



Large
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**Bill Viola/
Michelangelo
Life, Death, Rebirth**

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Bill Viola/Michelangelo

Life, Death, Rebirth

Main Galleries:

26 January – 31 March 2019

Contents

Introduction to the exhibition	Page 5
Bill Viola: The Messenger	Page 8
Bill Viola: Nantes Triptych	Page 9
Michelangelo drawings (1)	Page 9
Bill Viola: The Reflecting Pool	Page 16
Bill Viola: Slowly Turning Narrative	Page 17
Bill Viola: The Sleep of Reason	Page 18
Michelangelo drawings (2)	Page 20
Bill Viola: Man Searching for Immortality, Woman Searching for Eternity	Page 27
Bill Viola: The Veiling	Page 29

Bill Viola: The Dreamers	Page 30
Bill Viola: Five Angels for the Millennium	Page 31
Michelangelo drawings (3)	Page 32
Bill Viola: Surrender	Page 33
Bill Viola: Fire Woman	Page 40
Bill Viola: Tristan's Ascension	Page 40

Exhibition organised by the Royal Academy of Arts, London in partnership with Royal Collection Trust and with the collaboration of Bill Viola Studio



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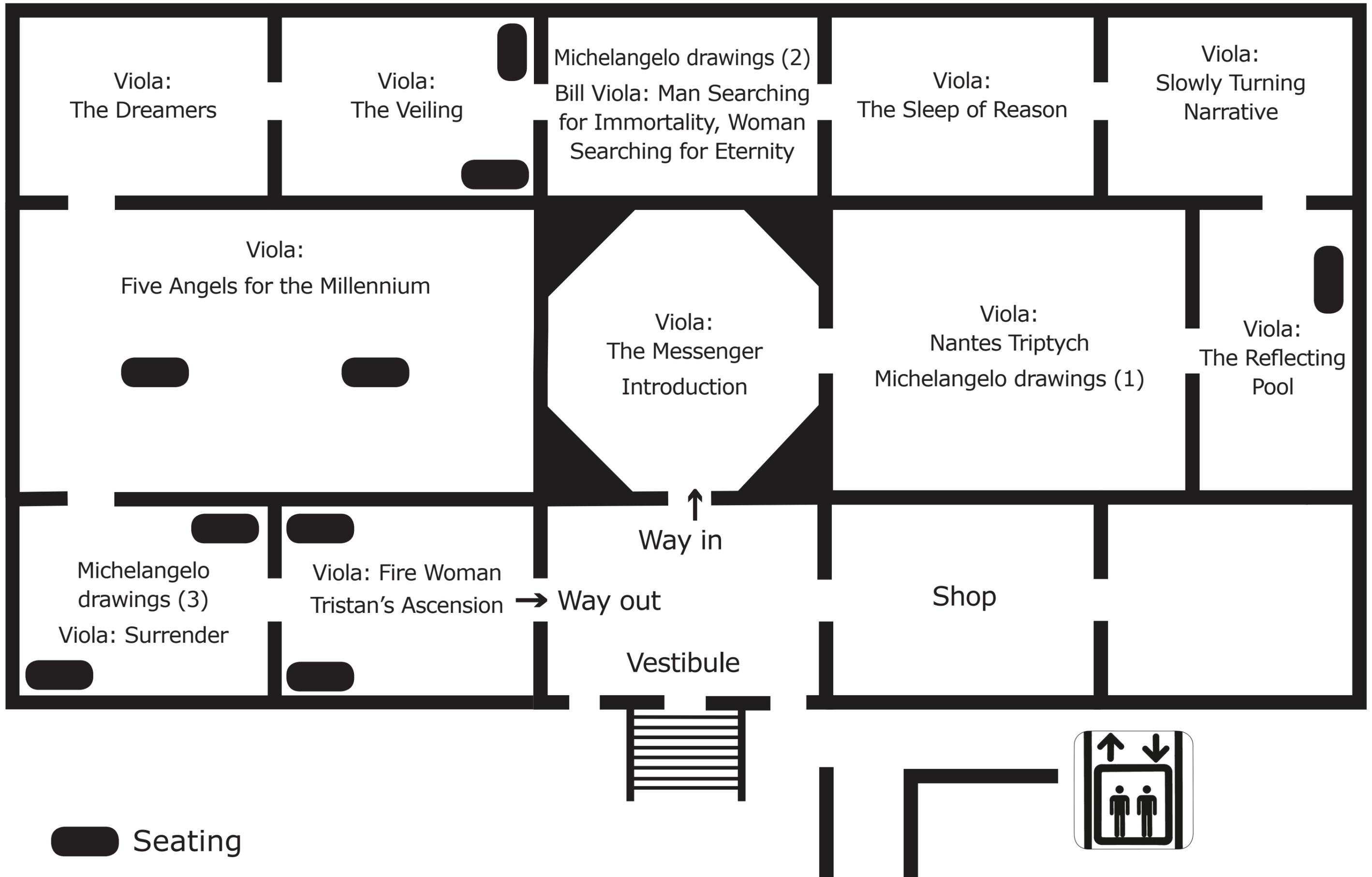


