

Bill Viola

Frustrated Actions and Futile Gestures

Blain|Southern

4 Hanover Square

London W1S 1BP

5 June 2013 – 27 July 2013

Private View: 4 June, 6–8 pm

'Viola has become the Rembrandt of the video age, an artist who has done more than any of his contemporaries to advance the emotional and aesthetic content of his medium.'

– *Laura Cumming*



The Dreamers, 2013 (details), Video/Sound Installation, seven channels of colour High-Definition video on seven 65" plasma displays mounted vertically on wall in darkened room; four channels stereo sound, room dimensions: 6.5 x 6.5 x 3.5m, Photo: Kira Perov

The Directors of Blain|Southern are delighted to present *Frustrated Actions and Futile Gestures*, a museum-scale exhibition of nine new works by the internationally renowned video artist Bill Viola. Created between 2012 and 2013, both on location and in the artist's studio in Southern California, the exhibition presents three distinct bodies of works; the *Frustrated Actions*, the *Mirage* and the *Water Portraits* series. Through these works, Viola engages with complex aspects of human experience, including mortality, transience and our persistent, yet ultimately futile attempts to truly and objectively understand ourselves and the meaning of our brief lives.

The Chapel of Frustrated Actions and Futile Gestures (2013), from which the exhibition derives its name, incorporates a grid of nine horizontal screens that depict figures perpetually repeating various activities. Presented in real time, we witness a man pulling a cart up a hill, only to let it roll back down again as soon as he reaches the top – a palpable reference to Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, a philosophical essay based on the Greek myth, which calls into question the significance of our daily accomplishments. In another screen, we observe a man continuously digging and refilling a hole in the ground at night. The central panel shows a glass bowl being filled with water from a jug, which slowly seeps out through a crack in the glass until it has emptied – at which point the bowl is then refilled. Every action is repeated in ritualistic fashion, gradually and purposefully, rendering each unsuccessful endeavour all the more poignant.

The three works that complete the *Frustrated Actions* series engage with ideas relating to the subconscious, the perception of 'self' and the ephemerality of life. In *Man Searching for Immortality/Woman Searching for Eternity* (2013) a man and woman in the later stages of their lives emerge out of the darkness, pausing to explore their own naked bodies with torches, a daily routine search for disease and decay. The figures are projected onto two seven-foot high black granite slabs, suggestive of tombstones, which evoke a sense of impending mortality. The diptych, *Man with His Soul* (2013) presents us with a man sitting on a chair, waiting, though we will never discover exactly what he is waiting for. The left hand screen – in high-definition video – depicts his conscious self, while the right – shot in grainy black and white – portrays his soul, his inner being. Thus, the viewer is confronted with a juxtaposition of physical and psychological realities. *Angel at the Door* (2013) continues to explore this theme of the 'inner self'; a cycle develops whereby a man hears a knocking at the door, but each time he opens it, he finds no one there – only a dark void. When he opens the door for the final time, however, there is an explosion, revealing a mirror image of himself – offering a thought-provoking insight into man's inevitable and unavoidable confrontation with his 'inner self'.

Four works from the *Mirage* series, *Ancestors* (2012), *The Encounter* (2012), *Walk ing on the Edge* (2012) and *Inner Passage* (2013), were recorded at El Mirage – a six-mile long, dry lake bed in the Mojave Desert. Presented in horizontal and vertical formats, they portray figures from a distance through the distorting haze of a mirage, becoming increasingly visible as they walk towards the camera. Shot in high definition and slowed down, the vast arid landscape takes centre stage, as the travellers navigate the strong winds and the searing heat of the desert.

The Dreamers (2013) consists of seven individual screens, which depict underwater portraits of people who appear to be sleeping. Presented in the gallery on the lower-ground floor, and accompanied by the gentle sounds of water, the viewer is led to feel as if they themselves are submerged with these figures. In this spiritual, immersive subterranean environment, ultimate interpretation is left for the viewer to define, through the lens of their own experiences.

For over forty years, Viola's practice has continuously transformed our understanding of video as an artform, expanding its technological scope and historical relevance. He draws from a range of influences, including Eastern and Western art and the spiritual traditions of Zen Buddhism, Islamic Sufism and Christian mysticism, to express fundamental truths underpinning human existence. Bill Viola's profound visual language captures and expresses thoughts, feelings and memories that have a universal appeal, offering viewers a vehicle for the exploration and contemplation of their own circumstances and emotions.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue, with an introduction by Blain|Southern's Head Curator and Director of Exhibitions, Mario Codognato, and edited by Kira Perov.

For further information on the exhibition, please contact Mark Inglefield
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Notes to Editors:

Viola represented the U.S. at the 46th Venice Biennale in 1995, and his work has been the subject of large solo survey exhibitions including: The Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami (2012-2013), The Whitney Museum of American Art (travelled to 5 venues) (1997-2000); Mori Art Museum, Tokyo (2006); and Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome (2008). Among his numerous awards, he received a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Fellowship in 1989. He holds honorary doctorates from Syracuse University (1995), The School of the Art Institute of Chicago (1997), and Royal College of Art, London (2004) among others, and was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2000). In 2006 he was awarded Commander of the Order of Arts and Letters by the French Government, received the Catalonia International Prize in 2009 and the Japan Art Association's Praemium Imperiale in 2011. Kira Perov, executive director of Bill Viola Studio and executive producer of the works, has been Viola's partner and collaborator for over 30 years