

bill viola: submerged spaces

(various locations, norwich)

American video artist Bill Viola's work is currently being shown across Norwich as part of this year's Norfolk & Norwich Festival. Several of his works are collected in the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts (SCVA), while two other non-gallery locations are exhibiting single pieces. The exhibition is entitled '*Submerged Spaces*', referencing the underground locations in which the works are housed; the SCVA exhibits a few pieces (including *Catherine's Room* and *Ascension*) in its subterranean gallery, while *Quintet of the Unseen* is being shown in the 'Undercroft' – a cavernous, unused space once deployed as a storage facility for market stall-holders bins – while a crypt in the Cathedral Close is the setting for *Visitation*.

Taken as a whole, the various installations demonstrate Viola's range – from his quiet study of basic human behaviour, through the slightly sinister works that deal with despair and death, to the grandiose spiritual symbolism of *Ascension*. Equally, the exhibition highlights the large thematic and technical strands that run through all of Viola's art. On the technical side, there's the consistent use of sharp high-definition video, the super slow-motion, the single-shot static camera and various aesthetic mainstays. Thematically, it's all Big, Human concerns like birth, death, consciousness and, er, Buddhism. The consistency with which Viola employs these techniques allows his detractors to accuse him of narrowness, simplicity and a reliance on cliché, while the very same austerity draws equal and opposite praise due to its overtones of something like authenticity or purity.

Like any prominent artist, Bill Viola has a great deal of talent and, of course, a few failings; rather than retread the same old criticisms levelled at him, I want to explore a particular aspect of his work that interests me. Viola's connection to painting (Renaissance painting in particular) is well established and I thought that *Submerged Spaces* gave a good account of his equally nuanced and heavy-handed appropriation of the great masters.

Viola emerged as a video artist in the wake of Bruce Nauman, at a time when everything still had to define itself in relation to painting. Abstract Expressionism's rock stars had given way to the self-critical, monastic Minimalists who, by many accounts, drove modernism (and possibly painting) down its formalist dead-end. Conceptualism's early pioneers nevertheless still hung things on walls, exhibiting *textual* paintings that, while radical in their critique of aesthetics, were still tentatively attached to its conventions (even if just as a means of enabling dialogue). An increasingly radical Conceptualism eventually brought about the disintegration of the art-object and, often, an art-world insularity that strongly resembled that of the late modernists they attempted to overcome.

It is in this context that Viola developed his approach to making art. What defines him as an artist is his duality of progressive technical experimentation and traditional spirituality/romanticism; he understood the need to move beyond the drawing-painting-sculpture triad that had so dominated Western art for centuries but, equally, favoured a continuity of the spirit in which the great masters had approached the production of great art. Viola thought that all the most interesting artists would naturally be drawn to new technologies but he wanted to produce technically ground-breaking videos that could stand up to Titian or Carravaggio as unmistakably *powerful* works of art; Michaelangelo in HD, digital *terribilita*.

Many will say that he has achieved this, but his translation of Renaissance painting onto video is often too literal. Viola said that an artist at the end of the 20th century is not someone who *draws* well, but someone who *thinks* well; this was supposed to explain his use of video over traditional techniques. It seems that, like the Conceptualists, Viola prizes the idea over the method – it strikes me as odd, therefore, that he is happy to recycle old ideas, focusing more on the adaptation of a new technique to those ideas, rather than a double-edged development of new themes and new methods. Sometimes, for example, Viola's work can look like an animated Raphael, with figures arranged in traditional structures, standing in sharp contrast to a black background – flesh lit with a warm, candle-like glow and garments coloured in bright, primary tones (e.g. *Quintet of the Unseen* or in a very different sense *Catherine's Room*). The effect can still have an emotional resonance but, without using the medium to its full, it is often in danger of appearing too contrived; of course, the heavy symbolism is also often to blame but that imagery penetrates so much deeper when we no longer feel that we are simply watching a video of a painting.

