exhibition

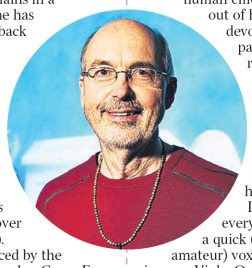
The gospel according to Bill? Yes, I'm a believer

A new film shows how the artist Bill Viola transforms the mundane into the mystical, says Rachel Campbell-Johnston

Bill Viola was six when he fell into a swimming pool and nearly drowned. "It was the most peaceful, most majestic, most blissful moment," he once told me. "I saw Paradise." And when an uncle, suddenly noticing that the little boy had gone missing, plunged in fully clothed to hoick him out, Viola remembers feeling not relieved, but resentful.

Down there, at the bottom of the water, he had seen the "bright light". Call it a vision of heaven, if you like — or see it as the by-product of an oxygen-starved brain. Whichever, the experience has been tugging at Viola's imagination.

All his life, he explains in a new documentary, he has been wanting to go back and back and back again to that place.



Bill Viola: The Road To St Paul's will have its first public showing at Picturehouse Central in London next week (there will be subsequent showings at cinemas across the country over the coming months). Directed and produced by the Bafta-winning film-maker Gerry Fox, it follows the long journey of a landmark commission from conception to final installation in St Paul's Cathedral. You can see it there now: two multipartite video pieces that, translating old religious stories into contemporary language, set out to capture a sense of life's mystery.

To one side is his 2014 *Martyrs* quartet. In each of the four panels a single protagonist confronts one of the elements. A man hangs upside down, arms outspread, beneath a torrent of beating water. A woman, suspended in space, is blown and buffeted by the winds. Each must be immersed in an elemental medium before rising transcendent. A martyr accepts his or her fate, explains Viola, and then sacrifices life for what they believe to be the common good.

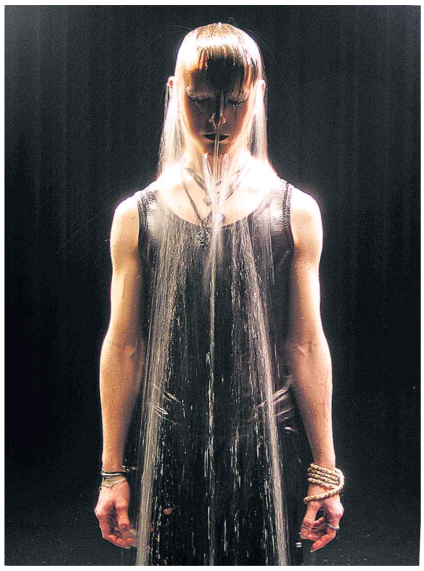
On the other side is what looks like an altarpiece, except the filmed images also move. Each, finding its inspiration in familiar Christian iconography, tells the story of the Virgin Mary, from calmly nursing mother to woman who cradles the broken body of her crucified son.

Viola first tapped into the aesthetic potential of cathedrals several decades ago, when, in 1975, he began investigating the impact of sound on our perceptions of space. What started out as an acoustic experiment quickly developed into a fascination. In 1992 his *Nantes Triptych* and then in 1996 *The Messenger* were presented in ecclesiastical settings. *The Passions* — a video series that he began in 2000 and which explores the expression of human emotion — developed out of his interest in devotional medieval painting and the great religious canvases of the High Renaissance. His St Paul's commission, which took 12 years to come to fruition, felt like a culmination of his life work to date.

It is not to everyone's taste. I took a quick (and admittedly amateur) vox pop of art-world views on Viola. Opinions, it turned out, were dramatically divided. His pieces were either loved or loathed. It was the card-carrying postmodernists who appeared to have the big problem. Perhaps it's hardly surprising. If you think art should reflect today's atomised world, a society that refuses the consolations of ultimate meaning and prefers a superficial cut-and-paste play of cross references instead, then Viola, with his yearning for mystical wholeness, feels at best sentimental, at worst completely outmoded.

Yet the job of art is not only to mirror its era. Great art — perhaps, even, the greatest art — is about transcending time, place and individual experience and reaching out to the eternal and universal instead. It is about evoking that which has been traditionally — and not least during the many centuries in which the church was the dominant artistic patron — described as the human soul.

BILL VIOLA ; GERRY FOX



This is what Viola aims for. For more than 40 years, drawing on the mystical literature of Europe and Asia (as well as his own spiritual practice), he has devoted himself to the exploration of an unseen world of mental, sensual and spiritual perception. He has sought to convey a sense of our unfulfilled yearning for the "other".

In this new documentary he speaks of his art as a priest might speak of his vocation. Doing his work, he says, clearly struggling for words to capture his inner experience, draws on some "deep deep centre", "a place right in your gut that you don't know you even have", where there is "this little being… telling you something". "You feel the movement of energy," he says, "almost like a woman making a new baby, it's really intense."

Yet to this age-old vocation he brings modern tools. Iconic images are given fresh filmic incarnation. In *The Road to St Paul's* you will find him at one moment brushing away tears of emotion, at the next issuing complex instructions to an entire film crew. His aim, as he describes it, is to present a subject in a way that changes it "from a physical to a metaphysical thing".

Viola sets out to effect what almost feels like some mystical transubstantiation. He translates mundane matter to another level. It is a gift that lies in the hands of only the greatest artists. It doesn't matter if you are a believer or determinedly not so. To stand and bear witness is to be in the presence of something that, even in our most secular of modern worlds, can only be described as sacred. This is the magic that spectators will discover on the road to St Paul's.

From top: The Road to Saint Paul's, 2017, and a still from the video Ocean Without a Shore. Above left: Bill Viola

***Bill Viola: The Road to St Paul's* opens at Picturehouse Central, London, on November 8**