



# Bill Viola

Short Guide



Bill Viola (1951, New York, NY, US) is one of the most renowned video artists of our time. His visual worlds, realized with state-of-the-art technology, are impressive for their contemplative balance and overwhelming with their direct emotionality and pictorial intensity. They push the boundaries of conventional viewing habits shaped by the everyday floods of images in film, television, and social media. The focus of his visually stunning works is on the human condition; they create immersive worlds of experience that confront the viewer with the basic conditions and potentials of human existence and address essential themes such as life and death, dream and rebirth, memory and oblivion, transformation and transfiguration. Viola, who has been intensely concerned with the human body, divergent temporal orders, spirituality, and transcendence since the 1970s, has rightly been described as a “postmodern humanist” (David A. Ross). He maintains an intensive dialogue with non-Western art, music, and religion and conceives his brilliantly composed works both as a reflection on the locating of human existence in the world and as an exploration of the conditions of the possibility of human consciousness. Viola’s spiritual openness to Eastern thought allows him to create works of strikingly powerful, visionary poetry that combine the spiritual with the aesthetic without drifting into neo-religious dogmatism. The tradition of Western painting—especially the influence of major Renaissance artists—is of great importance for Viola’s work, which focuses on the artistic exploration of the moving image. At the same time, he manages to transcend our perception of the real world by means of advanced video techniques such as slow motion, time lapse, dissolves, and micro and macro shots. Especially in uncertain and disturbing times, Viola’s works are of great relevance, as they are based on an underlying idea of hope and solidarity. His 2004 video/sound installation *The Raft*, for example, which shows in extreme slow motion a group of people being overwhelmed by a violent torrent of water, is a universal metaphor for the threat to human life. In this depiction of the suffering of the global community, it was important to the artist—as he noted in a statement—that all those “shipwrecked” survived: “no one is lost.”

The Museum der Moderne Salzburg pays tribute to Bill Viola with a grand exhibition surveying his body of work, which now spans five decades. Produced in close collaboration with Bill Viola Studio, the solo exhibition is the first presentation of Viola’s imposing oeuvre at an Austrian museum.

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# The Reflecting Pool

1977–9

Videotape, color, mono sound

Projected image size: 213.5 × 160 cm

7 minutes

Performer: Bill Viola



A man emerges from the forest and stands before a pool of water. He leaps up and time suddenly stops. All movement and change in the otherwise still scene is limited to the reflections and undulations on the surface of the pond. Time becomes extended and punctuated by a series of events seen only as reflections in the water. The work describes the emergence of the individual into the natural world, a baptism into a world of virtual images and indirect perceptions.



# Interval

1995

Video/sound installation

Two channels of color video projections on opposite walls of a large, darkened gallery;  
custom video switching program; two channels of amplified mono sound, four speakers

