The New York Times

Teeman, Tim. "Fire and Water, Death and Wagner," *The New York Times*, September 11, 2010.



arts

opera

# Fire and water, death

**The maestro of video art, Bill Viola, thinks big and has a reputation to match. He talks to *Tim Teeman***

I am in front of a bungalow in Long Beach, California, on a deathly quiet suburban street of modest houses and clipped lawns. Is this really where Bill Viola, the maestro of video art, lives? Viola's productions and installations are epic multiscreen concoctions of stunning special-effects and quasi-spiritual imagery. He has represented the US at the Venice Biennale, his works — including *The Crossing*, *The Veiling* and *Ocean Without a Shore* — of figures crying, staring, dying or emerging from water and fire have appeared in the world's greatest galleries and museums. And now they are going to appear on the stage.

In the five-hour video that Viola has created as a backdrop for Peter Sellars' production of Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*, first seen at the Paris Opera in 2005 and about to have its British premiere, there are cascades of fire and water, hundreds of candles, optical illusions with people walking through still, barely illuminated water, and a stunning tableau in which a dead body is raised high within a waterfall against the flow of the water. Fire and water — "the archetypes of life and death", as Viola puts it — are his most familiar images: he thinks, and films, big, and has a reputation to match.

Viola's greeting gives me fair warning of the intellectual and artistic gyre within: "You've got the right place, but this is not a typical suburban house." Wiry, bearded and quietly spoken, he shows me the hundreds of books and notebooks in this "ground zero of my art-making". Indian music plays. There are ethnic artefacts, parchments and books on art (Picasso, Japanese, Bosch and Breughel) and faith (from Christianity to Zen mysticism).

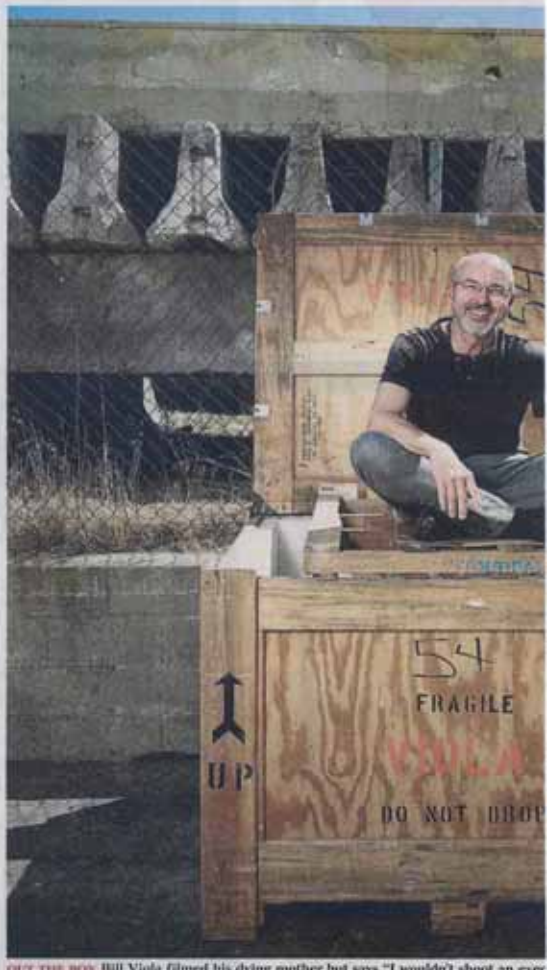
Viola has a house and studio, overseen by his wife, Kira Perov, and near a 6,000ft studio where all the fires and floods are filmed. He has been based here since 1982. "I like being the plain-clothes artist. Before, we lived in New York, which was like being in a factory town where everyone works for the same factory. On one level that's great, but I didn't want to be 'on' constantly. I like to work in solitude."

Viola, 59, has friends who "just go to their studios and create", but he will "write, think"; some pieces take six years to execute. Because he thinks in images rather than words, he writes down each idea and thought, quotes, his worries and hopes in notebooks, along with drawings of the images we see realised in his works.

He says of *Tristan und Isolde*: "The images I create are on the threshold of reality. Wagner was radical, making the music speak for his characters' thoughts and desires rather than the action, and I want to do the same." The opera, starring Anne Sofie von Otter and featuring the Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by Esa Pekka-Salonen, will be performed in Birmingham on September 23 and the Festival Hall, Central London, three days later.

Viola lives in his head, and what an esoteric farmyard it is. He shows me the book devoted to the multiscreen altarpiece that he is making for St Paul's Cathedral about the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. Amid the precise scrawl and jagged diagrams are quotes from Edvard Munch and Joseph Beuys and headings such as "rules for the icon painter", the measurements of the north aisle of St Paul's, a guide on how to draw martyrs and a sacramental tabernacle, a description of salvation. Does he ever want to stop scrawling in notebooks and get on with it? "My wife says the same," Viola replies. "She's the midwife trying to keep me from going off the rails."

At this point Perov joins in. "It's hard sometimes, he goes off at tangents," she




OUT THE BOX Bill Viola filmed his dying mother but says "I wouldn't shoot an exec

# and Wagner


tion, although I've thought about it"

says diplomatically. "He spends too long in here. I make appointments for him to see people." They met when she organised an exhibition of his in Australia in 1977, the attraction was instant and their relationship works, "as long as he stays in his place and I stay in mine", Perov says, smiling. One sympathises: Viola goes off on riffs about technology and the body, why we live in a "timeless" age, why "the idea of narrative is so dubious, there is a theory we exist out of time". He notes that the words "going through the space between us are occupying other space". Culture and sociology are "spinning webs" around us.

