

Although they have the moving image in common, commercial cinema and video art are poles apart. It comes as something of a surprise, therefore, that the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has decided to present a special Oscar to Alejandro González Iñárritu for his virtual reality installation, *Carne y Arena* (Virtually Present, Physically Invisible). Of course, it could be that AMPAS is simply seeking to cock a snook at President Trump by awarding such a prestigious and rarely bestowed honour to a piece that focuses on migrants crossing the South-West American desert in the first light of dawn. But the announcement raises the profile of video art just as Gerry Fox profiles one of its undisputed masters in Bill Viola: *The Road to St Paul's*.

A little context is needed before we begin. Born in Queens, New York in 1951, Bill Viola took his first steps as a video artist in the 1970s, in conjunction with composer David Tudor and Italian video pioneer Maria Gloria Conti Bicocchi, whose *Art/tapes/22* (it) studio introduced him to the work of such innovators as Nam June Paik, Bruce Nauman, and Vito Acconci. However, his most enduring collaboration has been with wife Kira Perov, whom he met while exhibiting some of his earliest works in Melbourne in 1977.

Fascinated by video's ability to help viewers become more self-aware through sense perception, Viola has often blended human experience with spiritual inspiration in the 150+ works that have been shown in cinemas, galleries and museums worldwide. Among his best-known items are *Déserts* (1994), *Catherine's Room* (2001), *Going Forth By Day* (2002) and *Ocean Without a Shore* (2007). However, Fox concentrates on the 12-year project to produce two permanent video installations, *Mary and Martyrs*, for the High Altar of St Paul's Cathedral in London.

Opening with extracts from *The Crossing* (1996) and *The Raft* (2004), the documentary uses captions to set the scene for Bill Viola's meeting with John Moses, the Dean of St Paul's, who had seen *The Passions* show at the National Gallery in 2003 and had decided that Violas moving tableau had the power to engage the viewer in a way that is beyond a static canvas. Clips from 'Emergence' from *The Passions* (2002) and *The Quintet of the Astonished* (2000) follow, as the pair discuss the need for the installations to replace lost side chapels dedicated to Mary and modern martyrs and for them to reinforce the Christian message of life, death and eternal life. Six years later, Viola is wading through a field in Ojai, California, as he scouts locations with Kira Perov, director of photography Harry Dawson and actress Alessia Patregnani, who is playing Mary. He explains that the project has proved more difficult than he had anticipated, as the more he read, the more ideas he had and he felt the need to collaborate more openly than had sometimes been the case on earlier works. Taking his inspiration from religious art, he talks Patregnani and Deborah Puette through a reconstruction of the Visitation between Mary and Elizabeth, her cousin and the future mother of John the Baptist.

Curator and art historian John Hannardt comments on the potency of the ideas that Viola draws from paintings like Jacopo da Pontormo's 'Visitation' (c.1528), which he had drawn on for a slow-motion piece entitled *The Greeting* (1995). We see him shooting the scene for St Paul's and uses a loudhailer to guide Patregnani and Puette through their movements and gestures and he rushes down the hillside to hug them for getting the shot so perfectly. He explains over images from *Heaven and Earth* and *Nantes Triptych* (both 1992) that life and death contain their own distinctive beauty, with the end portion of the latter work showing the last breath taken by Viola's mother, which he considers her last gift to him.

Having produced *The Messenger* (1996) for Durham Cathedral, Viola is well aware of the demands being made upon him at St Paul's. During a second site visit in 2006, he acquainted himself with the space in which the right-hand panel would sit and he reveals that he is toying with notions of mud-caked bodies being made clean with water to convey the ideas of death and transcendence. As he works, he explains how vital Perov is to his formulating concepts and turning them into reality and he describes how he contrasted the texture of images produced by different makes of camera in *Ocean Without a Shore* (2007) to reflect on the idea of how a body

changes at the moment of death, when something appears to leave the physical form, even though you can't see what it is.

At the Venice Biennale in 2007, he presented this piece on the altar of the San Gallo chapel and this helped him fathom his approach to the walls in St Paul's. We fast forward to 2011, as Viola and designers David Nelson and Andrea Weidmann gauge how mock-ups of the installation will work with their surroundings. As Mary is about the female connection to the Earth, Viola wants the screens to stand on a plinth touching the ground, while Martyrs will only be attached to the wall to give a sense of it flying upwards towards Heaven.

Cutting from a meeting with executive Mouzhan Majidi to discuss materials for the screens and their surrounds, Fox takes us to the Salton Sea in California in 2011, as Viola is working on a Crucifixion scene with Mary, St John the Evangelist and Mary Magdalene based on Matthias Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece (1512-16). This fails to make the final cut, but Viola confides during the shoot that he has found this commission extremely difficult, as it requires a degree of narrative linearity that is entirely alien to him. But he adores the setting, which has also featured in *The Passing* (1991), as well as the Mojave Desert, which he used in *Passing Into the Light* (2005).