Projected image size: 300 × 400 cm

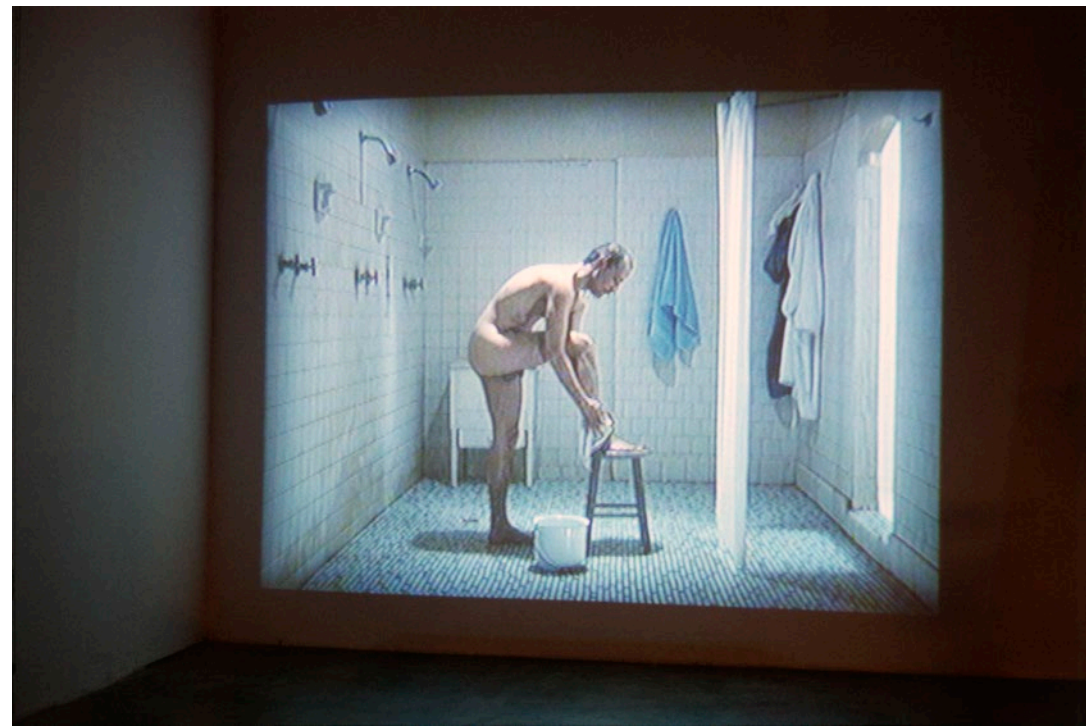
Room dimensions: 4.3 × 6.6 × 7.9 m

29:00 minutes

Two large color projections stand opposite each other, filling the sidewalls of a small room. Viewers pass between the images on their way through the space. An image of a man alone in a shower room, naked, is seen on one wall as he slowly and methodically cleans his body with a white cloth and a bucket of water. A series of wild and violent images appears on the other wall, showing a figure struggling through fire and water intercut with scenes of the camera point of view aggressively pushing itself through folds of skin into the body's orifices.

The two sets of images represent not only opposing architectural surfaces, but embody opposing energies—peaceful/violent, passive/aggressive, calm/chaotic. Controlled by a computer-programmed switcher, the images are never present on opposite walls simultaneously. Instead they appear sequentially, one at a time, displayed according to a mathematically programmed curve that alternates their duration in ever decreasing intervals of time. Starting at one minute, the images and sound switch slowly at first, then faster and faster, finally reaching the limit of the frame rate of the video signal at thirty times per second. This extreme peak condition is maintained for a few moments until both images abruptly end in black and silence and the cycle starts anew.

What begins as a simple slow succession of images gradually becomes a violent, roaring alternation, eventually reaching a blurred merger of the two as the peak switching frequency is reached, exceeding the ability of the human eye and ear to distinguish between distinct pictures and sounds and creating the impression that the two images are, for a brief moment, coexisting simultaneously.



