."

The work to which Viola refers consists of two panels, hung side by side in vertical orientation. Chosen to grace most of the Getty's promotional material, including the inevitable lamppost banners, the diptych depicts a man and woman, dressed in nondescript T-shirts, building imperceptibly in synchronized but isolated agony to a crescendo of physical distortion, tracing the wavelike passage of a singular unutterable anguish through two utterly discrete bodies. Separate vessels, same juice. The connection visible only to the voyeur. Many of the pieces in "The Passions" convey a similar sense of unbridgeable isolation.

Walsh expounds on one such piece, *The Quintet of the Astonished*: "The National Gallery in London did a

show of artists responding to works of art in their collection, and Bill, while he was here for the scholar year, had already thought about a piece that used a group of actors in an arrangement that was inspired by a Bosch painting.

"What is remarkable is that the figures were not directed as a group — meaning they were not told that there was something that they were supposed to be reacting to or enacting; instead each actor was given a range of emotions to go through during each take. And they were together, they were in fact pressed right together cheek by jowl, standing shoulder to shoulder, but they weren't *acting* together. They were making hand gestures and sort of giving comfort to one another, but that wasn't the point — they were each on their own private, separate emotional trajectories."

Pausing to watch the production unfold in its glacial tempo for a few minutes more, Walsh continues: "One nice thing about a show that takes plenty of time in front of each piece is that you also have plenty of time to let a lot of things play out in your head. This sounds dumb obvious, but it is true that there's hardly any just glancing and checking things off. You don't begin to get these pieces without some standing — or sitting — and thinking. And what you think about is hardly analytical — most people tend to go off on very interesting strings of association — whether it's a personal thing, their family, their own emotions or just 'Why is this piece so strange?' I think a lot of people will have the reaction 'It's strange because I'm treating it like a still — it's going a little too slowly for me to see action; what I see is a series of thousands of stills.' And if you're an art historian like me, used to looking at paintings, which really hold still — for centuries — this is a completely unnerving experience. I don't know how to fit this in my movie experience, either. I can sit in a movie theater and see slow motion and take it for what it is — but I always expect things to speed up again."

This disconcerting indeterminacy between filmic narrative and timeless iconic modes is central to the intensity of "The Passions." Most of the videos bear absolutely no clues as to the particularities surrounding the extreme emotional states being portrayed. I ask the artist about this dearth of extraneous detail.

"I felt that I didn't want to get into the story," says Viola. "The first thing you ask is, 'Why are these people doing this? Why are they crying? Why are they screaming?' That's a human response. You want to know what their story is, and I knew early on that I wasn't interested in representing that in the work. In fact, working with the actors, I didn't know a lot of the time what they were doing within the space of their craft, and didn't feel I needed to probe that at all. The traditional paintings of the crying Mary are a perfect example — they're about *your* story. In the Middle Ages, people would go to the cathedral to go to the special sacred Madonna if they lost a child or loved one, or something happened and they were distressed, and they would literally bring their story to the image, and let that play out that way. So I was interested in that — I don't know what the word would be — empathy maybe? When you leave stuff out, there's this great opening that happens — of creativity, basically. That gap gets filled with creativity."

"So the more information you withhold from the story," I venture, "the greater the viewer's capacity for identification."

"Yes. And in conventional Hollywood films that *does* work. The classic thriller is all about holding back, about withholding and then revealing information at key points along the narrative line. And so that obviously heightens involvement. I guess the difference between that and what I do is that . . . I never reveal it." He laughs. "You get to the end and you still don't know."

"What a rip-off! Then it starts over again."

"Right! But I guess what that does — and I'm just thinking of this as I'm saying it — is it makes it clear that the focus is on something else, that the direction, and what's being studied or looked at, is not that. It's not that story, it's not that content that we read about every day in a newspaper, in a novel or in a movie."

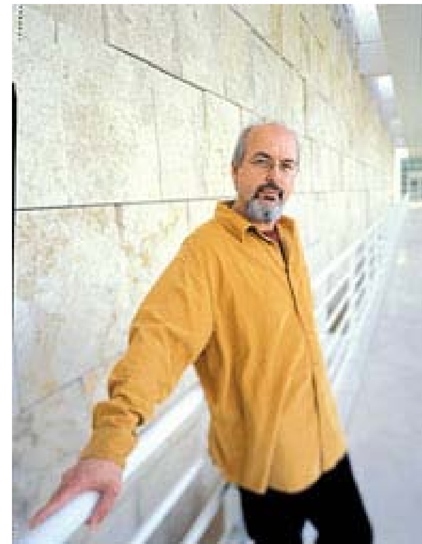
"Do you think that your work offers something that is intentionally excluded from mainstream popular culture?"