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Viola/Michelangelo Exhibition map



 Seating

Introduction to the exhibition

Bill Viola/Michelangelo: Life, Death, Rebirth brings together two artists working 500 years apart and in radically different media, yet whose work shares a deep preoccupation with the nature of the human soul and the passage of life.

The pioneering video artist Bill Viola was born in New York in 1951, and first encountered the images and sacred spaces of the Renaissance when living and working in Florence during the 1970s.

Since that time he has explored the spiritual practice of many different cultures and religions. Central to his work in video has always been humanity's universal concern with the cycle of life and death – the tumult of existence, the passing of the material body and the possibility of rebirth.

This exhibition originated in a visit by Viola to Windsor Castle in 2006 to view the Italian Renaissance drawings in the Royal Collection.

Those by Michelangelo (1475–1564) struck a particular chord: like Viola's works, their underlying subject is the nature and fate of the soul, and their intended effect is as much emotional as intellectual.

Although Michelangelo's paintings and sculpture are awe-inspiring in their grandeur, his personal vision is expressed most clearly in his drawings, the finest of which are presented here.

Many artists through the ages have engaged with the spiritual, but rarely with the purity and intensity shared by Bill Viola and Michelangelo. It is this commonality, rather than a suggestion that Viola is a "modern Michelangelo", that the exhibition illuminates.

“I have learned so much from my work with video and sound, and it goes far beyond simply what I need to apply within my profession. The real investigation is that of life and of being itself; the medium is just a tool in this investigation.

“I happen to use video because I live in the last part of the twentieth century, and the medium of video (or television) is clearly the most relevant visual art form in contemporary life. The thread running through all art has always been the same.”

Bill Viola, 1985

Bill Viola

The Messenger

1996

Colour video projection; stereo sound

Duration: continuously running

Performer: Chad Walker

Bill Viola: 'The Messenger' was commissioned by Canon Bill Hall on behalf of The Chaplaincy to the Arts and Recreation in North East England. It was first shown as a site-specific installation in Durham Cathedral in 1996 (Year of the Visual Arts UK).

It was donated to Tate in 2016.

Michelangelo's depictions of the Virgin and Child emphasise that Christ was born of human flesh, and that like all flesh he would inevitably die.

The power of the maternal bond lay at the heart of Michelangelo's Christian faith: the Virgin's tragic awareness of her son's mortality and, after his Crucifixion, her contact with his dead body, through which grace flowed to humanity.

Bill Viola's 'Nantes Triptych' centres on this same fact, that from the moment of our birth we are destined to die. Between those two moments of transition, the journey of our life is a mysterious interplay between our material form and our hidden inner being.