# Three Women

2008

Color high-definition video on flat panel display mounted vertically on wall

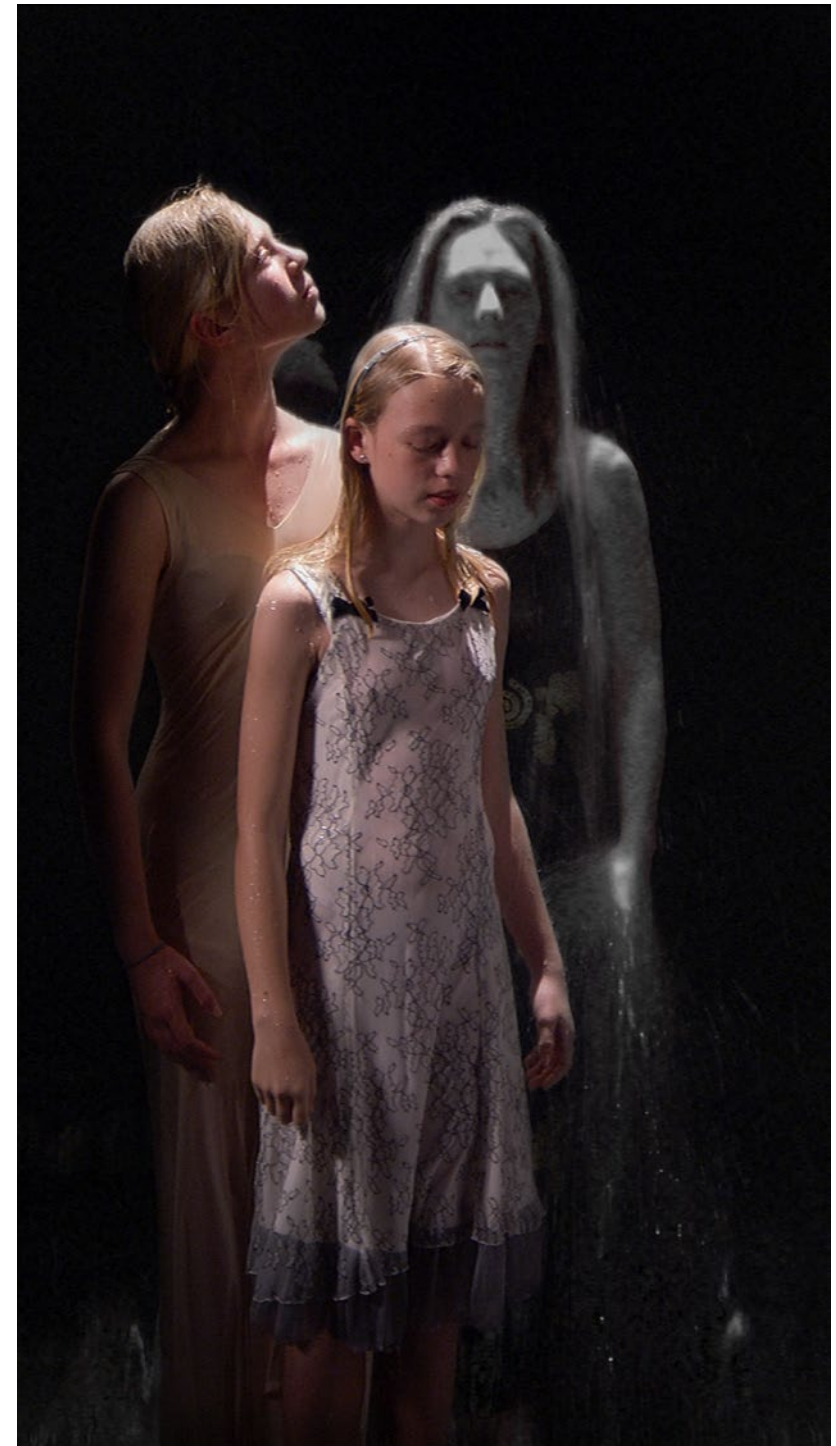
155.5 × 92.5 × 12.7 cm

9:06 minutes

Performers: Anika, Cornelia, Helena Ballent

*Three Women* is part of the Transfigurations series, a group of works that reflect on the passage of time and the process by which a person's inner being is transformed. The Sufi mystic Ibn al-Arabi described life as an endless journey when he said, "*The Self is an ocean without a shore. Gazing upon it has no beginning or end, in this world and the next.*" *Three Women* expresses this profound vision of the eternal nature of human life.

In the dim, ghostly gray of a darkened space, a mother and her two daughters slowly approach an invisible boundary. They pass through a wall of water at the threshold between life and death, and move into the light, transforming into living beings of flesh and blood. Soon the mother recognizes that it is time for her to return, and eventually her children slowly follow, each tempted to have one more look at the world of light before disappearing into the shimmering, gray mists of time.