The foundation of Viola's inspiration came from nearly drowning when he was 6 on a family holiday at a trout lake in upstate New York. "I remember every second. I felt like I was in another dimension. Everything was blue and green. I was weightless. I wasn't scared. It was unbelievably beautiful. I didn't think 'I'm dying'. I was marvelling at what I was seeing. Some people are logical and rational, others, like me, are elusive and ethereal and an experience like that shaped my view of the world."

He is talking about it with such reverence that I ask if he'd have liked to have died. Viola laughs. "No! I'm really glad my uncle grabbed me, I'd rather be alive. But at the moment he wrenched me up I remember being angry that this sensation of pure bliss was being interrupted. Later I knew I had crossed the threshold to death."

Viola's parents weren't religious. His father was a former Roman Catholic altar boy, who, as a barman during Prohibition, would see priests sneaking in "to hang around the ladies", which disillusioned him. His mother was English, from Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria, and, although Anglican, was more "spiritual" than devoted to one faith. They met on a blind date in New York. Viola played the recorder, sax and drums at school. "According to the Tibetans the last sense that goes is

**'I cry two or three times a week: tears are the most profound expression of human experience'**

sound and so after someone dies they chant for three days to help them to pass to the other side," he says — and sound is there, as thuds or hums in his work. "It is the most profound sense," he says.

He was so good at art that he designed the backdrops for all his school plays and his first finger painting was put on the classroom wall. "I always knew I was going to be an artist," he says. His parents gave him a small camera. He relished the skill of the TV cartoonists whom he grew up watching and remembers going to the World's Fair when he was 14. "It was magical, rooms with 10 or 12 projections in them at once."

He smiles, comparing himself with his two children, Andrew, 24, and Blake, 18. Six years ago the family met the Dalai Lama. Blake asked him if it would be right to kill a man who was about to kill a hundred people. The Dalai Lama said yes. "If I killed that one man it would take me two or three lifetimes to work off the negative karma," he told Blake. "But if I let that man kill all those people he would have had multiple negative karmas to resolve before he found peace." Andrew is set to become an artist; Blake "is a little wilder, but good".

You couldn't study video art when Viola was a student at Syracuse University in the early 1970s. His first film was about wild horses contrasted with stately Lipizzaner stallions. His first show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York was next to the lavatories, he says, recalling his many scraps with critics who claimed that video art wasn't art. "We were like the Salon des Refusés [the 1863 exhibition in Paris for artists rejected by the Paris Salon]. When the big galleries wouldn't give us a space we had shows in lofts. One friend said that art was whatever an artist said it was. It's like asking is rally driving really a sport? Well, yes if the guy driving the car says it is. I could never accept these people claiming to know what your intentions were behind your work."

As a young artist "I was so against anything old," Viola laughs. "I liked Rothko and de Kooning. If I saw gold leaf I would run a hundred miles." It wasn't until his late thirties that Viola immersed himself in the great works, inspired by his mother's gift of the *Time-Life* series of books on art. He feasted on the life of Vermeer, "on a horse and carriage trying to make it like my friends and I were, and Dürer's wife hawking his work alongside the fruit sellers". As his later work reveals, Viola is heavily inspired by such work now: Bosch's *Creation of the World*, Flemish still lifes, "and death", he says emphatically. "All those guys' work was filled with death."

Viola claims never to have courted controversy, although he filmed his mother when she was dying of cancer. "Obviously" he asked his family's permission. "To me, it was like a memorial to her." Why make it public then? "The death of the mother is one of the profoundest things in human life. She is the source of you. In the last few days that hospital room wasn't a space as we know it, everything was turned upside down." Did he feel intrusive? "I can see why you might think that, but I thought a lot of people might get something from it." Indeed, it helped to cure him of a "block" he had been suffering for almost three years.

Is there anything that he wouldn't shoot? "That's a great question," he muses. "I wouldn't shoot an execution, although I have thought about it." He's so obsessed by death, but is Viola scared of it? "No, but who knows when the time comes?" For the past six years he has been devising *The Night Journey*, a single-player, non-violent video game in which the player — traversing desert landscapes — has dream-like visions, except that they aren't visions at all, but the experience of his or her own death. He hopes that it will be out within the year.

Unsurprisingly, given his flair for the spectacular, Viola has toyed with the ideas of making Hollywood movies and owns up to lost afternoons watching *The Towering Inferno*. But his art will be always be left-field and, besides his St Paul's project, he is working on "video poems", in which images on three screens take the viewer through the story of a woman's life.

Viola will turn 60 next year. "I can't wait," he says: in his bountiful, productive fifties he drew inspiration from his youth and middle age. He doesn't ever really relax, he says. He embraces sadness and depression if it descends. "To me, it's open space. Vulnerability is good. I cry two or three times a week: tears are the most profound expression of human experience."

His work is most focused on death and the extremities of emotion, but what recurs in our conversation is his heartfelt passions and beliefs. "If you want to be an artist," he says, "eat as much as you can wherever you can, especially foods you don't like. Put all that knowledge inside you. Years later you'll be surprised by what you remember and goes into your work."

In his video for *Tristan*, he says, audiences should expect the "realistic, surreal, metaphorical and inscrutable. There is no one style, it keeps morphing." The same could be said for the artist himself.

***Tristan und Isolde*, Sept 23, Symphony Hall, Birmingham (thsh.co.uk 0121-780 3333) and Sept 26, Southbank Centre, London SE1 (southbankcentre.co.uk 0800 6526717)**