

arts opera

Fire and water, death and Wagner

The maestro of video art, Bill Viola, thinks big and has a reputation to match. He talks to *Tim Teeman*

I am in front of a bungalow in Long Beach, California, on a deathly quiet suburban street of modest houses and clipped lawns. Is this really where Bill Viola, the maestro of video art, lives? Viola's productions and installations are epic multiscreen concoctions of stunning special-effects and quasi-spiritual imagery. He has represented the US at the Venice Biennale, his works — including *The Crossing*, *The Veiling* and *Ocean Without a Shore* — of figures crying, staring, dying or emerging from water and fire have appeared in the world's greatest galleries and museums. And now they are going to appear on the stage.

In the five-hour video that Viola has created as a backdrop for Peter Sellars' production of Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*, first seen at the Paris Opera in 2005 and about to have its British premiere, there are cascades of fire and water, hundreds of candles, optical illusions with people walking through still, barely illuminated water, and a stunning tableau in which a dead body is raised high within a waterfall against the flow of the water. Fire and water — “the archetypes of life and death”, as Viola puts it — are his most familiar images: he thinks, and films, big, and has a reputation to match.

Viola's greeting gives me fair warning of the intellectual and artistic gyre within: “You've got the right place, but this is not a typical suburban house.” Wiry, bearded and quietly spoken, he shows me the hundreds of books and notebooks in this “ground zero of my art-making”. Indian music plays. There are ethnic artefacts, parchments and books on art (Picasso, Japanese, Bosch and Breughel) and faith (from Christianity to Zen mysticism).

Viola has a house and studio, overseen by his wife, Kira Perov, and near a 6,000ft studio where all the fires and floods are filmed. He has been based here since 1982. “I like being the plain-clothes artist. Before, we lived in New York, which was like being in a factory town where everyone works for the same factory. On one level that's great, but I didn't want to be ‘on’ constantly. I like to work in solitude.”

Viola, 59, has friends who “just go to their studios and create”, but he will “write, think”, some pieces take six years to



OUT THE BOX Bill Viola filmed his dying mother but says “I wouldn't shoot an execution, although I've thought about it”

execute. Because he thinks in images rather than words, he writes down each idea and thought, quotes, his worries and hopes in notebooks, along with drawings of the images we see realised in his works.

He says of *Tristan und Isolde*: “The images I create are on the threshold of reality. Wagner was radical, making the music speak for his characters' thoughts and desires rather than the action, and I want to do the same.” The opera, starring Anne Sofie von Otter and featuring the Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by Esa-Pekka Salonen, will be performed in Birmingham on September 23 and the Festival Hall, Central London, three days later.

Viola lives in his head, and what an

esoteric farmyard it is. He shows me the book devoted to the multiscreen altarpiece that he is making for St Paul's Cathedral about the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. Amid the precise scrawl and jagged diagrams are quotes from Edvard Munch and Joseph Beuys and headings such as “rules for the icon painter”, the measurements of the north aisle of St Paul's, a guide on how to draw martyrs and a sacramental tabernacle, a description of salvation. Does he ever want to stop scrawling in notebooks and get on with it? “My wife says the same,” Viola replies. “She's the midwife trying to keep me from going off the rails.”

At this point Perov joins in. “It's hard sometimes, he goes off at tangents,” she

says diplomatically. “He spends too long in here. I make appointments for him to see people.” They met when she organised an exhibition of his in Australia in 1977: the attraction was instant and their relationship works, “as long as he stays in his place and I stay in mine”, Perov says, smiling. One sympathiser: Viola goes off on riffs about technology and the body, why we live in a “timeless” age, why “the idea of narrative is so dubious, there is a theory we exist out of time”. He notes that the words “going through the space between us are occupying other space”. Culture and sociology are “spinning webs” around us.

The foundation of Viola's inspiration came from nearly drowning when he was 6

on a family holiday at a trout lake in upstate New York. “I remember every second. I felt like I was in another dimension. Everything was blue and green. I was weightless. I wasn't scared. It was unbelievably beautiful. I didn't think ‘I'm dying’. I was marvelling at what I was seeing. Some people are logical and rational, others, like me, are elusive and ethereal and an experience like that shaped my view of the world.”

He is talking about it with such reverence that I ask if he'd have liked to have died. Viola laughs. “No! I'm really glad my uncle grabbed me, I'd rather be alive. But at the moment he wrenched me up I remember being angry that this sensation of pure bliss was being interrupted. Later I knew I had crossed the threshold to death.”

Viola's parents weren't religious. His father was a former Roman Catholic altar boy, who, as a barman during Prohibition, would see priests sneaking in “to hang around the ladies”, which disillusioned him. His mother was English, from Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria, and, although Anglican, was more “spiritual” than devoted to one faith. They met on a blind date in New York. Viola played the recorder, sax and drums at school. “According to the Tibetans the last sense that goes is

I cry two or three times a week: tears are the most profound expression of human experience'

sound and so after someone dies they chant for three days to help them to pass to the other side,” he says — and sound is there, as thuds or hums in his work. “It is the most profound sense,” he says.