# The Raft

May 2004

Video/sound installation

Color high-definition video projection on wall in a darkened space;

5.1 channels of surround sound

Projected image size: 3.96 × 2.23 m

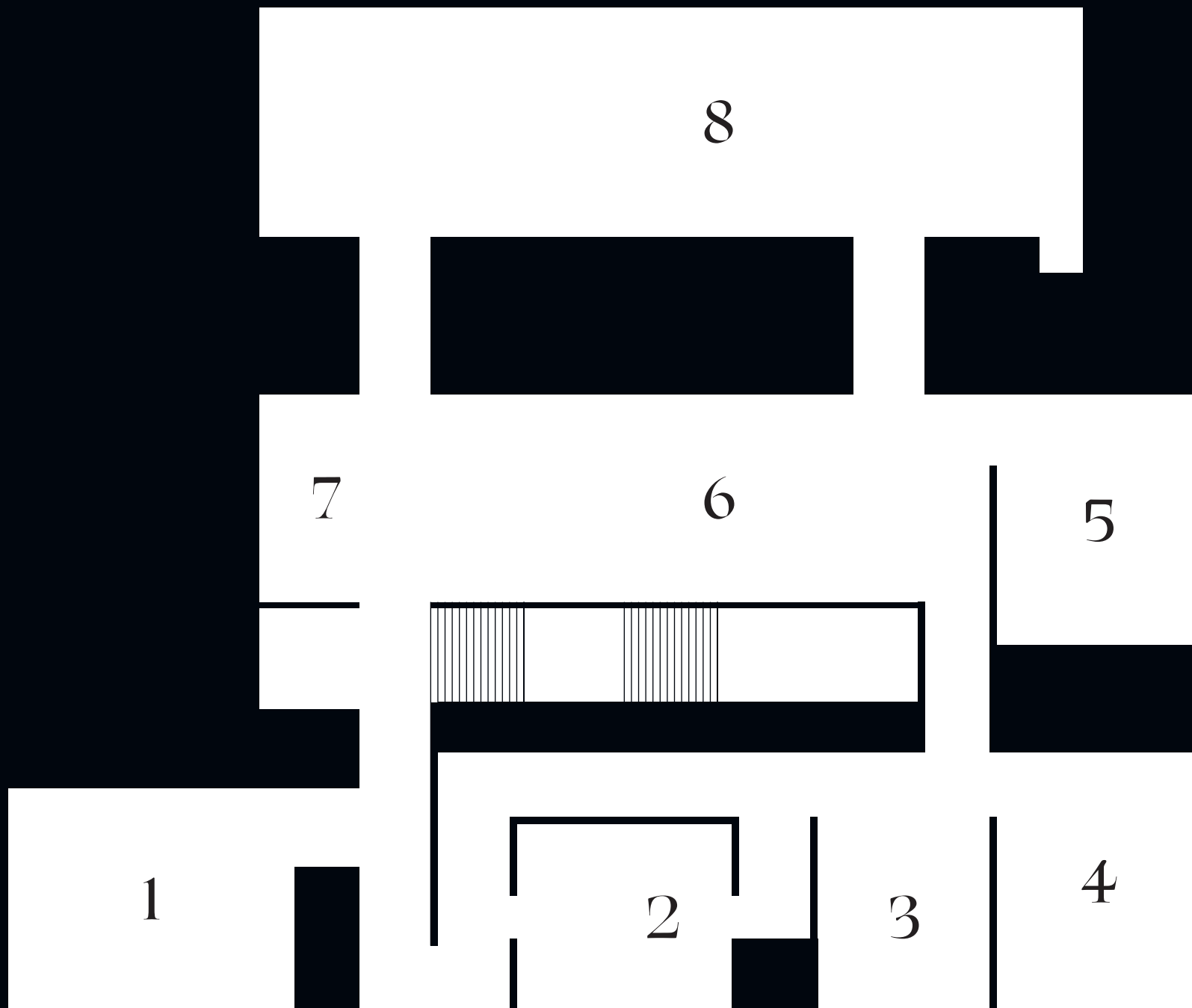
10:33 minutes

Performers: Sheryl Arenson, Robin Bonaccorsi, Rocky Capella, Cathy Chang, Liisa Cohen, Tad Coughenour, James Ford, Michael Irby, Simon Karimian, John Kim, Tanya Little, Mike Martinez, Petro Martirosian, Jeff Mosley, Gladys Peters, Maria Victoria, Kaye Wade, Kim Weild, Ellis Williams

