

# JAMES COHAN GALLERY

*Los Angeles Times*

January 28, 2003

ART REVIEW

## **Tackling life's eternal questions, on video**

Bill Viola attempts a worthy cross-pollination of emotion, art and technology in his current Getty exhibition.



Observance

By Christopher Knight, Times Staff Writer

When the new Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels opened in September with its pallid array of commissioned art, I couldn't help wondering how different it might have been had Bill Viola been invited to contribute a work. Viola's art is determinedly secular, not religious, but an absence of doctrinal divinity does not equate with a lack of spiritual power.

As was so beautifully laid out in the artist's 1997 retrospective at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, profound and ageless questions of mortality, love and human consciousness have been his focus for several decades. Of course, the very fact that he's a video artist might make even the daydream of a cathedral commission seem remote. Plasma screens and devotional chapels have yet to make peace with one another.

On the other hand, certainly the spiritual dimension of Viola's art can also make art world cognoscenti nervous. When his extraordinary five-screen projection "Going Forth by Day" opened at New York's Guggenheim Museum late last year, more than one enervated critic marveled at the obvious technological complexity, while fretting over perceived affectation. Based on stories ranging from ancient Egyptian ritual to the Book of Genesis, "Going Forth by Day" is a moving secular meditation on disaster and loss.

A suggestion of what might have been at the cathedral can now be seen in a first-rate exhibition at the J. Paul Getty Museum. "Bill Viola: The Passions" assembles a dozen video works from the last three years that are variously connected by the theme of extreme emotion.

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The show culminates with the monumental "Five Angels for the Millennium," a video environment shown on five enormous screens. It made news in September when it was jointly acquired by three museums: London's Tate Modern, New York's Whitney and Paris' Pompidou Center.

"Five Angels" is nearly abstract. In a large, darkened gallery, each 7-by-10-foot screen shows the slowly churning surface of a body of water, pierced by light. Four images appear to have been shot from underwater, while in the fifth we seem to look down from above. A rumbling soundtrack swells and ebbs like electronic thunder, or diesel trucks passing in the night. (The show's other works are silent.) In slow motion, a gathering storm agitates one watery surface or another, when suddenly -- *whoosh!* A body plunges through the glowing liquid space, floats momentarily, then disappears.

It's genesis again. Or, perhaps it's the alpha and the omega. Birth and death, each conceived as a dramatic transition in consciousness, rather than as a conclusive beginning or a definitive end, are embodied as unfathomable yet riveting mysteries. If Mark Rothko had been a video artist, not a painter, Houston's Rothko Chapel might have looked like this.

What's remarkable about "Five Angels for the Millennium" is that, even after you've seen and experienced the cycle and its disconcerting surprises, responses resonate and deepen as you linger. The five projections are of differing duration, which means the arrivals and departures come in random patterns. Eager anticipation, nervousness, droning tedium, a bit of dread, impulsive surrender, thrilling release, wide-eyed-curiosity -- passions are not described in the work but embodied in a visitor swimming about in the dark.

Themes in this exceptional work will be familiar from earlier Viola video projections. In the 1977-79 "The Reflecting Pool," a figure in a leafy glade disappears into a pool, as if slipping into another world. The central figure in 1992's "The Nantes Triptych," which chronicles passages from birth to death, is a languid, floating body.

The current exhibition also shows a deepening interest in medieval and Renaissance painting, as well as modern photography. A four-panel work shows a pair of hands entwining fingers, cupping one another, knocking knuckles and more. Black and white, it puts you immediately in mind of Dürer's famous drawing of praying hands or Alfred Stieglitz's photographs of Georgia O'Keeffe.

The well in a work titled "Emergence" recalls any number of tombs in Renaissance paintings, from which a resurrected Christ emerges in triumph. Here, a dead youth rises up mysteriously from inside the watery well, to be caught by a waiting older woman and her younger companion. As the women weep and caress the beautiful corpse, the evocation shifts: The scene now evokes memories of Titian, his "Sacred and Profane Love" enacted by the mournful figures of a mother and a lover.

Most works in the show were shot in 35-millimeter film at nearly seven times normal speed, then slowed to a crawl when transferred to video. The slow motion lends a dreamy, wistful quality to the work, one that splits the difference between high-action movies or TV and the static art of painting.

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Most are also shown on high-definition plasma screens. In the five years since the LACMA retrospective, the available technology has advanced significantly. The result is a crispness of visual detail and a chromatic intensity almost never found in video art -- but certainly familiar to painting. In fact the exhibition, organized by Getty director emeritus John Walsh, is laid out almost in the sequential manner a painting survey might be -- drawings first, then independent paintings and finally "Five Angels for the Millennium," which is like an environmental mural.

What I call drawings are actually video studies of individual heads, many shown on plasma screens the size of a laptop computer. Each features an actor emoting -- fear, awe, sorrow, joy, anger. Some are diptychs -- two screens hinged together -- which hang on the wall or stand on a pedestal, like a portable devotional icon.

The video studies are interesting to see, especially in light of how the artist then uses them to great effect in orchestrating the video paintings. "Observance," played on a vertical plasma screen, shows a line of people pushing forward to look in sorrow, shock or numbed despair at some unseen tragedy, like a modern lamentation at the foot of the cross. A small, five-screen work showing the passage from day to night in a monastic cell recalls Viola's earlier installation, "The Ecstasy of St. John the Divine." But that was an installation, while this work takes the form of a predella panel -- the painted narrative of a saint often found beneath a traditional altarpiece.

For the studies especially, the high-tech hardware is a problem. It seems out of scale, overwhelming the imagery. It's one thing to look at a slip of paper with pencil marks as a lively record of unfolding artistic thought, but quite another to peruse actors hamming it up on the screen of a flat black box, while knowing a DVD player is hidden somewhere nearby. The video drawings border on grandiloquent, empty vessels showing the passions as disembodied gestures.

Viola was a Getty scholar, along with a dozen academics studying the theme of the passions in 1998, and these works have something of the remote, analytical air of the seminar room and the library. Art history is a scholarly discipline, but making art is not.

The video paintings, however, do represent a potentially important evolution in video art. Given the explosive popularity of cultural tourism during the last 20 years, traditional museum art has left the rarefied realm and now resides within the tumultuous world of popular culture. A moat once separated "high" from "low," but now that it has been irrevocably bridged, Viola is attempting a worthy cross-pollination. In "Five Angels for the Millennium," Titian has met the Terminator.