The following galleries chart Viola's exploration of that mystery – our isolation as individuals, the passage of time, and the workings of memory and the subconscious.

Bill Viola

Nantes Triptych

1992

Three colour video projections; four channels of amplified sound

Duration: 29 minutes 46 seconds

Courtesy Bill Viola Studio

Michelangelo Buonarroti

The Virgin and Child

c. 1540–1545

Black chalk over red chalk, silhouetted by a later hand
Lent by Her Majesty The Queen

The Virgin pulls her son close and turns his head back to kiss him. The weight of the child on his mother's knee is palpable, and we sense their unavoidable fate, that the adult Christ will again be held in his mother's lap after the Crucifixion.

This small drawing thus encompasses the full cycle of Christ's life – his birth, his separation from his mother, his death, and his mother's lamentation – or any mother's awareness of her child's mortality.

Michelangelo Buonarroti

The Virgin and Child with the Young St John

c. 1532

Black chalk

Lent by Her Majesty The Queen

The pose of the Virgin and Child is intimate and tender, his arms around her neck, their faces pressed together.

As in the sculpture nearby, the presence of St John foreshadows Christ's sacrifice, but here the shadowing is literal.

Michelangelo may have intended this to be read as a metaphor – Christ as the light and the life, contrasted with the shadow of his death that was present from birth.

Michelangelo Buonarroti

The Virgin and Child with the
Infant St John the Baptist (the
'Taddei Tondo')

c. 1504–1505

Marble

Royal Academy of Arts, London. Bequeathed by
Sir George Beaumont, 1830

St John the Baptist, the herald of the
Messiah, is believed to have been a cousin
of Christ, and they have often been depicted
together as infants.

Here St John brandishes a bird towards the
recoiling Christ – probably a goldfinch, whose
patch of red plumage was said to come from
the blood of Christ on the Cross.

His action makes Christ's destiny explicit, and
by extension stands for the physical death of
every one of us, to be conquered only by the
salvation of the soul through Christ.

Like many of Michelangelo's sculptures, this relief tondo (roundel) remained unfinished, perhaps due to concerns about the structural stability of the marble block.

Michelangelo Buonarroti

The Lamentation over the Dead Christ

c. 1540

Black chalk

The British Museum, London. Exchanged with Colnaghi
1896

“Whoever is born arrives at death through time’s swift passage; and the sun leaves nothing alive. What is sweet and what brings pain, man’s thoughts and words, all disappear; and our ancient lineages are as shadows to the sun, smoke to the wind.

“Like you we were men, happy and sad, as you are; but now we are, as you see, dust in the sun, deprived of life.

“Everything arrives at death. Once our eyes were fully formed, shining in both sockets; now they are empty, horrid and black: such is the work of time.”

Michelangelo, c. 1520

Michelangelo was close to the 'Spirituali' movement in the Catholic Church, whose devotional practices included meditation on the death and blood of Christ.

Around 1540 he drew the Lamentation repeatedly, a private meditation through the act of drawing.

Here the body of Christ held in the Virgin's lap is an echo of her cradling of her infant son: she seems to be receiving back into herself the body to which she had once given birth, both Christ's womb and his tomb.

Bill Viola has consistently used video as an expressive tool for depicting inner states, rather than as a documentary device.

He has drawn analogies between video and how consciousness shapes human experience: the camera is like the eye, while video's unfolding of images over time is akin to the way perception is transformed through experience, thought, memory and the subconscious.

This and the next two galleries chart Viola's exploration of life's tumultuous journey through different states of being, formed by the relationship between our external and internal worlds.

Bill Viola

The Reflecting Pool

1977 – 1979

Colour video projection; two channels of mono sound

Duration: 7 minutes

Performer Bill Viola

Courtesy Bill Viola Studio

Bill Viola

Slowly Turning Narrative

1992

One black-and-white, one colour video projection onto mirror and vinyl rotating screen; six channels of amplified sound

Duration: continuously running

Performer: Bill Viola

Courtesy Bill Viola Studio

The Sleep of Reason

“My interest in the various image systems of the cultures of the world involves a search for the image that is not an image. This is why I am not interested in “realistic” rendering. Sacred art seems very close because of its symbolic nature.