A group of nineteen men and women from a variety of ethnic and economic backgrounds are suddenly struck by a massive onslaught of water from a high-pressure hose. Some are immediately knocked over and others brace themselves against the unprovoked deluge. Water flies everywhere, clothing and bodies are pummeled, faces and limbs contort in stress and agony against the cold, hard force. People in the group cling to each other for survival, as the act of simply remaining upright becomes an intense physical struggle. Then, as suddenly as it arrived, the water stops, leaving behind a band of suffering, bewildered, and battered individuals. The group slowly recovers as some regain their senses, others weep, and still others remain cowering, while the few with any strength left assist those who have fallen back to their feet.

The action is recorded in high-speed film and unfolds in extreme slow motion to reveal subtle nuances of the light and color in the explosive impact of the water and the individual expressions and gestures of the figures. The high-definition video format enhances the tiniest visual details in the image and the 5.1 surround sound creates a complex, spatial sound field in the space.



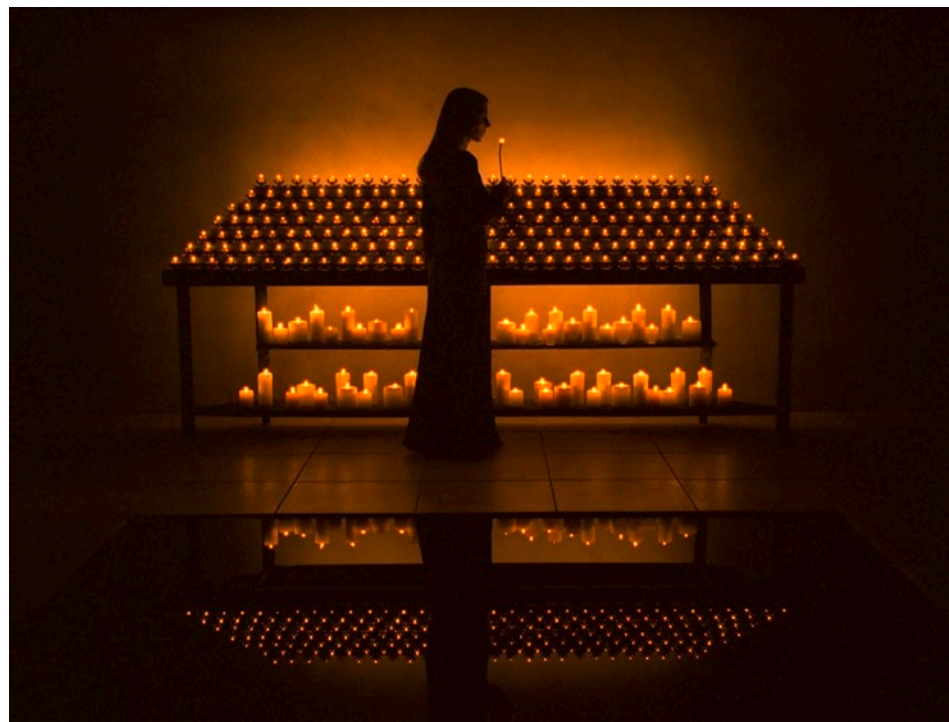


# Night Vigil

2005/2009  
 Video installation  
 Color rear-projection video diptych on two large screens  
 mounted on wall in dark room  
 Overall projected image size: 2.01 × 5.28 m  
 Room dimensions variable  
 9:20 minutes  
 Performers: Jeff Mills, Lisa Rhoden

The images for *Night Vigil* are derived from a production of Richard Wagner's nineteenth-century opera *Tristan und Isolde*, a collaboration with director Peter Sellars, conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen, Bill Viola and executive producer Kira Perov (video, 2004–2005). The original story of Tristan and Isolde is a mythic tale of a love so intense and profound that it cannot be contained in the material bodies of the lovers. In order to fulfill their desires, the two must ultimately transcend life itself to arrive at a realm beyond all polarities of light and darkness, male and female, life and death, time and eternity.

