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For dust thou art

Bill Viola's commission for St Paul's Cathedral to be unveiled in May

By Helen Stoilas. Web only

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Scenes from the panel for "Earth" in Viola's *Martyrs*

Bill Viola has moved beyond water, a symbolic element that is often used by the US artist in his large-scale videos, for his commission for St Paul's Cathedral in London. *Martyrs*, which is due to be unveiled on 21 May, is a four-screen video installation—the first of two works to be installed behind the cathedral's high altar. The work refers to the Classical elements; the panel for "Earth", for example, shows a man buried under a cascade of dust (above).

Viola tells us that it was Kira Perov, his partner and collaborator, who "felt that we were ready to move in this direction". Work on the commissions, which were announced in 2009, "slowed down" because of other projects and to give the cathedral more time to complete its internal preparations, Viola says. In the end, "it took a month of production in a large rented studio in Hollywood" to film the work. The second part of the commission, on the subject of Mary, is due to be installed next year. "I was working on *Mary* for some time but decided to put it aside," Viola says.

Martyrs is installed as an arrangement of four vertical colour plasma screens, each corresponding to a different element. "We looked at my drawings and sketches and once Kira introduced the elements of Earth, Air, Fire and Water to each of the four panels, we were able to see how to proceed," Viola says. The screens are supported by a stainless steel stand designed by the British architectural firm Foster + Partners.

The works, estimated to cost around \$2m and commissioned through the Church of England's Fabric Advisory Committee, will be gifted to Tate, "ensuring the works would be cared for

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permanently, whatever the decision of future cathedral authorities”, according to a church report. The videos will be permanently installed in St Paul’s, however, and an annual budget of £10,000 has been agreed for the conservation and maintenance of the video, with technical support from Tate and the artist’s studio. And to highlight the tie between the institutions, at the same time St Paul’s unveils its commission, an important early work by Viola will be shown directly across the Thames at Tate Modern. In *Tiny Deaths*, 1993, three human figures projected on the walls of a darkened room are slowly engulfed in white light.

Last month, Viola and Perov installed a series of smaller videos in the Cathedral of Berne in Switzerland, and the experience has made them eager to see their work finally realised in St Paul’s. “We saw the works [in Berne] with the cathedral bathed in late afternoon light and the stained glass windows were glowing. Underneath some of these windows were the video screens, also glowing. It was an amazing moment. It made me feel that art is timeless,” Viola says. “There is a certain kind of resonance that is created when works of art are placed in spaces that are not museums. There is also a greater intimacy to see smaller works in a vast space, we are drawn to them because they are human scale.”



A production still from the panel for "Fire". Photo: Nicola Goode



Familiar territory: the panel for "Water"