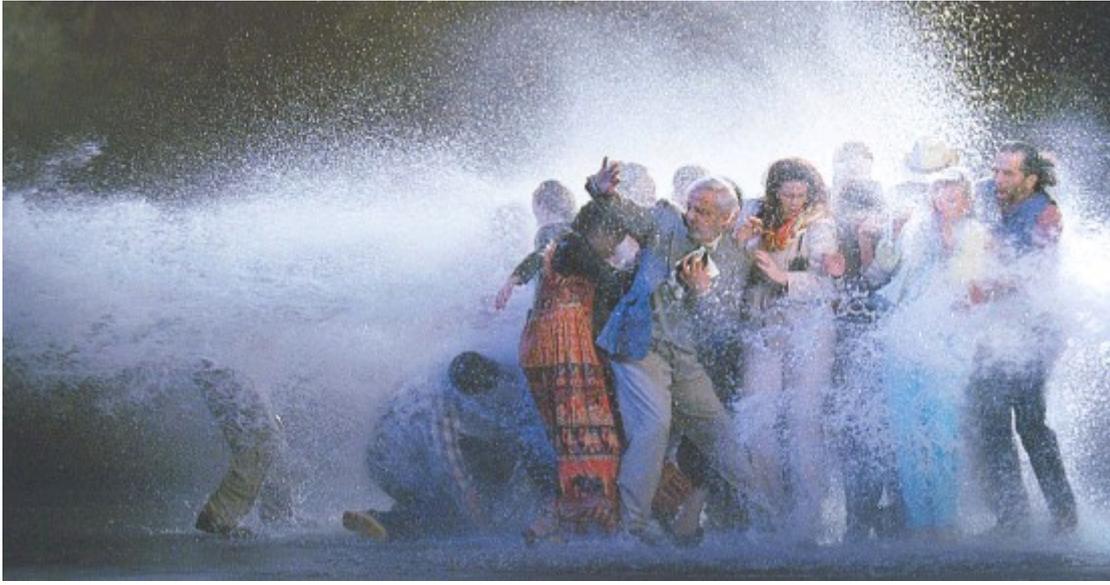


Water of life

At the National Portrait Gallery, watching Bill Viola's videos of people letting go of self and embracing humanity feels like a religious experience

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A National Portrait Gallery exhibit shows the deep, redeeming humanity of Bill Viola's video art.



The video art of Bill Viola is a balm at any time, but one particular work in a new exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery is especially moving. "The Raft," commissioned for the 2004 Olympics in Athens, shows a crowd of 19 diverse people, of all ages and seemingly unrelated in their habits, dress and identities. Over 10 minutes, they gather at what may be a bus stop, and then, in slow motion, a deluge of high-pressure water floods the space, knocking them over and drenching them until they lie in a disorderly, disheveled heap upon the ground. And then? They begin to get up, to check on each other, extend a hand and, with a gentle touch, put back together some semblance of their antediluvian normality.

Most of what has made Viola one of our best and most humane artists comes together in this piece. Inspired by an emotionally supercharged 19th-century painting by Théodore Géricault, it is historically self-conscious; with its narrow field of action, it suggests not just the two-dimensional space of a painting, but a deep respect for the cumulative meaning of the history of painting; it recalls both the mythic force of water, and its personal resonance for Viola, who uses water frequently and to great effect in his work; and it harnesses the power of narrative without getting lost in the details of telling any particular story. There is a surfeit of water in this video, yet everything feels distilled for maximum symbolic and emotional impact.

"The Raft" is now more than a decade old, made for the Olympics back before the games had been polluted by Vladimir Putin and reduced to farce in Brazil. Even though the bulk of the drama captured in the video is about the terror of a looming and unfolding disaster, the weight of the piece is all at the end, when strangers show their humanity to one another. Viola's work is too subtle to celebrate anything mindlessly, but "The Raft" is a sage and reassuring nod to the resilience rather than

the fragility of human connection. As the United States joins the international parade of demagoguery and division, this piece, and several others in the exhibition, give one some shred of hope.