The installation *Night Vigil* is a rear-projected video diptych on two adjacent screens. In the video sequence a woman and a man, separated by darkness in the middle of the night, are drawn to each other and to the source of light that illuminates their longing. They undertake individual journeys to reach their goal: his, an outward journey of action—the long approach through the dark night into the light of a blazing fire, and hers, an inward journey of contemplation—the methodical lighting of a bank of candles until the darkness of her room is filled with light. Although solitary and separate, the destinations of their individual journeys are the same—the merging of their individual selves in a world beyond death.





# The Path

It is the time of the summer solstice high in the mountains. The early morning light reveals a steady stream of people moving along a path through the forest. They come from all walks of life, each traveling at their own pace in their own unique way. There is no beginning or end to the procession of individuals—they have been walking long before we see them here, and they will be walking long after they leave our view. The constant flow of people suggests no apparent order or sequence. As travelers on the road, they move in an intermediate space between two worlds. A small marker in the forest grants them safe passage through this vulnerable state.

2002

Panel 2 of 5 panels from *Going Forth By Day* (2002)

Video/sound installation

Color high-definition color video projected onto wall in dark room;

four channels of spatial quadraphonic sound

Projected image size: 2.28 × 10.97 m

34:30 minutes



# Water Portraits

*Gleb, 2013*

Color high-definition video on flat panel display  
mounted vertically on wall; stereo sound

92 × 53.6 × 3 cm

Continuously running

Performer: Gleb Kaminer

*Madison, 2013*

Color high-definition video on flat panel display  
mounted vertically on wall; stereo sound

92 × 53.6 × 3 cm

Continuously running

Performer: Madison Corn

*Sharon, 2013*

Color high-definition video on flat panel display  
mounted vertically on wall; stereo sound

