

In Paris, Catching Fire



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The venerable walls of Paris's Grand Palais have hosted blockbuster exhibitions by such safe bets as Claude Monet and Henri Matisse. Now the museum is gambling on the American artist Bill Viola's offbeat videos about life, death and the things we leave behind.

No water lilies here. Fifty screens show Mr. Viola's moody creations: People walk in a forest. A lonely woman in her bedroom does domestic chores again and again. The subject of the 11-minute "Fire Woman" stands in front of a wall of fire and eventually falls in water.

In video art, the 63-year-old Mr. Viola, a New York native, is one of the most influential creators. A smaller retrospective at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo attracted 340,000 visitors in 2007. The one at the Grand Palais is more exhaustive and includes pieces lent by private collectors such as French billionaire François Pinault.

The show in Paris opened March 5, and the first indicators of public interest are positive. The average number of visitors is above 2,700 a day—far below Monet's average of 7,000 per day but a strong showing for a video artist, according to exhibition curator Jérôme Neutres. The show is to run until July 21 and won't travel.

"I am emotionally driven," Mr. Viola said. "I just work with feelings and emotions." Water is a central part of his work. As a child, he was strongly marked by a near-death experience: He

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almost drowned in a lake. One of his most spectacular works is the 10-minute "Tristan's Ascension," showing a man lying on the floor, then gradually rising in the air, apparently pulled upward by a reversed cascade. In another, "The Dreamers," a series of seven people on separate flat screens lie underwater with their eyes closed without ever breathing.

Mr. Viola, now based in Long Beach, Calif., said he wants to leave his work open to interpretation, with few written captions accompanying the exhibition and a lengthy explanation only at the end. But visitors can download a free smartphone app to get commentary by Mr. Viola himself.

The exhibition, covering the more than 30 years that Mr. Viola has been creating videos, plunges visitors into semidarkness. Through editing that makes the videos seem never-ending, Mr. Viola shows the passing of our time on Earth as an eternal beginning. He considers his work closer to painting than actual filmmaking, even though he shares many tools with movie directors. He's collaborated with the band Nine Inch Nails on a video suite for a tour. "I know I am a kind of storyteller but not a traditional one," he said.

Some viewers are left cold. Retiree Michèle Lagarde, 64, missed a clear narrative. "I wonder if there isn't a part of snobbery in this kind of show," she said. But Jacques Lehericy, 68, a former official at a state environmental organization, called the exhibition "stupefying, a moment of intense emotion." He liked "Fire Woman" the most.



A scene from American video artist Bill Viola's 'Fire Woman,' on view in Paris. *Collection Pinault/Kira Perov (photo)*