During a night shoot for the Pieta sequence, Viola notes how many themes recur in his work, with 'Ascending Angel' from *Five Angels for the Millennium* (2001) conveying the power of the Resurrection. But, even while certain sequences slotted into place easily, others proved problematic and Viola admits that the thought that his work would be on permanent display was nagging away at him and clouding his judgement. He decided to take time off the St Paul's project and let the dust settle while he worked on items like *The Dreamers* (2013), which riffs on his fascination with the non-waking form and harks back to an earlier piece, *The Sleepers* (1992), which also focused on faces in repose underwater.

By 2013, Viola is ready to start shooting *Martyrs* in Los Angeles. Perov muses on the fact that those dying for their beliefs have come to terms with death and the four segments of this video will involve actors John Hay, Sarah Steben, Darrow Igus and Norman Stone respectively being subjected to the elements of water, air, fire and earth. As he watches soil covering Stone's cowering torso, Viola decides to follow his old art teacher's advice of circumventing problems by running the film backwards and he is so thrilled by the effect that he abandons the idea of Man being buried alive to him emerging from the dust of Creation.

Still pursuing other projects, Viola describes the rationale behind *Man Searching for Immortality/Woman Searching for Eternity* (2013), which uses large slabs of granite to depict an elderly couple examining their bodies with torches for the imperfections that will kill them. The viewer becomes involved in a mutual mirror gazing exercise and Viola admits that he has been obsessed with death since he almost drowned when he was six years old. This experience clearly informed *The Passing* (1991), which examines the notion that we are just matter waiting to be recycled by the Cosmos and this chimes in with the Earth segment of *Martyrs*, which he runs for the first time alongside the other elements and he is too overcome to speak on camera.

Always in demand, Viola heads to Paris in 2014 to supervise an exhibition of his work and he reveals that he always learns something new about creations like *The Veiling* (1995), *Nine Attempts to Achieve Immortality* (1996) and *Going Forth By Day* on seeing them again. But he has little time to linger, as it's off to London to see the installations in situ and be warmly congratulated by the Chancellor of St Paul's, Mark Oakley. Dean Moses jokes after the premiere that he has been retired for eight years and has hopes that Mary will soon be in place on the opposite wall. Tate director Nicholas Serota enthuses about *Martyrs* and claims it enhances the cathedral and invites the viewer to recall all the other great works of art dealing with the same themes.

The following year, Viola is back in London to help curate another show, which includes older pieces like *Moving Stillness (Mt Rainier)* (1979). At this point, Fox opts to leap back to Viola's formative years at Syracuse University, where he made the likes of *Information* (1973) and *The Space Between the Teeth* (1976), and helped

Nam June Paik install his seminal piece, TV Garden (1974). Rather in keeping with the restless nature of the documentary, we leap into the present again to join Viola in his Long Beach study, where he claims he feels the energy for new works like a woman must do when she starts to form a new life inside her. We see a clip from Ascension (2000), which again relates back to his childhood trauma and he admits that water has played a significant role in his output.

At his nearby studio, Perov and their son Blake join him to work out how to finish Mary, after it was decided that the 90-minute running time needed to come down to around 15. He decides to condense scenes into a three-screen polyptych in the manner of Catherine's Room, which had been based on Andrea di Bartolo's Predella, 'St Catherine of Siena and Four Mantellate' (1428). After consulting with their editor, Viola and Perov go to St Paul's to see the finished article and Perov explains how the first segment shows an Eternal Mother suckling her child in slow-motion against a timelapsed cityscape. Former National Portrait Gallery Director Sandy Nairne is blown away and Viola is awed by the fact that this work that forced him to delve so deeply inside of himself is finished and will long outlive him in order to prompt people to reflect upon the Blessed Virgin Mary's journey, but also their own.

Never one to stand still, Viola is soon working on Inverted Birth (2014), which has since been dedicated to the memory of Norman Stone, who died in 2016. But this touching tribute feels an odd place for the profile of Bill Viola to end. However, several decisions with regard to the structuring of this otherwise fascinating film feel a little puzzling. Fox and editor John Street clearly wish to convey the extent to which Viola is forever quoting himself or revisiting key moments in his life. But the jumbled feel doesn't quite equate to the creative turmoil that Viola and Perov endured while making the St Paul's pieces.

Nevertheless, Fox makes the most of his unique access to one of the most inspired visionaries in the history of moving pictures and presents him as an unassuming and genial man, who just happens to be a driven genius. Moreover, he shows how indebted Viola is to the pragmatic skills of the ever-supportive Perov. But, despite being executive produced by Melvyn Bragg, this makes few concessions for those not already au fait with Viola and his milieu. So, perhaps, someone needs to make a start on a primer for the next generation of budding video art aficionados.