92 × 53.6 × 3 cm

Continuously running

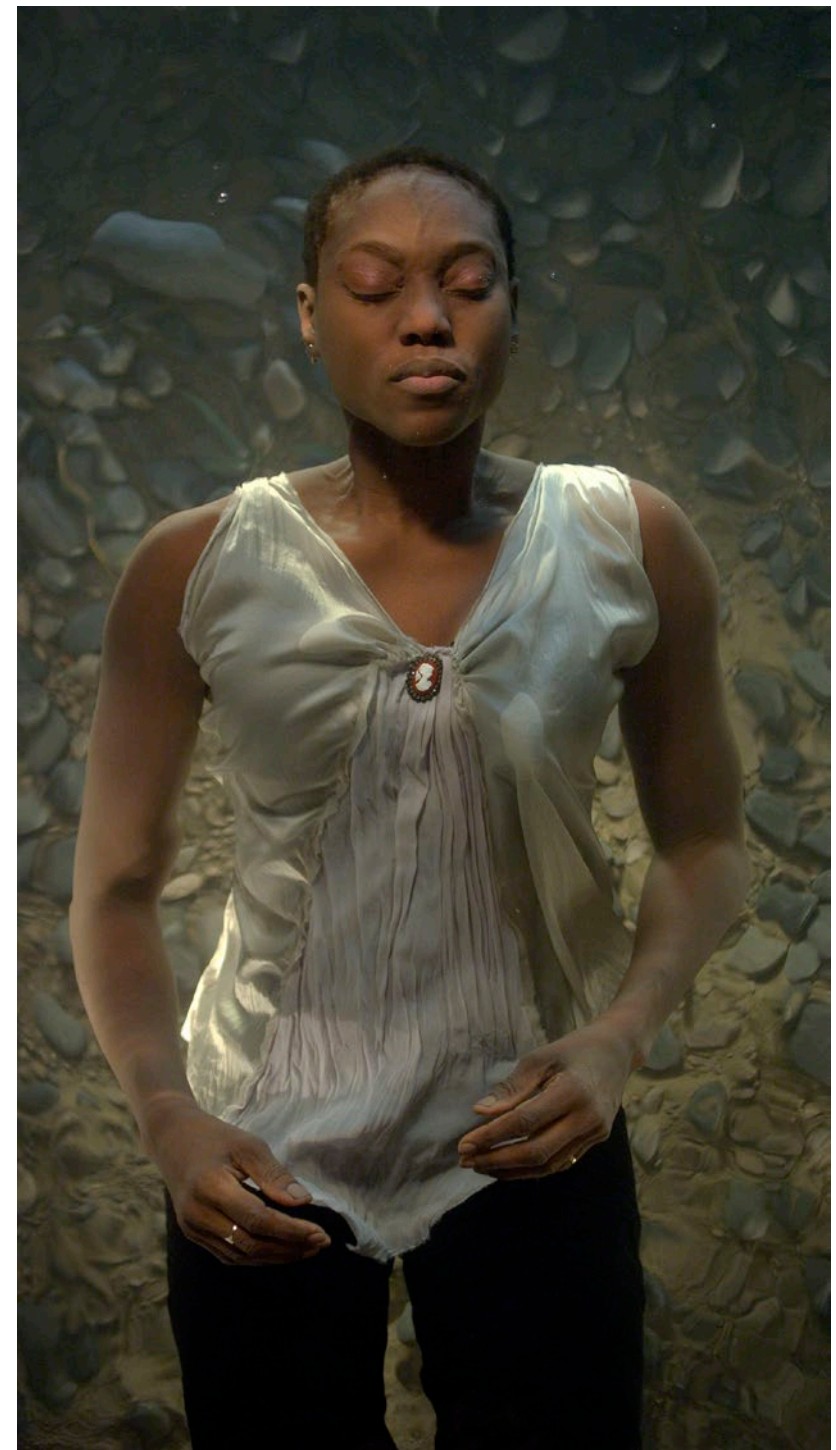
Performer: Sharon Ferguson

The Water Portraits series is a continuation of a life-long exploration of the element of water, the substance that is life itself. Water represents change, the passage of time (ever flowing), eternity, and is a metaphor for the unborn, for birth and rebirth, baptism, and reflection. Water is a powerful force that can never be contained. The water portraits are unsettling—water is not a natural environment for humans, but yet here are dreamers who seem to be content in this watery world that gently rocks them, dreamers who mysteriously seem to exist without the aid of breath.

Each work depicts a person under water at the bottom of a streambed. Their eyes are closed and they appear to be at peace. Water ripples across their bodies, subtly animating their movements. The sound of running water permeates the space as dreams filter through the room.









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# Five Angels for the Millennium

2001

Video/sound installation

i. "Departing Angel"

ii. "Birth Angel"

iii. "Fire Angel"

iv. "Ascending Angel"

v. "Creation Angel"

Five channels of color video projection on walls in large, dark room;

