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Enduring the Elements

Exploring mortal drama with religious overtones.

By
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Martyrs
(Earth, Air, Fire, Water)
St. Paul's Cathedral

Nothing can prepare visitors to St. Paul's Cathedral, in the heart of the city, for the impact of Bill Viola's visionary video installation "Martyrs (Earth, Air, Fire, Water)." After walking through the spectacular elaboration of Christopher Wren's architecture, I find the work positioned at the far end of the long South Quire Aisle. The carbon-steel stand containing four plasma screens is purged and minimal; designed by Norman Foster at his most austere, it contrasts very severely with the profuse ornamentation enlivening the High Altar nearby. The presentation of "Martyrs" is not allowed to interfere with the visceral power of the images themselves, focusing relentlessly on the plight of four figures who undergo extreme torment.

When Mr. Viola first made his reputation, in the 1980s, as a pioneering video artist from New York, his work seemed more secular than sacred. In the poignant

"Nantes Triptych" (1992), three screens record the birth of a baby, a man surrounded by water and an old woman's death in a hospital.

The baby was Mr. Viola's second child and the dying woman was his mother. So his fascination with extreme mortal drama was already clear, but his exploration of religious images became overt as he grew older. The overseers of St. Paul's were very impressed by his 2003 exhibition at the National Gallery in London, where he disclosed an intense interest in traditional Christian art. Small wonder, then, that "Martyrs" was commissioned for the cathedral, where Mr. Viola's figures immediately look at home in a building dedicated to suffering and redemption.

No seats are provided, so I stand and watch as three men and one woman, one on each screen, endure their unimaginable agony. This time, unlike in the "Nantes Triptych," the figures are all performers. Above them, an enormous Wren window admits daylight to the cathedral. But absolute darkness surrounds the martyrs as they strive to withstand their alarming pain. My

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encounter with "Martyrs" is profound enough to make me feel that I have never before experienced the strange, heightened intensity provided by Mr. Viola here.

At the beginning, the man on the far left is virtually invisible. Almost covered by a stifling heap of earth, he seems to be buried alive. Only after moving in very close to the screen do I realize that his head is still protruding, although he clamps both hands protectively against his skull. Next to him, a fair-haired woman dangles from thick ropes tied round her wrists. Her clothed body is seen full-length, and ropes entwine her ankles as well. There she hangs, twisting in the wind and contrasting with a seated elderly man on the next screen. He appears to be asleep, yet small flames have already started descending from above and settling ominously on the floor near his bare feet. Meanwhile, on the far-right screen, a bearded young man lies motionless on the ground. Although his naked torso looks healthy and well-built, he might be close to death already. Soon enough, the rope tied round his ankles begins pulling him up into the air.

Mr. Viola wastes no time in putting all the martyrs through hell. The duration of his entire video is only seven minutes, and all the way through I find my gaze darting from one screen to the next in an attempt to discover what exactly is happening to each of these doomed figures. It is a highly dramatic spectacle, especially when the man on the far left is uncovered. The earth rushes upward, like smoke rising from an inferno or even an inverted waterfall ascending to the sky. The man emerges from his hunched humiliation, gradually becoming upright. His stance is very different from the position of the hapless woman, who is now tossed brutally from side to side by furious air.

Yet the most alarming development of all affects the elderly man in the chair. The flames flare upward with terrifying force, threatening to burn him. He wakes up, placing hands on knees while raising his head and staring out directly at us. As for the athletic young man on the right, he dangles upside-down and stretches out his arms at either side. For a moment, I am reminded of the Crucifixion. But Mr. Viola rightly ensures that "Martyrs" cannot be pinned down to a single religion. Water starts pouring down from the top, drenching the young man and making his dark hair hang in long, dripping tresses.

In the final phase of this mesmeric work, turmoil gives way to stillness. Yet there is no loss of intensity. If anything, the figures become even more compelling as they arrive at stasis. The man on the far left stands erect, head up and eyes closed as if lost in prayer. By a miracle, none of the earth that once smothered his body can now be seen on his flesh or clothes. He has been purged, and the woman's gyrations have likewise ceased. She has even managed to free her hands from the thick ropes, but her feet are still bound together and so her fingers cling to the ropes for support. Suspended in space, but not inverted, she throws her head backward as if searching for the light-source above.

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Her deathly pallor is echoed by that of the man in the chair. Although the flames have subsided and his entire body is unaccountably intact, he looks blanched enough to be dead. The theme of extinction is pursued at the far right, where the inverted young man is pulled up until he disappears at the top, leaving only a thin, melancholy trickle of water in his place. An overall sense of tragedy dominates the work, but at least the young man might have ascended to another realm. Even the man on the far left, who is still standing, tilts his head back and shuts his eyes, while a strong white light shines down and almost makes his face dissolve in the brightness. At this point, all four screens grow dark and the work terminates.

After a few seconds, though, it starts again and the martyrdom is re-enacted on a continuous loop, replayed over and over. Wandering away from Mr. Viola's elegiac installation, I walk behind the High Altar and, in the Jesus Chapel, discover a large open book with names carefully written inside. The chapel especially commemorates U.S. soldiers who died in World War II, and their names lend a poignant historical dimension to Mr. Viola's work. But his overall intentions cannot be limited to the idea of a military memorial. "Martyrs" may invite us to witness what Mr. Viola describes as "the human capacity to bear pain, hardship, and even death," yet its deepest power resides in his ability to convey the fundamental mystery of sacrifice.