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## Bill Viola and the Heartbeat of Water

“I fell into a lake when I was six years old—and fell to the bottom—and then I saw probably the most beautiful world I’ve ever seen; it was colorful, there was light, and it was moving. It was a kind of paradise.”<sup>1</sup>

So goes the response of contemporary artist Bill Viola to a question about images, memory and water in his life’s work. With an affinity for the Jungian-like fluidity of patterns and pictures, trauma and ecstasy, Viola describes an aquatic pathos as always permeating the form and content of his art. In other words, for Viola, the sublimity of both art and life are concealed just beneath the surface, and the creative process emerges somewhere on the shadow-side of water.

Whereas cinema has a long theoretical relationship to metaphor and mind, water and transparency (from Bazin to Bergson, Barthes to Deleuze), an ethos of liquidity in installation art has a far more limited historical purview. That said, in this talk I juxtapose two works of water from Viola’s long artistic career and suggest how together they reveal a cosmos of quiet phenomenological reverie and lyrical imagistic sorrow.

*He Weeps For You* (1976) is a multi-media installation project: a big projection, a drop of water, and a heartbeat fuse to create an otherworldly space of contemplation. From a valve of copper piping a single sacred tear comes to breathe life on the skin of a drum; a sonorous reverb pulsates the viewer’s body in a cycle of repetition. We are at once breathing in, and with, water.

*Ascension* (2000) is similarly replete with a uncanny sense of embodied mysticism and apocalyptic undertones. In this short video a man in the molten shape of a cruciform is fully immersed within a cinematic frame composed of moving water. The filmic stakes of diegesis are amplified by the stillness of camera and figure, water and ground.

I suggest that circuits and dreams, electricity and self-reflexivity are the vernacular terms most vital in understanding Viola’s artwork: in short, his work teaches us that cinema’s liquidity finds voice on the other side of silence, and that the holy shape of tears find form within the hollows of air.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ikonotv.art/ondemand/video/447548/series-artists-who-use-water-in-their-art-bill-viola.html>

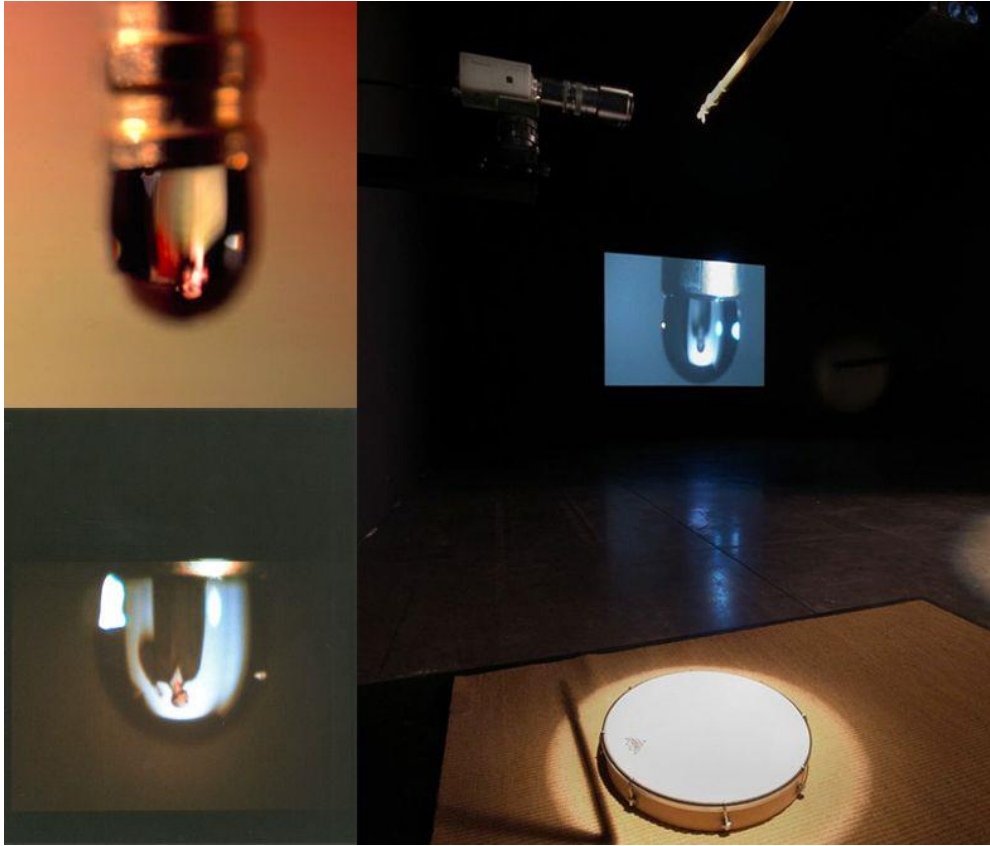


Fig. 1  
Bill Viola  
*He Weeps For You*, 1976  
Video/sound installation water drop with micro lens, amplified drum, projection in a dark room  
Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, NY



Fig. 2  
Bill Viola  
*Ascension*, 2000  
Color video projection on wall in dark room; stereo sound  
Running Time: 10 minutes