

Aesthetic swamped by arty farce

VISUAL ARTS BILL VIOLA

ACMI, to Oct 23; St Carthage's, Parkville, to Oct 23; and Mortality, ACCA, to Nov 28

Robert Nelson Reviewer

A SMALL crowd gathers in slow motion: people of different ages and occupation, some with suits, book or handbag. Then, water gushes in from the sides under fierce pressure, chaotically hurling the figures towards one another. The people scramble for a footing against the barrage, and tumble while trying to shield themselves from the impetus of the jets.

This slow-motion trauma goes on for three minutes. After the people are pummelled and flooded, the ordeal ceases; the torrents abate and the drenched heroes slowly

recover. In this lyrical aftermath, the participants are in shock yet gradually come to life in disbelief.

These dramatic scenes belong to Bill Viola's video *The Raft*, above, which is screened at ACMI as part of the Melbourne Festival. The work recalls sublime pieces, such as Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa* or Rodin's *Burghers of Calais*. As with much of Viola's video, the content concerns a threshold where we cross into another realm, with implications of mortality. Grandiose and baroque, *The Raft* is large: the figures are sharp and the work has impact beyond the violence of diluvial waters and panic. But despite the high production values, *The Raft* runs aground on its own artifice: it bobs between allegorical narrative and experiment in psychology, and

unwittingly slips into farce.

The Raft is full of portent in its transitions from damnation to redemption; but what we see is a bunch of people being hosed down from hidden hydrants. There's no sense of a sea — because that might be too literal — and so the onrush of water upon a neat platform is gratuitous, a staged execution of performers to capture the pathology of their disorientation. It isn't nature that knocks them about but the artist. The work doesn't suspend disbelief and we're left with a slightly cruel and silly spectacle.

The same aesthetic peril wrecks the videos at St Carthage's in Parkville. In *Tristan's Ascension*, where a body on a slab is sucked up into heaven, I found it impossible not to think about the technical elements of the

illusion, like the gushing water played in reverse. So while great cosmic energies are invoked by the mystic deluge, I can only see the manipulation of footage with software.

Fire Woman is similar. Amid much loudness and fury, I'm worried about ending up in a furnace with the ghostly female silhouette. I get a shock when she jumps into water and doesn't re-emerge. But because there's no narrative around this martyrdom — as there would be in a film — the iconic vignette seems unconvincingly staged; and no matter how bullying the noise and oppressive the flames, the evocation of reality is cancelled.

Viola is a giant of the contemporary scene and the Melbourne Festival and Kaldor Public Art Projects did well to get him to Melbourne. At ACMI,

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Viola spoke of his interests in death and transcendence and came across as an artist genuinely dealing with spirituality and eternity.

But eternity doesn't reciprocate; and his imposing videos falter on the iconic machinery of the medium. In their desire to express a cosmic ontology, they fail to create an aesthetic reality. The works attempt to stage spooky thresholds of life and death, but we end up not thinking of the abyss but the technical engineering that concocts it. Viola's brinkmanship doesn't speak beyond its own techniques. His earlier work, at

ACCA, is more in the tradition of expressionist documentary, dark and naive, which better communicates the uncanny life transitions that he is consistently concerned with.

The later works have iconic clout, which gives Viola his claim to spiritual monumentality; but they collapse for want of narrative. The symbolic content is obvious and corny; and the giant video presence, far from inducing enigma upon the allegorical phantasms, crumbles beneath contrivance.

As Viola seeks to clinch the grand religious potential of his funeral themes with big sound and slo-mo, he puts impossible pressure on the credibility of the action. The aesthetic stress leaves little to survive but spiritual bombast.

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robert.nelson@monash.edu

