

Death as Presence

Bill Viola's *Ocean Without A Shore*

The dead are never gone:
they are in the shadows.
The dead are not in earth:
they're in the rustling tree,
the groaning wood,
water that runs,
water that sleeps;
they're in the hut, in the crowd,
the dead are not dead.¹

Birago Diop

The representation of the enduring presence of the spirit after death has concerned artists of the Christian tradition since the Crucifixion on the hills of Golgotha. How to visualise the presence of death in spiritual or heavenly realms and how to manifest both the divine and incarnational bodies of the figure of Christ underlie the main problematics of the Christian visual tradition. While the lived experience of sacred figures can be located within a historically specific and earthly reality – knowable forms within the human experience that can be easily translated into narrative painting – the divine presence and the spirit of the dead transcend the limits of human experience. How then does an artist illustrate within material culture that which is essentially uncircumscribable? Within the convention of painting, artists have employed pictorial devices such as symbolism (nimbus and mandorla), hierarchical structures and the emblematic use of colour in order to delineate the transcendent from the profane. The contemporary artist Bill Viola similarly proposes a visuality of the transcendent, moving beyond the two-dimensional framework of the canvas in the video installation *Ocean Without A Shore*.

In mid-2008 the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) purchased Bill Viola's critically acclaimed video work where it is now installed on the ground floor. The installation was initially created for the 2007 Biennale di Venezia and was installed in the fifteenth-century Venetian church of San Gallo, in which three existing stone altars were employed as recesses for the video screens. Of the work, Viola stated that it "is about the presence of the dead in our lives. The three stone altars in San Gallo become transparent surfaces for the manifestation of images of the dead attempting to re-enter our world."² In the NGV, the chapel is evoked conceptually through the construction of altar-like niches.

The three screens play in a continuous loop with each video sequence illustrating the crossing of the dead into the physical world. The human forms initially appear in a shadow of obscurity; the black and white silhouettes barely perceptible in the far-off distance. As each figure slowly moves forward, their outline becomes clearer until passing through the threshold (a water wall device that appears completely transparent) that demarcates the spiritual from the earthly, and they emerge as a palpable presence within the viewer's reality (fig. 1). Drenched in water, their clothes cling to their body, highlighting each figure's corporeality. Like a Baroque painting, Viola's use of saturated colour, chiaroscuro and direct lighting compounds the drama and intensity of each scene.



Fig. 1.

Bill Viola
Ocean Without a Shore, 2007
Video/sound installation
Performer: Blake Viola
Production Still
Photo:Kira Perov

Experience in this world is, however, fleeting. Once incarnate, the figures must depart, and turning around they are gradually enveloped by the darkness until they are again absent from the physical world. The installation oscillates in constant tension between the absence and presence of the human figures; the departing of one is paralleled by the gradual appearance of another. The continuous and cyclical nature of the installation visually manifests the dialectical opposites of birth/death and love/loss that are inherent to the human condition.

The crossings of each of the twenty-four figures are diverse, mirroring the distinctness of human experience. In one scene, a middle-aged woman stands at the edge of the threshold; with arms outstretched like an Orant, she passes through the water wall like a haloed angel. In another, an older gentleman tentatively approaches the viewer; his hands are crippled by arthritis and protect his furrowed brow as his form slowly fractures the invisible surface. There is one human figure that does not transcend the darkness; a girl on the cusp of womanhood walks steadily forward, but upon reaching the boundary she pauses. She holds her right hand out, piercing the wall once, twice and a third time; ultimately, however, she turns away and her earthly presence is never realised.

Viola's work was inspired by the poem, quoted above, by Birago Diop, which evokes the omnipresence of the dead who exist beyond the physical body through the sights, sounds and feelings of the cycle of life. Viola borrowed the title for the video work from the Andalusian Sufi mystic Ibn al'Arabi (1165 – 1240).³ The title is echoed in the soundscape of the installation, which encircles the viewer in a continuous rumbling of waves that never break on the shore. The continuities between sound and image create an immersive space that has an almost meditative quality. The slow pace and duration (ninety minutes) of the piece requires patience and long contemplation; a work at odds with the haste of modern life.

Meaning in this video piece is centrally located in illusion, in which the evocation of the two realms of existence is produced through the visual effect of the figures crossing from shadowy figuration to hyper-real representation. In a contemporary context that has been conditioned by the artistic discourses of modernism and post-modernism, which over the course of the twentieth century have sought to both dismantle the illusionism of the picture surface and deconstruct the concept of definable and centralised meaning, Viola's video seems perhaps anachronistic. Yet, the readability of the drama, emotively heightened by visual effect and technological bravura, also gives a sense of immediacy that balances the otherwise slow movement of the films. Similarly, the mythic qualities of the installation appear outmoded in a world, at least in the Latin West, defined by scientific discovery, reason and concrete knowledge. In reality though, Viola's work projects itself into an artistic climate that is increasingly concerned with religious themes and the spiritual conscience.⁴

While Viola's oeuvre has been influenced by various spiritualities (Zen Buddhism, Islamic Sufism and Christian mysticism) this installation visualises a dualism particular to Christian art, and its initial location in a church (and its consequent restructuring at the NGV) also orients the viewer toward an understanding of the work within Christian paradigms. The crucifixion of Christ signified his mortal death and absence from the physical world, though simultaneously it marked his eternal life and enduring presence. A paradox, as mentioned earlier, that defines the essential problem of Christian representational art in regards to how an artist evokes these two spheres of existence. Corporeal death in the Christian tradition signifies heavenly presence – an *absent presence* that Viola articulates by juxtaposing contrasting representations of each figure. He constructs visual oppositions of dark/light, black and white/colour, obscurity/clarity and low-resolution/high-resolution that give an imagined, and artistic, form to the dichotomies underpinning the entire experience of

the Christian tradition: heavenly/earthly, infinite/finite and eternal life/bodily death. Like Diop's poem, Viola suggests, within the installation space, that "the dead are never gone."

Justine Grace

¹ Excerpt of poem by Birago Diop in David Melzter (ed), *Death - An Anthology of Ancient Texts, Songs, Prayers and Stories* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), 190.

² Bill Viola quoted in Claire Walsh, "Press Release: Bill Viola, *Ocean Without A Shore*, 2007," (Haunch of Venison, May 2007 [accessed 29 July 2009]), <http://www.haunchofvenison.com/media/4897/hov%20-%20viola%20exhibition%20-%20press%20-%20release%20-%20final.pdf>.

³ Bill Viola, "Past exhibitions and Events" (Bill Viola, 2007 [accessed 29 July 2009]), <http://www.billviola.com/pastexhibitions.htm>. Ibn al'Arabi's meditation reads: "the Self is an ocean without a shore. Gazing upon it has no beginning or end, in this world and the next."

⁴ I direct the reader in particular to: the 2008 exhibition *Traces of the Sacred* held at the Pompidou in Paris which looked at the history of the religious impulse in twentieth century art; Damien Hurst's diamond encrusted skull entitled *For the Love of God* (2007); the decision to include a Vatican national pavilion in the Venice Biennale from 2011; the 2008 exhibition *God and Goods: Spirituality and Mass Confusion* held in Milan's Manin Centre for Contemporary Art, which traced the intersections between religion and consumerism; the 2009 group show *The Return of Religion – The Art of Iconoclasm* curated by Sven Lütticken and held at Basis Voor actuele kunst in Utrecht, which staged a confrontation with the various forms of iconoclasm; and Jensen Tjhung's installation of a three-dimensional inverted Latin cross at Hell Gallery in Melbourne in 2009.