



Cries from the heart

The distilled images of sorrow created by Bill Viola are an antidote to the cheap sentiment of our time, writes **JOYCE MORGAN**.

The near darkness of the editing suite draws close as video artist Bill Viola speaks in calm, measured tones. His subdued voice seems at odds with the intensity of the images he creates, and with what he is about to reveal.

"I cry a lot," he admits. "Usually once a day ... I think it's one of the most profound forms of human expression." The insulated room that absorbs all echoes suddenly feels more like a confessional than a high-tech post-production centre in the heart of Hollywood. Viola has had a long personal and professional encounter with weeping. But these are not the tears of cheap sentiment from nearby Tinseltown. He has contemplated how and why we cry, studied paintings of weeping Madonnas, and presented images of sorrowful figures in his own art.

"A doctor once told me that with crying you aren't sure what its derivation is ... if someone comes at you with a knife, you don't cry, you scream, you try to run. When it's over and you're OK, that's when you cry." Probing the essence of human expression is Viola's domain. The way in which he has done so has made him one of America's most prominent artists. And

in drawing on diverse Eastern and Western philosophical sources – from Zen Buddhism to St John of the Cross – he is also one of its most mystical. But Viola is a thoroughly modern mystic, who uses digital technology to create images that invite contemplation of life and death. His work has more in common with Old Master portraits than the pyrotechnical gimmickry that has given the phrase

'One of the essential aspects of human beings throughout history has been suffering.' BILL VIOLA

"video installation" a bad name. His small plasma screens pay homage to the portable religious icons of the Middle Ages.

Such screens form part of his acclaimed exhibition *The Passions*, which opens this month in Canberra at the National Gallery of Australia. At first glance, the exhibition appears almost conventional – portraits on a wall. But these portraits move. Slowly. Very slowly. The faces are shown in extreme slow motion and capture every delicate shift of emotion. This is not work



that reveals itself instantly. Indeed, some works reveal themselves so slowly that viewers are advised to look, move away, then return. For Viola, that's part of the purpose. Because, as Gandhi said, there's more to life than increasing its speed.

"After all, the destination isn't all that appealing," Viola says, "so where are you running off to?" Slowing the images has more than an artistic purpose. For centuries, Eastern and Western esoteric spiritual traditions have used practices that aim to slow the mind or breath and calm the passions, as a means to understanding or enlightenment. Think yoga, tai chi, chanting and forms of Christian prayer.

such early Christian mystics as Thomas à Kempis and Meister Eckhardt. And he meditates daily.

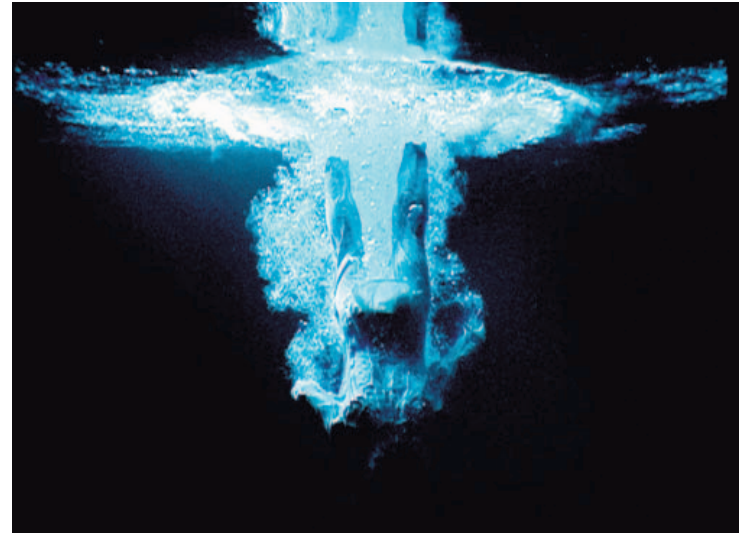
"It is really needed in this world, just to give you the confidence that what you feel inside yourself is real and genuine and truthful," he says. "We are constantly being bombarded and assaulted from without by all these sources, not the least of which is the very medium I use. And that can really undermine your confidence and belief in yourself"

The slowness of Viola's work also has a political dimension. It is an antidote to what he sees as one of the greatest dangers of our age – the speed with which we receive information and our growing inability to make sense of what we see.

"The velocity and knee-jerk response to events happening in real time that television brings us precludes any kind of reflection or contemplation and, therefore, analysis. And that's been one of the greatest political dangers in the postwar era ... the idea of the reasoned, thoughtful response goes out of the window."

His life weaves the political and artistic. I see him at a benefit for a theatre company working among the homeless in Los Angeles's skid row one night, the next at a concert by the LA Philharmonic. Coming of age in the Vietnam era, Viola, 54, acknowledges he has wrestled with whether he could justify being an artist, in the face of political tyranny and the need for action.