It *does* work when Viola genuinely utilises the unique properties of video in a way that takes a Renaissance formula and subtly transforms its mode of expression through a gentle juxtaposition of past, present and future. This is a difficult task since the great painters developed their techniques precisely in order to provide narrative in an atemporal medium but, when done well, there is a powerful sense of tension, occurrence and resolution that painting *just can't achieve*. This is done most impressively in *The Raft* which is, unfortunately, not part of this exhibition – nevertheless, *Ascension* (which appears in the SCVA) utilises a similar structure. In both these works we are presented with a placid, almost static scene that is pregnant with a peculiar kind of foreboding. In *Ascension* this opening scene is an underwater shot: almost entirely black, the engulfing water is made evident by ephemeral wisps of blue light and guttural aquatic gurgles, deepened to a growl by slow motion. In *The Raft* the foreboding is carried by an absurd banality; silent individuals wait at what could be a bus stop, but the monumentality of Viola's installations, along with the super slow motion, creates an atmosphere that convinces us immediately that this banality is almost ironic in its inevitable precession to some *event*.

In both pieces, the calm is disturbed by water; in *Ascension* its role is a little ambiguous; the 'event' takes place when a figure – all of a sudden – plunges deep into the water, adopting a crucifix pose before slowly drifting upwards and out of shot. The water, on one hand, seems to be cleansing and suggestive of rebirth, but Viola evokes a claustrophobic environment with his deep blackness, leading to an invocation of *drowning*. Of course, the crucifixion is both a violent act that leads to death and also a passage to renewal and forgiveness – Viola is holding both aspects in balance. Incidentally, he often speaks of nearly drowning as a child but recalls it as a beautiful and rapturous experience rather than a terrible one.

Water is much more violent in *The Raft*; it fires in from the wings, reminiscent of a flood (again, biblical) or fire hoses used by riot control units. The people, once placid, are toppled and violated by the torrent but, again, a certain balance is maintained by their resolute defence in the face of catastrophe and the emerging acts of self-sacrifice and co-operation that begin to blossom.

The soundtrack is key here (something else that painting can't do) since the rumble that opens *Ascension* is classic tension-building, while the eerie silence at the start of *The Raft* is only disturbed by the slow onrush of gallons of water. The actual event is, in both cases, a noisy one, with the plunging man in *Ascension* signalled by an enormous splash alongside the thrashing of unsettled water that follows, while the raging water in *The Raft* commits a certain violence upon the audience with its sonic assault.

So, both pieces begin with a pregnant calm before a violent and sudden event takes place that contains within

itself a counter-balancing hope; perhaps, for Viola, all catastrophe – even death – inherently contains a contradictory promise of resolution. Every cloud.

This resolution also, finally, comes to the fore in both works; it is signalled in *Ascension* by the slow ascent of the submerged figure and the gentle, glittering bubbles that he leaves in his wake to slowly disappear – violent water neutered and dispelled. In *The Raft*, not only does the water cease to flow but the once helpless people cobble together to resist the flood and, once it subsides, become a group of people together, rather than the distinct individuals at the opening. Again, the symbolism here is a bit trite and obvious (crucifixes, water, rebirth, the lonesome crowded West standing silent at bus stops) but it is carried through by the careful use of this temporal structure. Rather than creating a linear, fluid, narrative film Viola hangs focus on the central event (like a painting) but bookends it with moments that subtly infect and modify it – the initial sequence through anticipation and the final sequence through resolution. If we go back to Renaissance painting, we can see that this sort of narrative is hinted at through careful composition. Often a violent – or at least animated – scene is the centre of attention, mirroring the central ‘event’ in Viola’s videos. Meanwhile, tense muscles contain potential action, figures in the distance suggest a possible aftermath, disturbed environments hint at the calm, uneventful, scene before the depicted, eventful, one. The power of human emotion is always embodied in forceful gesture against a backdrop of a world that stretches out, infinitely, on either side of it.

Viola is careful to retain the loaded spring of the Renaissance painting but, since his medium has a temporal dimension, he is capable of fleshing out the past and future in order to make foreboding and resolution so much more a part of the work. I think this is where Viola is most powerful; some of his imagery is more resonant – the haunting evocations of passage into the afterlife in his *An Ocean Without a Shore* series, for instance – but, if it’s love, humanity and hope that Viola wants to reveal (and I think it is), then these beautiful temporal triptychs serve him well. As Viola said, a modern artist must think well, not necessarily paint well, and, unlike painters, video artists have time to think things through.