He was so good at art that he designed the backdrops for all his school plays and his first fingerpainting was put on the classroom wall. “I always knew I was going to be an artist,” he says. His parents gave him a small camera. He relished the skill of the TV cartoonists whom he grew up watching and remembers going to the World's Fair when he was 14. “It was magical, rooms with 10 or 12 projections in them at once.”

He smiles, comparing himself with his two children, Andrew, 24, and Blake, 18. Six years ago the family met the Dalai Lama. Blake asked him if it would be right to kill a man who was about to kill a hundred people. The Dalai Lama said yes. “If I killed that one man it would take me two or three lifetimes to work off the negative karma,” he told Blake. “But if I let that man kill all those people he would have had multiple negative karmas to resolve before he found peace.” Andrew is set to become an artist; Blake “is a little wilder, but good”.

You couldn't study video art when Viola was a student at Syracuse University in the early 1970s. His first film was about wild horses contrasted with stately Lipizzaner stallions. His first show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York was next to the lavatories, he says, recalling his many scraps with critics who claimed that video art wasn't art. “We were like the Salon des Refusés [the 1863 exhibition in Paris for artists rejected by the Paris Salon]. When the big galleries wouldn't give us a space we had shows in lofts. One friend said that art was whatever an artist said it was. It's like asking is rally driving really a sport? Well, yes if the

guy driving the car says it is. I could never accept these people claiming to know what your intentions were behind your work.”

As a young artist “I was so against anything old,” Viola laughs. “I liked Rothko and de Kooning. If I saw gold leaf I would run a hundred miles.” It wasn't until his late thirties that Viola immersed himself in the great works, inspired by his mother's gift of the *Time-Life* series of books on art. He feasted on the life of Vermeer, “on a horse and carriage trying to make it like my friends and I were, and Dürer's wife hawking his work alongside the fruit sellers”. As his later work reveals, Viola is heavily inspired by such work now: Bosch's *Creation of the World*, Flemish still lifes, “and death”, he says emphatically. “All those guys' work was filled with death.”

Viola claims never to have courted controversy, although he filmed his mother when she was dying of cancer. “Obviously” he asked his family's permission. “To me, it was like a memorial to her.” Why make it public then? “The death of the mother is one of the profoundest things in human life. She is the source of you. In the last few days that hospital room wasn't a space as we know it, everything was turned upside down.” Did he feel intrusive? “I can see why you might think that, but I thought a lot of people might get something from it.” Indeed, it helped to cure him of a “block” he had been suffering for almost three years.

Is there anything that he wouldn't shoot? “That's a great question,” he muses. “I wouldn't shoot an execution, although I have thought about it.” He's so obsessed by death, but is Viola scared of it? “No, but who knows when the time comes?” For the past six years he has been devising *The Night Journey*, a single-player, non-violent video game in which the player — traversing desert landscapes — has dream-like visions, except that they aren't visions at all, but the experience of his or her own death. He hopes that it will be out within the year.

Unsurprisingly, given his flair for the spectacular, Viola has toyed with the ideas of making Hollywood movies and owns up to lost afternoons watching *The Towering Inferno*. But his art will be always be left-field and, besides his St Paul's project, he is working on “video poems”, in which images on three screens take the viewer through the story of a woman's life.

Viola will turn 60 next year. “I can't wait,” he says: in his bountiful, productive fifties he drew inspiration from his youth and middle age. He doesn't ever really relax, he says. He embraces sadness and depression if it descends: “To me, it's open space. Vulnerability is good. I cry two or three times a week: tears are the most profound expression of human experience.”

His work is most focused on death and the extremities of emotion, but what recurs in our conversation is his heartfelt passions and beliefs. “If you want to be an artist,” he says, “eat as much as you can wherever you can, especially foods you don't like. Put all that knowledge inside you. Years later you'll be surprised by what you remember and goes into your work.”

In his video for *Tristan*, he says, audiences should expect the “realistic, surreal, metaphorical and inscrutable. There is no one style, it keeps morphing.” The same could be said for the artist himself.

Tristan and Isolde, Sept 23, Symphony Hall, Birmingham (tsh.co.uk 0121-780 3333) and Sept 26, Southbank Centre, London SE1 (southbankcentre.co.uk 0800 6526717)

film

Here's looking at you, Kid

Kevin Lewis survived a horrific childhood. Now his story is an inspiring film, says *Jude Rogers*

One day in 1993 Kevin Lewis decided to kill himself. He had been regularly beaten, bloodied and scalded by his mother, was taken into care as a teenager, where he found out what it was like to be loved, and was then returned to her horrific abuse.

A few years later, in his mid-teens, having left home and school for a failed career as a City trader, he suffered the tragic loss of his foster father and, aged 17, found himself caught up in organised crime, boxing to stay off the streets.

But today the Kevin Lewis who sits opposite me shows that miracles happen. He is sharply dressed and impeccable as he tucks in to a full English breakfast. “Stodge!”, he beams, speaking in a soft, measured, sensitive voice. We are in the Clocktower Café in Croydon, a few miles away from the tin-roofed council house where he grew up, but light years from his mercurial past.