"I'm really interested in universals. My interest in both Eastern and Western culture is really more about a search for an underlying root system rather than looking for differences ... This idea of stilling the mind comes up in all traditions. All cultures have a form of meditation." So, too, does Viola, who wears a mala, a string of meditation beads, beneath his shirt collar. He studied Zen Buddhism in Japan in the early '80s. He has also studied Sufism, Hinduism and



Extreme emotion ... (from far left) *The Quintet of the Astonished; Emergence; Dolorosa* (detail) and *Departing Angel*.

But it is events much closer to home that have been pivotal in Viola's personal and professional journey. The deaths of his parents – his mother in 1991 and father in 1999 – unleashed not only a torrent of tears, but an outpouring of creativity.

For two years before his mother died, Viola suffered a creative block. Ideas petered out, work was started but left unfinished or abandoned. On the surface he had entered a fallow period, although he kept extensive notebooks. In the year after his mother died, he drew on the notebooks and created nine works – the most he had ever made in a year – as he struggled to come to terms with the loss.

“Creativity comes out of two things: boredom and crisis,” he says.

The tracks of his tears led to an interest in earlier Western art; art he had bypassed over the years in favour of contemporary work. He turned to the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Old Masters, to images of weeping Madonnas and crucified Christs.

He began a year-long study of the representation of the passions while a guest scholar at the Getty Research Institute in 1998. He was interested in how the extremes of emotions, where the ability to reflect is lost, can be represented. He began to realise there was a common ground at the heart of the Eastern and Western traditions, indeed at the heart of all existence.

“I always thought [*The Passions*] had to do with the deaths of my parents ... those bookends were eye-opening in the sense of seeing and feeling a connection to older art that I hadn't really experienced before. Being a first-hand witness to death, which I hadn't ever experienced in my life, [I realised] that one of the essential aspects of human beings throughout history has been suffering,” he says.

Suffering and death is at the heart of the art of the Middle Ages, and as central to Christianity as to Buddhism. In the wake of this realisation, he created the work *Emerg-*

ence, which is part of *The Passions*, in which a Christ-like figure emerges from a tomb where two women are mourning.

“That was a weird piece for me to make because it's so religious-looking,” he says. “It's also like a birth and death without everything in between. It really is the essential human equation.” Other works in the exhibition include *The Quintet Series*, moving images – in more ways than one – in which five people undergo a wave of emotions that threatens to overwhelm them; *Observance*, in which a stream of people move towards the viewer as though paying respect to the departed; *Dolorosa*, in which a man and woman, framed and hinged together like a diptych or a family portrait, weep endlessly on a video loop, portraits of perpetual sorrow. While images of tears recur in Viola's work so, too, do images of water and reflections, including in *Five Angels for the Millennium*.

“Water is connected to us in deep ways,” he says. “The first time humanity ever saw its self-image way back in the recesses of prehistoric time would have been kneeling down by a stream.”

A decade on, Viola looks back on the creative block that preceded his mother's death as a blessing. He may not have produced any work for a while, but beneath the apparently barren surface, ideas and images were taking shape. Creativity, like emotions, comes in waves.

“There's this illusory idea that creative work is a straight line and neat and tidy. You package the next thing before you make it and it just comes out consistently and everybody's happy. Corporations thrive on that, the consistency of the product. That's one of the 10 commandments of our culture and the business world.

“Art is not a straight line. It never has been, and if you see that in art, you should be suspicious.”

The Passions opens at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, on July 29.

And he found an answer in an unlikely quarter: the life of the 16th-century Spanish mystic and poet St John of the Cross, who was imprisoned and tortured, but bore no malice towards his tormenter.

“He didn't take the intensive political action path as a result of that ordeal, but he wrote this incredible poetry that continues to inspire people to this day ... when I read them I realised, it's OK to be an artist. You can be an artist in the face of this terror and the power of art will cut through that.

“Revolution is something that actually starts in individual hearts. That's what art does. It transmits a spark which the artist originally received in the form of inspiration and it transmits it back to us, whether the picture is four years old, 40 years old or 400 years old. There's a way of change that is generated from the inside out rather than from the outside in.”

Viola is based in Long Beach, California,

with wife and creative partner, the Melbourne-born photographer Kira Perov. The pair met during Viola's first visit to Australia in 1977 when Perov was director of student activities at Melbourne's La Trobe University. At that time, Viola had already started pioneering the use of video in contemporary art.

His innovative work would eventually take him to the Venice Biennale, where he represented the US in 1995. In 2003, he became the first solo contemporary artist to have an exhibition at the National Gallery in London when *The Passions* transferred there from the Getty Museum in LA, which had commissioned the show. More recently, Viola has been working with opera director Peter Sellars on a major production of *Tristan and Isolde*, which opened at Opera Bastille in Paris in April and will be revived there later this year.

These are milestones in any artist's life.