

# Bill Viola

## The Tristan Project





(above)  
**The Fall into Paradise**, 2005  
videofsound installation colour  
high-definition video projection: five  
channels of sound with subwoofer  
(5.1), screen size 320 x 427 cm  
9:58 minutes  
Bill Viola

(previous page, left)  
**Fire Woman**, 2005  
Bill Viola

(previous page, right)  
**Tristan's Ascension**  
(**The Sound of a Mountain under a**  
**Waterfall**), 2005  
Bill Viola

'I thought, this is a man who could cope with Wagner, who operates with these incredibly long arcs and spans of time ... And underneath an apparently static surface, there is a whole subculture of torrents and energies flowing'. (Esa-Pekka Salonen, musical director, Los Angeles Philharmonic, commenting on the choice of Bill Viola for *The Tristan Project*)

Richard Wagner (1813-1883) composed 13 operas or 'music dramas' in his lifetime. His idea of a Gesamtkunstwerk ('total artwork') presented the classical music world of the times with a new way of thinking about opera. Wagner saw opera as a complex combination of poetry, visuals, music and dramatic arts. *Tristan and Isolde*, a four and a half hour work, was composed in 1865. It tells the story of a medieval myth, about a pair of doomed lovers. Their love is so intense and profound that it cannot be contained in their material bodies. To realise their love, Tristan and Isolde must ultimately transcend life itself.

*The Tristan Project* brings together all the elements of Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk in an extraordinary partnership of music, theatre, and video artistry, talent and expertise. Los Angeles Philharmonic music director, Esa-Pekka Salonen and theatre director, Peter Sellars, teamed with video artist Bill Viola to create a spectacular production of this epic story. 'Wagner was trying to create "the artwork of the future",' describes Peter Sellars, 'an experience that we're beginning to have the technology to realise'.

The artist chosen to interpret the imagery of this opera for a 21st century audience was Bill Viola, whose has a 30 year career using the medium of video to portray the human condition in its many emotional forms.

In 1998, at the Getty Research Institute, Viola studied the conventions of expression with the objective of choosing how to represent human passions. Viola's own study of mystical Asian literature and the spiritual traditions Zen Buddhism, lead him to research medieval devotion and the depiction of emotion in the history of art. Viola also explored religious works of the 15th and 16th centuries.

He was particularly attracted to the portrayal of emotional extremes in these works, at moments recognized as life milestones - birth, love and death. *Tristan and Isolde* is about the extremes of love and death, where the act of love triumphs over death. Viola has commented that the sexual act of love between a man and a woman, and the technology we now have to record human emotions, are the only ways humans can defy death.

Bill Viola's art reflects of an ongoing fascination with the relationship between an individual's inner self and the experience of his body. His own life experiences are central in his work - a near-drowning experience as a child had a dramatic impact on Viola. As a result, many of his works use water dropping slowly, cascading, or submerging his human subjects. But, perhaps the strongest component of Bill Viola's video artworks, which makes them so compelling, is that they have a sharply contrasting quality to the pace the 21st century; they 'stay in the moment'. The use of very slow motion video techniques, presents a place between 'not still' or 'at the movies'. Viola believes that 'images have life because they are untethered and floating' - when you keep the camera still, time is unfolding as a continuous process, and passion moves in an emotional wave as it wells up and passes through a person.

*The Tristan Project* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales is represented by three major videos: *Fire Woman* (2005), *Tristan's Ascension (The Sound of a Mountain Under a Waterfall)* (2005), and *The Fall into Paradise* (2005). These large vertical projection installations with surround sound are powerful works which are capable of sweeping us up on an emotional tidal wave where we can linger, suspended in time.

#### Anne Paterson

Bill Viola: *The Tristan Project*  
*The Fall into Paradise*, 2005  
Art Gallery of New South Wales  
10 April to 27 July 2008

Bill Viola: *The Tristan Project*  
*Fire Woman* and *Tristan's Ascension*  
(*The Sound of a Mountain Under a*  
*Waterfall*), 2005  
at St Saviour's Church, Redfern  
Kaldor Art Project in conjunction  
with St Saviour's Church  
9 April to 23 May 2008,  
6.30pm-10.30pm

Free admission

[www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au)