“I am interested not so much in the image whose source lies in the phenomenal world, but rather the image as artefact, or result, or imprint, or even wholly determined by some inner realisation.

“It is the image of that inner state and as such must be considered completely accurate and realistic.”

Bill Viola, 1981

Bill Viola

The Sleep of Reason

1988

Three colour video projections, black-and-white video on monitor; stereo sound, one channel of mono sound, wooden chest and objects

Duration: continuously running

Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh Purchased with funds provided by Milton Fine and the A. W. Mellon Acquisition Endowment Fund, 88.33

Michelangelo

“presentation” drawings

Among Michelangelo’s most distinctive works are his highly finished “presentation” drawings, erudite depictions of myths or allegories made as gifts for his closest friends.

These are unsurpassed demonstrations of his skill as a draughtsman, and profoundly personal essays on the nature of love and life.

A follower of contemporary Neoplatonic philosophy, Michelangelo distinguished between two forms of love – carnal lust which condemns us to earthly torment, and spiritual love which elevates our souls to Heaven.

He extended that distinction to life in general, contrasting the benighted state of the merely material with the enlightened presence of the divine.

Both Michelangelo and Bill Viola give expression to inner states and to the nature of existence: their concern is the fate of the soul, within its “earthly prison” and after it has left our mortal body.

Michelangelo Buonarroti

Tityus

1532

Black chalk

Lent by Her Majesty The Queen

The mythological giant Tityus was punished for attempted rape by being chained to a rock in Hades, the Greek underworld.

By day a vulture would rip out his liver, the seat of lust; by night the liver would grow back, for the torment to be repeated to eternity.

The drawing was given by Michelangelo to a young Roman nobleman, Tommaso de' Cavalieri, with whom he had fallen ardently in love.

A second sheet, now lost, depicted the beautiful shepherd Ganymede abducted by the god Jupiter. The pairing contrasted base lust with divine love.

Michelangelo Buonarroti

A Children's Bacchanal

1533

Red chalk

Lent by Her Majesty The Queen

This is the most highly finished of Michelangelo's gift drawings, and in pristine condition.

The children represent the lowest form of human existence: without reason, intellect or divine love, they are driven solely by animal urges.

Two adults are present, but one is half goat and the other asleep or drunk, symbolising the captivity of the unknowing soul by the body.

Michelangelo Buonarroti

The Fall of Phaethon

1533

Black chalk

Lent by Her Majesty The Queen

Phaethon begged his father, Apollo, to be allowed to drive the chariot of the sun. But he soon lost control, and to save the earth Jupiter struck Phaethon from the heavens with a bolt of lightning. The subject is a warning against hubris.

Michelangelo made the drawing for Tommaso de' Cavalieri, and it may express his feelings of unworthiness in his love for the young man, as echoed in his letters and poems. The tripartite arrangement gives an inexorable, pitiless air to the composition, evoking the terrors of fate and the irreversible consequences of our actions.

Michelangelo Buonarroti

Three Labours of Hercules

c. 1530

Red chalk

Lent by Her Majesty The Queen

Michelangelo depicts three of the twelve labours of Hercules: his slaying of the Nemean lion, the giant Antaeus, and the many-headed Hydra.

In the first two scenes Hercules is overcoming these terrors; in the last, the Hydra seems about to overwhelm him, and he twists to look up in despair.

Hercules is one of the more human and sympathetic heroes of mythology, and there is something unsettling, even disturbing, in these images of a mortal man beset by irrational forces.

Michelangelo Buonarroti

Archers Shooting at a Herm

c. 1530

Red chalk

Lent by Her Majesty The Queen

A group of figures, male and female, are posed as if firing arrows at a target, though most do not bear bows.

