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Stained glass for the 21st Century: St Paul's installs plasma screen art

Complete with hints of bondage and waterboarding, St Paul's Cathedral installs first plasma screen video art installation



It is being viewed as a 21st century answer to the medieval stained glass masterpieces or renaissance frescoes depicting vivid Biblical scenes of suffering and death.

St Paul's Cathedral in London has become the first church in Britain to introduce a permanent a video art installation – complete with hints of bondage and waterboarding.

Martyrs, by the American artist Bill Viola, is made up of four plasma screens installed next to the High Altar in Sir Christopher Wren's church.

The panels, arranged like a traditional altarpiece, simultaneously show four seven minute-films, in which the martyrs are subjected to torture and death through the elements: earth, air, fire and water.

In the first, a man is shown being slowly being buried alive as sand rains down on him. Next to him a woman in a plain white dress is suspended in mid-air, her hands and feet bound, as she is buffeted by hurricane-force winds.

Another man is seen strapped to a wooden chair, slowly being engulfed in flames, while a fourth is shown bare-chested and hanging upside down as torrents of water cascade onto him.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY



Martyrs (Earth, Air, Fire, Water), a new large-scale video installation by artist Bill Viola for St Paul's Cathedral
(JULIAN SIMMONDS)

The work, which was a decade in the planning, has been gifted to the Tate Modern but will remain on permanent display at St Paul's, running on a constant loop. A second work by Viola, entitled Mary, is to be installed later.

It is described as the first moving art installation to be commissioned by a church in Britain and one of the first in the world.

Art critics nicknamed it a "hi-tech Caravaggio", a reference to the Italian painter's often gruesome depictions of crucifixion and other Biblical themes.

"This is the first video being shown in St Paul's cathedral which will be a part of the cathedral, that for me is just so exciting," Viola told The Telegraph.

"My partner Kira who I work with very closely also feels the same way.

"It is such an honour to be here in this unbelievable building and we are able now to be a part of that because of the work that we do, it is just an amazing experience even standing in this incredible place."

Although it is the first such work to go permanent display in a British church, in 1996 Viola projected his work *The Messenger*, onto the great west door of Durham Cathedral.

His *Nantes Triptych* caused controversy in the early Nineties due to its footage of the birth of a child and the death of an elderly woman.