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## Not Drowning but Creating

Bill Viola brings his preoccupation with life, death and water to Paris's Grand Palais

By

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*Kira Perov*

**VIDEO ARTIST BILL VIOLA** has often spoken of his near-death experience at the age of six, when he fell into a lake. He was saved by an uncle, but at first he tried to push his rescuer away—"I saw a beautiful world under water...I wanted to stay," he said earlier this week at a press conference to launch his retrospective at the Grand Palais in Paris. Water remains a signature element in his work, in which fleeting time, the brevity of life and the inevitability of death are ever-present.



*Kira Perov*

# JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Born in Syracuse, N.Y. in 1951, Mr. Viola belongs to the first TV generation. "I was born at the same time as video," he said, and his website biography lists "Captain of the TV Squad, fifth grade, P.S. 20, Queens, NY." At Syracuse University, he quickly gravitated to a new "experimental studios" department, and later assisted video-art pioneer Nam June Paik. In Melbourne for a 1977 exhibition, he met Kira Perov, cultural director at La Trobe University; they married in 1980, and she has since been a close collaborator on all his work. They are world travelers, but based in Long Beach, Calif. for 30 years, with a library of books on mysticism, Zen Buddhism, Sufism, philosophy, poetry and art.



*Kira Perov*

The Grand Palais show is the first Viola retrospective in France and his largest show anywhere to date, with 20 works on 30 screens running a total of more than 500 hours of videotape, with sound effects the only audio. ("No one is expected to watch every frame," said Ms. Perov. "I probably haven't seen every frame myself.") Mr. Viola describes the elegant presentation as "magical," with no visible wires, cables or tech equipment.

The show covers four decades, from "The Reflecting Pool" (1977-79), a direct reference to his near-drowning, to "The Dreamers" (2013), seven screens for seven people asleep underwater. There are two works, "Fire Woman" and "Tristan's Ascent," from his 2005 collaboration with director Peter Sellars for Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde" at the Paris Opera. (The controversial production returns to the Opera Bastille April 8-May 4.)

The show's centerpiece is "Going Forth By Day" (2002), with five huge color screens covering the walls of a large gallery, simultaneously playing out five different, enigmatic stories. The elaborate polyptych, requiring 125 technicians and a cast of 200, was inspired by Giotto's late-13th-century frescoes in Assisi's St. Francis basilica, which Mr. Viola cites as his ultimate reference. "All art is contemporary," he said. "Art is the universal language of all times."

*Until July 21 , [grandpalais.fr](http://grandpalais.fr)*