

# Life & Times Exhibition

## Bill Viola/Michelangelo Life Death Rebirth

Royal Academy of Arts, London,  
26 January 2019 to 31 March 2019

### THE PASSAGE OF TIME

This superb exhibition brings together two artists, separated in time by 500 years but sharing preoccupations with life, death, and what might happen afterwards:

*'Whoever is born arrives at death through time's swift passage; and the sun leaves nothing alive. What is sweet and what brings pain, man's thoughts and words, all disappear; and our ancient lineages are as shadows to the sun, smoke to the wind.'*

These words were written by Michelangelo in 1520. On the wall to one side are his peerless drawings of the Madonna and Child and of a *Pietà* in which the same mother cradles her dead adult son. On the other side of the darkened gallery is a giant video triptych by the US

Bill Viola, *Tristan's Ascension (The Sound of a Mountain Under a Waterfall)*, 2005. Video/sound installation.  
Performer: John Hay. Courtesy Bill Viola Studio. Photo: Kira Perov.



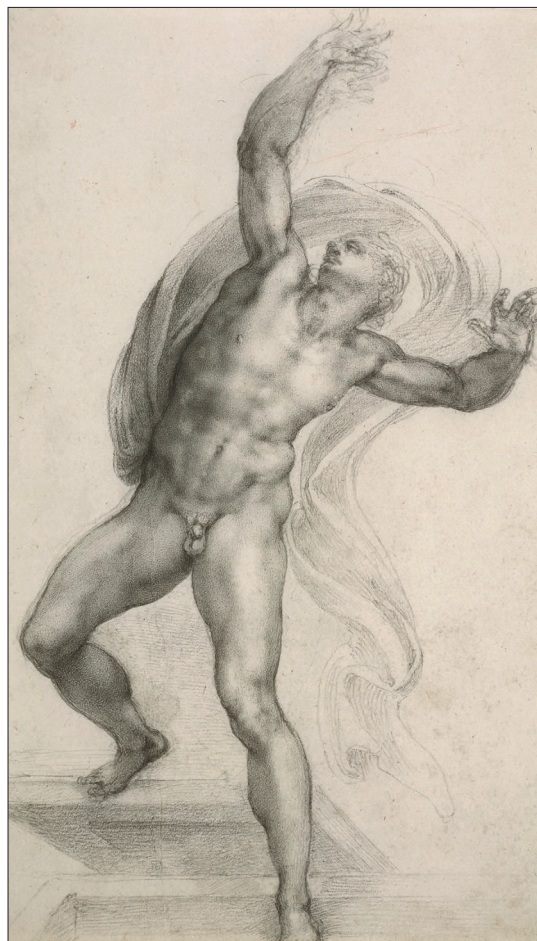
artist Bill Viola. On the left, a young mother is in labour and giving birth to a child, and, on the right, the artist's mother lies dying peacefully in a hospital bed tended by her family. In the central panel a veiled and indistinct human figure moves underwater sometimes peacefully and sometimes in agitation. The child is born, smacks his lips, and gazes at us quizzically. It is a long time since I have found any single room in an art gallery so deeply moving.

Bill Viola was born in New York in 1951 but spent an early and formative period in Florence. In the 1970s this city was not just a much-visited museum but also the cradle of important developments in modern art — just as it was in Michelangelo's day. Viola's beautiful, mesmeric video installations involve the slow and patient observation of people and the four elements. In another sparsely furnished room we watch, on a small TV, a man and then a woman sleeping, while on the walls are projected brief flashes of their dream images of swimming fish, owls in flight, and buildings on fire. This work, *The*

*Sleep of Reason*, takes its title from an 18th-century etching by Goya in which the sleeping artist rests on a plinth with the legend '*El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*' ('*The sleep of reason brings forth monsters*') — a motto for our times.

Later on, Michelangelo's drawings show scenes of mythical punishment for the misdeeds of lesser gods and giants, whereas Viola has an ageing couple minutely examining their bodies by torchlight, trying to work out what has happened with the passage of time.

Many of Viola's works show living humans entering, leaving, or resting peacefully under water. As a child he nearly drowned but later recalled the



Michelangelo Buonarroti, *The Risen Christ*, c. 1532–1533. Black chalk on paper, 37.2 × 22.1 cm. Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019.

experience as blissful. The fortune teller in Eliot's *The Waste Land* warned her client to fear death by water. Viola is perhaps suggesting that we should not. As he approached his own death Michelangelo made repeated beautiful study drawings of the crucifixion as an aid to contemplation.

Try to see this exhibition. Take your time. Go more than once. And if you have a student or trainee who would like to see a beautiful normal delivery suggest that they go too.

**Duncan Keeley,**  
GP, Thame, UK  
Email: [duncan.keeley99@gmail.com](mailto:duncan.keeley99@gmail.com)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp19X701633>