They are impelled by the flames of passion, kindled by two putti, and their aim has been awry. A winged Cupid, god of love, is asleep and unable to guide the archers: only with divine love can the soul achieve its aim.

15

Michelangelo Buonarroti

Studies for the 'Last Judgement'

c. 1534

Black chalk

Lent by Her Majesty The Queen

The theme of Michelangelo's "presentation" drawings, the fate of the soul, is also that of his 'Last Judgement' in the Sistine Chapel – whether we will be cast down by sin, or raised to the divine sphere.

At lower left are sketches for the resurrected climbing out of their graves; to the right, eight studies of a struggle between angels and devils for a single soul.

Michelangelo felt this struggle deeply, and his letters and poems reveal a yearning for his own salvation.

Bill Viola

**Man Searching for Immortality/
Woman Searching for Eternity
2013**

Two colour video projections onto two slabs of black granite

Duration: 18 minutes 54 seconds

Performers: Luis Accinello, Penelope Safranek

Courtesy Bill Viola Studio and Blain|Southern, London

“The years of my life’s journey have reached their mark, like an arrow that has landed on its target, and so the burning fire should have died down.

“... My soul, which speaks with death, and with it takes stock of its own situation, and is continually weighed down by new anxieties, hopes day after day to leave the body: so it sets out on the journey it has oft imagined, confused and unsettled between hope and fear.

“Alas, Love, how swift to act you are, reckless, bold, armed and strong! For you drive out of me the thought of death at the time when it is approaching, and from a withered tree draw foliage and flowers.”

Michelangelo, c. 1524

Bill Viola

The Veiling

1995

Two colour video projections onto nine scrims; two channels of amplified mono sound, four speakers

Duration: 30 minutes

Performers: Lora Stone, Gary Murphy

Courtesy Bill Viola Studio

“It is not the monitor, or the camera, or the tape, that is the basic material of video, but time itself. Once you begin to work with time as an elemental material, you have entered the domain of conceptual space.

“A thought is a function of time, not a discrete object. It is a process of unfoldment, an evolving thread of the living moment.

“Awareness of time brings you into a world of process, into moving images that embody the movement of human consciousness itself. Duration is to consciousness as light is to the eye.”

Bill Viola, 1989

Bill Viola

The Dreamers

2013

Seven channels of colour video on flat panel displays;
four channels of stereo sound

Duration: continuously running

Performers: Sharon Ferguson, Christian Vincent,
Katherine McKalip, Gleb Kaminer, Rebekah Rife, Mark
Ofugi, Madison Corn

Courtesy Bill Viola Studio and Blain|Southern, London

Five Angels for the Millennium, 2001

- i. Departing Angel
- ii. Birth Angel
- iii. Fire Angel
- iv. Ascending Angel
- v. Creation Angel

Five colour video projections; stereo sound for each projection

Duration: continuously running

Performers: Josh Coxx (panels i–iv), Andrew Tritz (panel v)

Courtesy Bill Viola Studio

Michelangelo: The Crucifixion

In the 1530s Michelangelo drew the Resurrection more than a dozen times, an exploration of Christ's triumph over death.

Thirty years later, in his eighties, he drew the Crucifixion repeatedly – sustained meditations on Christ's sacrifice, as the soul is freed and passes to a different realm, and on his own approaching death.

Many of Bill Viola's works explore this passage between life and death, and the relationship between the mortal body and the immortal soul.

In 'Surrender', two mirrored figures reach such a pitch of emotion that their corporeal forms dissolve into pure colour. In the next, and final, gallery is a pair of works first created for a production of Wagner's 'Tristan and Isolde'.

'Fire Woman' is an image seen in the mind of a dying man, when the flames of passion and fever engulf the inner eye. 'Tristan's Ascension' describes the ascent of the soul in the space after death, as it is awakened and drawn up in a backwards-flowing waterfall.