Almost every one of the 11 works in “Bill Viola: The Moving Portrait” is mesmerizing enough to capture you for a quarter-hour at least, or longer. Youth, life and old age are encapsulated with the concision of a master drawing in the four black-and-white videos that make up “Four Hands.” The title of this 2001 piece doesn’t prepare you for its range of expression, as four sets of hands make gestures borrowed from Buddhist tradition and forerunners of sign language. The attention is drawn toward the visual details of anatomy, the way young hands are hairless and smooth, older ones gnarled, and gender is implied by hair. But there is a simultaneous consciousness of aging and mortality, implied but not exploited; the span of life becomes a natural fact, without any terror, and with beauty perceived at every stage along the way.

A deep and calming sense of acceptance pervades other works.

In “Man Searching for Immortality/Woman Searching for Eternity,” two older people stand naked against a dark background, each using a flashlight to examine his or her body. The ritual reminds one first of a medical self-inspection, fraught with anxiety. But they show no signs of fear as they slowly move the beam of light around their limbs and torso. In his notes for the exhibition, Viola explains: “They are looking for death,” and yet, “When they are finished, they each turn off their light, thankful for life.” Their unashamed nakedness, and the drama of looking for death without fear, is deeply touching.

At 65, Viola belongs to the second generation of great video artists, younger than Nam June Paik but not part of the more recent generation that has turned to the tropes of pop culture and the corrosion of reflexive irony for subject matter. Viola’s personal cosmos is deeply informed by Eastern philosophy and mysticism, but Christian and ancient Greek themes abound. Prelapsarian Adam prepares to dive into a shimmering pool of water in the earliest work on view, the 1977-79 “The Reflecting Pool,” and some trio of mythic woman (Graces? Muses? Sibyls?) seems to emerge from the underworld and breathe themselves briefly into life in the 2008 “Three Women.” No single source, or any single explanation, unravels the truth of any of these works, which are suspended between various poles or sources of meaning, rather like the bodies submerged in a limpid stream seem suspended in time, between life and death, sleep and consciousness, in one of the most extraordinary video installations, the 2013 “The Dreamers.”

This last work, a coda and summation of the exhibition, comes closest to the theme of portraiture that runs through all the others. Viola’s work isn’t necessarily associated with portraiture, and there is some curatorial self-consciousness about the presentation of this exhibition at the Portrait Gallery. But the careful selection of works, from pieces that focus on Viola’s face to explore ideas about breathing and mortality, and the natural curiosity aroused by the actors and the characters in the more narrative videos, make the portraiture connection substantial. Are they traditional portraits? By no means. But do they focus us on identity, personality and details of self-presentation, as portraits generally do? Absolutely.

The slight dissonance one might feel when contemplating the work as portraiture is, in the end, productive. Almost all of the people in this exhibition are in some ways selfless, whether in the sense of being mindful of others, as in “The Raft,” or having a tenuous relationship to the usual, egotistical aspects of selfhood in some of the more mystical works. Portraiture is a fascinating and fraught medium for exploring people who are living beyond or abandoning the delusions of selfregard.

There is one work that fails utterly, the 2000 video diptych “Dolorosa,” which shows two people with tear-streaked faces and red eyes, suffering what is supposed to be some kind of extreme emotion on two video screens joined like a Renaissance hinged painting. But the emotion doesn’t feel real and, unlike all the other works, the visual power is minimal. Why? Perhaps because of all the people presented by these “portraits,” these two are the most fully present as individuals, projecting individual pain. They do not seem to have taken any of the steps away from self-regard that the other characters depicted in Viola’s work have taken; they are locked in the moment of their pain, and curiously earth-bound.

Of 11 works, only one fails to speak. That’s a remarkable accomplishment. Everything else here is engrossing and ultimately uplifting. That’s a word one doesn’t use lightly.

Bill Viola: The Moving Portrait is on view at the National Portrait Gallery through May 7. For more information, visit npg.si.edu.