Nowadays Lewis is a successful author of thrillers for Penguin, but he is best known as the writer and subject of his million-selling memoir, *The Kid*, published in 2003. Next week sees the release of the film

adaptation, directed by another council-house graduate, Nick Moran, who made his behind-the-camera debut in 2008 with the Joe Meek biopic *Telstar*, having been known previously as Eddie in *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*. Moran has assembled an impressive cast for the film, including James Fox, Rupert Friend and Natascha McElhone.

Moran is late for our meeting today — which, not to be rude to him, is rather fortunate. When the two men are together, Lewis lets Moran do the talking, but his personality flourishes when he is alone. Incredibly shy until he picks up on my Welsh accent and discovers that I come from the same town as his father, Lewis is away: daft, funny, chatty, suddenly at ease, smacking his lips close to my Dictaphone as he demolishes his sausages. Once he is on safe ground — as ever, one imagines — he can really be himself.

Lewis was born in 1970 in New Addington, a part of Croydon that is starting to change. “The council are doing it up a bit. Dressing up some tower blocks so they don't look so daunting. But the market's still there and the fish and chip shop, and it's still a good area. There is hardship, yes, but people cope well with it.” Lewis was eager to get this across in the film. “I wanted to be able to not only see and hear the estate but feel it, smell it, the texture of everything.”

The Kid begins with Lewis's attempted suicide, before catapulting us back to the horrors of his childhood. Lewis coped with his mother's abuse by drawing pictures on his wall (he couldn't read and write until he was 14, and learnt while in care), and by listening to classical music (given to him on a personal stereo, by a teacher; he hid the stereo from his mother in his pillow). These

interests are used as motifs in the film, with Lewis's scribbles announcing the cast and music being used — somewhat heavily-handedly — to choreograph the beatings in his childhood and adulthood.

Lewis had already written a screenplay of the memoir, having been approached by several film studios, but knew that he needed someone closer to home for the project. Then he watched *Telstar*. “I knew Nick wouldn't give my story a Hollywood makeover. He wouldn't cover it with rose-tinted glasses.” As we talk about Moran, he arrives in a whirlwind, charming and apologetic.

When Lewis and Moran met, the coincidences started to crop up. First they found out that they were the same age and had grown up in similar places. Then they discovered that their respective estates were almost identical — so much so that Moran used his home town, South Oxhey, as the location for the film. “It was as if someone had taken the layout of the houses, the street designs — and just splatted it in four or five places around London,” he says, appalled. But the coincidence also helped the director to come to terms with working on new material, especially as he had spent the previous decade putting *Telstar* together.

“Kevin saw past the preconception that anything I'd make would be Cockney-geezzer, cor-blimey nonsense. With *Telstar*, I made a gay love story more than anything — and he saw that, he got it.”

Then came the filming process itself. Lewis wanted Moran to put his own stamp on the material — that was vital, he says, personally and professionally — which led Moran to emphasise how Thatcherism affected the poor, a detail that wasn't

mentioned in the book. “I wanted to get across how Kevin was not just a victim of his parents,” Moran says, “but the climate at the time. Everyone was told they could be a teen millionaire, but without knowing the right people you didn't have a bloody chance.”

Moran was keen that Lewis was on set, but this came with complications. Lewis won't forget the moment he saw Natascha McElhone in the dressing room, “utterly transformed from the elegant beauty she is into a cartoonish monster”. She was, he says, the spitting image of his mother. “I didn't want to go near her. But she came up to me straight away, which made it a bit easier.”

The two men had a cast-iron rule on set. “We always spoke about Kevin in the third person,” Moran says. “It made things much more comfortable for everyone.”

But how did Lewis cope with seeing the finished film? He found it difficult, he admits, and has seen it only once, with his wife Jackie, who is acknowledged in the film as the person who turned his life around. He beams when he talks about her and their two sons, and how she still helps

with his “atrocious spelling”. Lewis is organising a private screening for his family (“I think that's only fair”), although they are a fragmented bunch. He knows only that his brother, Wayne, lives in Worthing, and one of his sisters lives somewhere in Croydon.

What about his parents? Suddenly there is distance and his voice is somewhat clinical. “One of them's dead. Dennis is dead.” He exhales. “And Gloria is alive, but where I don't know. But I'm starting to understand the problems she went through.”

More than anything, Lewis wants people to know that *The Kid* is not a misery

memoir. “That's the most insulting thing. It really gets to me. *The Kid* is essentially a very uplifting story.”

Moran agrees. He told his distributors that it was like *Slumdog Millionaire* set in Croydon, while his American agents described it as “Precious with skinny white people”, he laughs. “My job was to make the film as entertaining as possible, palatable, not preachy, so people don't go. It's a charity film about child abuse. It's not, it's a fairytale in the proper sense — where awful things went on, but your girlfriend's weeping tears of joy into her popcorn.”

The Kid is released on Friday



ESTATE KIDS The film director and actor Nick Moran, left, and the author Kevin Lewis

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