"Yeah, I think that one of the driving engines of not just filmmaking and media imagery today in the larger culture, but in so many facets of culture is . . . time. You can look at conventional training in film as a study in the economics of time: How do you tell this story in a means that is economical, that propels the story forward, that doesn't sit there, and when the sun goes down you don't turn the camera toward the window and watch it go down for half an hour? That's one of the reasons that Andy Warhol's films were so extraordinary, because he just turned the camera on the Empire State Building for eight hours. It sounds like a gimmicky thing, but if you ever watch that or one of his other films, it's incredibly palpable, and strange. I think that the whole notion, since the development of the mechanical clock in the 14th century, of time being portioned and cut up into identical units day and night, doesn't accurately describe our inner experience. Anyone who's ever been awake at 3 o'clock in the morning and goes through their daily life at 3 o'clock in the afternoon knows damn well that awake at 3 in the morning is not the same as 3 in the afternoon at your job. So that subjective sense of self, of space, of time, has been diminished in the great push that civilizations and societies have had to universalize and quantify experience through the scientific method."

"Why doesn't that diminish your commitment to technology?"

"Well, if you look at how technology is evolving, I think it's very clear right now — and not coincidental — that a lot of recent technological development is centered on America, and what America represents, i.e., individualism. The whole big push in very recent digital technology with computers is about the individualizing of these machines so that you can customize with a gazillion menus and set it up exactly the way you want it, and have these tools reflect and contour to the individual who's using them in the same way that a hammer in the Middle Ages would take on the shape of the hand of the carpenter. So there's this dual thread in technology where through mass production and the industrial revolution it stamps everything out all the same, but on the other hand it's also representing a way that individuals can encounter the world on their own terms. I have a lot of faith that technology is part of our evolutionary process. I think the dilemma of technology is the dilemma of the human being."

VIOLA'S TIGHTROPE WALK BETWEEN THE HORNS of that dilemma has become an ever more precise balancing act as he has reduced the spectacular theatricality of his work over the course of "The Passions." But the layout of the show seems to guide the viewer through an inverted version of this stripping-away process, building in tension to the final, cathartic environment. Viola has at one point mentioned Paleolithic cave paintings with an obvious sense of identification, and I couldn't help being reminded of accounts of these ancient installations. You would have to writhe on your belly through dark, narrow fissures for an hour to finally reach their cathedral-like caverns, where the wall paintings would spring to life by flickering torchlight.



Bill Viola
(Photo by Larry Hirshowitz)
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"This is the only sound piece and the only real old-fashioned Bill Viola environment; it's completely dark, with five projections of what you could only call altered scenes — turned upside down and backward — of men hitting the water."

Walsh is explaining *Five Angels for the Millennium*, the last piece in the exhibit and a work strongly reminiscent of the earlier *Stations.* "Mostly the figures levitate in some way: Instead of being dragged down by gravity into a watery death, they come exploding out." We move through the space where the gift shop will be installed, back to the lobby and the *Six Heads* perpetually contorting. "So you start with small silent studies of heads, and you make the circuit seeing increasingly theatrical enactments. Everything is clear and sharp and earthbound and human in the first part, and then you're sort of — out of this world."

Emerging into the light of day from Viola's crepuscular world is like awakening from a dream, and even though the slanting rays of the setting sun give the Getty a melancholic Mediterranean hush, it feels as if the movie has returned to its regular speed. On the drive home I happen to see a billboard for a PalmPilot or something with the catchy ad copy "30 minutes. Doodle or download?" and begin to have some doubts about Viola's optimism re digital technology's capacity to nurture individual creativity. Yet there is a fundamental rejection of authority in Viola's work that rings true, in spite of its reliance on state-of-the-art, corporate-produced electronics and its placement in the ultimate fortress of Western cultural hegemony that petrodollars built. Recalling the individual videos in my mind's eye, I am lulled back into that cyclical, contemplative mode of reality where our sense of categorical emotional isolation isn't quite what it seems, and for a moment — even though I'm creeping along the eastbound 10 at rush hour surrounded by thousands of hermetically contained human beings desperate to compress time — it feels like this is *my* story.

BILL VIOLA: The Passions | At the J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM, 1200 Getty Center Drive | January 28 through April 27