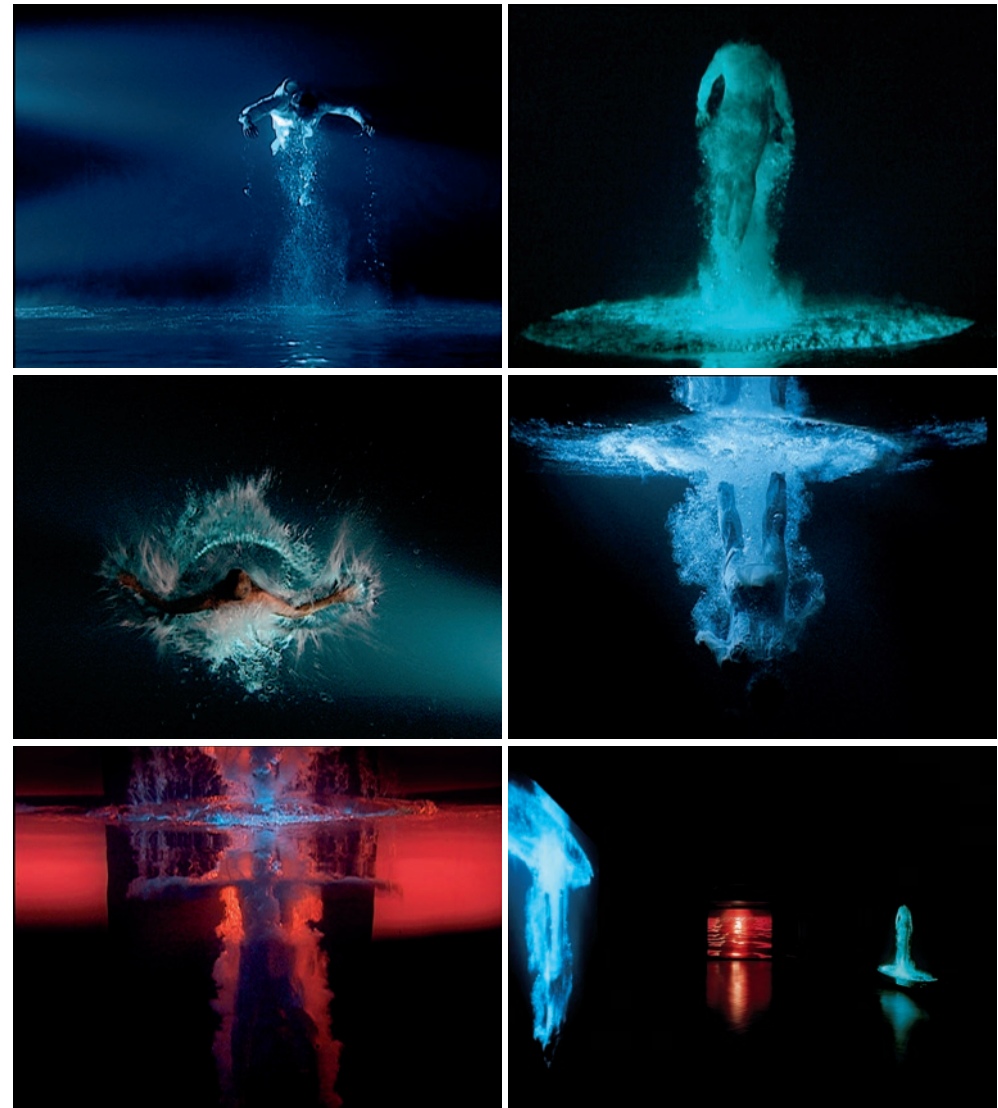
stereo sound for each projection

Projected image size: 2.4 × 3.2 m each

Continuously running

Performers: Josh Coxx (panels i–iv), Andrew Tritz (panel v)

*Five Angels for the Millennium* consists of five individual video sequences showing a clothed man plunging into a pool of water. Playing simultaneously and repeating on a continuous loop, the images are projected directly onto the walls of a large dark room. The "angel" appears infrequently on each screen, breaking through the surface in a sudden explosion of light and sound that interrupts an otherwise peaceful aqueous landscape. Weightless and motionless, the human figure enters into the depths of a mysterious underwater world, a luminous void of unknown dimensions where the laws of physics seem suspended and the borders between the infinite cosmos and finite human body merge. Shining bubbles float like stars in the night sky as the human form traverses the gap between heaven and earth, suspended between light and darkness, time and eternity, life and death. The panels are titled: "Departing Angel," "Birth Angel," "Fire Angel," "Ascending Angel," and "Creation Angel."



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# Bill Viola

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In collaboration with  
Bill Viola Studio

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Bill Viola, *The Raft* (detail),  
May 2004, video/sound  
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