Bill Viola

Surrender

2001

Two channels of colour video on flat panel displays

Duration: 30 minutes 51 seconds

Performers: John Fleck, Weba Garretson

Courtesy Bill Viola Studio

Michelangelo Buonarroti

Christ on the Cross with the
Virgin and St John

c. 1562

Black chalk and white heightening

Lent by Her Majesty the Queen

Michelangelo Buonarroti

Christ on the Cross with the
Virgin and St John

c. 1560-1564

Black chalk and white heightening

Lent by Her Majesty the Queen

In his late eighties, acutely aware of his approaching death, Michelangelo drew the Crucifixion repeatedly, as a sustained and profoundly felt spiritual exercise.

In contrast to the lumpen, earth-bound figures of the Virgin and St John, in mourning at either side of the Cross, Michelangelo reworked the figure of Christ to give a deliberate effect of indeterminacy – of the dissolution of the body at the moment of death, as the soul is freed and passes to a different realm.

To the right, the hunched figure of St John is lost in desolation, his arms tightly folded as if shivering, his mouth open in a pain both physical and mental.

The patch of red chalk at Christ's feet is probably deliberate, symbolic of the sacrificial blood that was shed on the Cross.

The video work in the next room contains flashing lights.

Michelangelo Buonarroti

The Resurrection

c. 1532

Black chalk with red chalk

Lent by Her Majesty The Queen

In the early 1530s Michelangelo drew the Resurrection of Christ more than a dozen times, for unknown reasons.

Here he presents the transition to the eternal as a triumphant release, Christ as an explosion of energy amid the sepulchral gloom of the terrestrial sphere.

The soldiers are prisoners of their earthly existence, lost in a death-like sleep, or recoiling from Christ in confusion at a sight beyond their comprehension.

Michelangelo Buonarroti

The Risen Christ

c. 1532-1533

Black chalk

Lent by Her Majesty The Queen

In no other work by Michelangelo is the Resurrection expressed with such exuberance.

Christ is young and virile, his muscular form modelled with tiny strokes of chalk, as highly finished as any of Michelangelo's mythological drawings.

It is perhaps paradoxical that a drawing of the triumph of the soul should so strongly emphasise Christ's body, but his almost polished torso reflects the radiant light with a glory that transcends materiality.

This is a facsimile of the original drawing, which is currently on loan to the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, and will be installed in this exhibition on Thursday 31 January.

Michelangelo Buonarroti

The Resurrection

c. 1532-1533

Black chalk

The British Museum, London

Although this drawing depicts the Resurrection, there is also a suggestion of the Ascension in Christ's weightless, effortless rise from the tomb, drawn upwards to the divine light of Heaven.

Michelangelo combines the material Resurrection with the spiritual Ascension, both body and soul rescued from death.

“My life’s journey has finally arrived, after a stormy sea, in a fragile boat, at the common port, through which all must pass to render an account of every act, evil and devout.

“I now fully recognise how my fond imagination, which made art for me an idol and a tyrant, was laden with error, as is that which all men desire, to their own harm. What of my former thoughts of love, empty yet happy, if I am now approaching a double death?

“Of one I am certain, and the other threatens me. Neither painting nor sculpting can any longer quieten my soul, turned now to that divine love which on the Cross, to embrace us, opened wide its arms.”

Michelangelo, c. 1552 - 1554

Bill Viola

Tristan's Ascension (The Sound of a Mountain Under a Waterfall)

2005

Colour video projection; four channels of sound with
subwoofer

Duration: 10 minutes 16 seconds

Performer: John Hay

Bill Viola

Fire Woman

2005

Colour video projection; four channels of sound with
woofer

Duration: 11 minutes 12 seconds Performer: Robin
Bonaccorsi

Courtesy Bill Viola Studio

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Thank you.

Molly Bretton, Access & Communities Manager



InTouch  **at the RA**

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