

Bill Viola (born 1951)
United States of America

Observance 2002

digital tape (betacam) shown as single channel digital video, colour, silent, plasma screen
Art Gallery of New South Wales – Gift of the John Kaldor Family Collection 2011. Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program

Many artists are unforthcoming, even coy, about the biography attached to their themes and work. Bill Viola, by contrast, has been open about the links between his personal grieving, first for his mother and later his father, as well as his own moment of encountering mortality in a near-death drowning incident as a child. These experiences have driven his practice.

Viola's sense of loss, sadness and fatalism has led him to contemplate and depict sorrow, mourning and catharsis. Interested for some years in Eastern mysticisms, philosophies and religions, and their pathways to self-improvement through meditation and acceptance, he produced several series of video works exploring the body in states of ecstatic release, disappearance and transformation.

In 1998 he was invited to be a visiting scholar at the Getty Research Institute. The Getty, with its amazing holdings of medieval religious art, provided a new aspect of insight. Looking at devotional paintings and altarpieces brought Viola's attention to the way emotion and human expression were individuated in the rigid formulas of iconic framing and formally strict bodies and figures in works of trecento masters such as Bernardo Daddi. Medieval artists worked to convey sentiment and feeling through attention to the countenance of a face, upturned eyes, downturned mouth, expressions of surprise or serenity which delivered an unexpected liveliness to otherwise stoical presentations.

In 2000 Viola embarked on a series – *The Passions* – which allowed him to fully explore Christian iconographies and somewhat directly, the images and lessons learned from looking at the Getty artworks and others. He created a number of video works that update devotional painting through film technology which permits slow, slight movement and extra narrative action to be perceived. In scenes reminiscent of Masolino da Panicale's Pietà, 1421 Viola made *Emergence*, 2002, in which a number of actions and scene-within-the-scenes encompass a catalogue of the Pietà and Deposition formats in art history.

As *The Passions* developed Viola explored more art with a particular concentration on emotions. To this he added knowledge from the studies of Charles Darwin and the artist Charles Le Brun. From this research developed works such as the *Quintet of the Astonished*, 2000, inspired by Hieronymus Bosch's *Christ Mocked (The Crowning with Thorns)*, circa 1510. In Viola's *Quintet* actors cluster horizontally and perform expressions of horror, disgust, pity and more. Viola's slow film process permits the audience to watch and travel through these emotional states.

Observance, made in 2002, extends this more abstract emotional encounter and takes on an additional load. Made directly after, although not specifically about, the events of 9/11, when the Twin Towers in New York City were attacked and the world bore witness to the dreadfulness of thousands of deaths in the inferno and collapse of the buildings, *Observance* provides a vision of horror, fear, grieving and anxiety through the expressions of a group of people who move towards the viewer gazing upon an unseen thing that exists between them and us. Dislodged from Christian iconography and removed from any specific occurrence, *Observance* is free to attach to the viewer's inner psyche and find company with any and all experiences of unsighted, unknowable, unthinkable distress.

Callum Morton (born 1965)

Australia

Cover Up #34 2021

Ureol timber, synthetic polymer paint

courtesy of the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne

Callum Morton has been making his 'Cover-Ups' for a number of years. Shrouding paintings, veiling statues and draping monument shapes, his objects indicate the hidden, occluded, clandestine, forbidden and censored. As objects of cancellation, they teasingly redact the horrors of culture as visibility, and representation as it is tested, modified, impeached and banished. You are free to imagine, associate and choose which infractions might be hidden. The title itself suggests some thoughts, from the geopolitical cesspool to the fallen-mighty or the mythic, religious and cultural taboo. Stuff that 'they' don't want you to know and see. The stuff various societies have discredited, or just things that need to be mothballed while norms and tolerances adjust and reformulate. Of course, one culture's cover-up might be another's disclosure.

However, Morton's 'Cover-Ups' will never be revealed. They are integrally, solidly swaddled to provide an ever-shifting possibility of guilt and suspicion. They offer a perpetual mourning for the hidden and repressed. Right now, we might imagine they shroud the political and economic machinations that have fuelled unequal and inadequate responses to the many interlocking crises we face – the Covid-19 pandemic, environmental degradation, the brutalities of civil wars, home-grown terrorism, misogyny – those things that divide all and bolster advantage for the few. Indeed Morton might all so be referring to the way in which culture and art have been mothballed, starved of both funding and audiences in these strange times.

Using the aesthetics of modernism, in particular monochromatic minimalism which came to prominence in the Cold War era of the late 1950s to early 1960s – a smooth, clean symptom of post-World War II classical cleansing – Morton reminds us that the so-cool procedures of culture often mask hot cultural anxieties below the surface.

U Biagini (late 19th–early 20th century)

Italy

Dante's Beatrice 1900

marble

Collection of the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū

J A Redpath Bequest, 1975

For **Dante Alighieri**, writing in exile, banished from the feverish political environment of Florence in 1301, the states of limbo, purgatory and paradise which he recounts relate strongly to the circumstances of his contemporary situation. Florence, an independent state of the late Roman Empire, was torn between independence and the rule of the Papacy. Dante, of aristocratic lineage and a supporter of the return of the Emperor's reign, was banished, sent away as part of a purge enacted by Pope Boniface VIII and his supporters. Dante's major works – *The New Life* (1294) and *Divine Comedy* (1320) – were written in the shadow cast by this political environment.

When all around him seemed venal, corrupt and wrecked, Dante clung to the memory of his beloved muse – Beatrice Portinari – a young woman whom he had met only two times before her death at the early age of 25 from an unspecified illness. For Dante, Beatrice – who would never grow old nor corrupt – personified purity and all goodness. In his famous works she is the guide who leads Dante through the stages of life and through the *Inferno* of judgements.

Beatrice is here depicted by the Italian artist, U Biagini, who has sculpted her as serene and eternal, her lowered eyes and swaddled head hinting at mortality. Her bust is supported by a pedestal with a base relief depicting the meeting between Dante and Beatrice as he enters Paradise and Purgatory.

In this setting Beatrice appears between Callum Morton's *Cover Up* and Marco Fusinato's *Rose* – a muse to higher thoughts and a prophet of a life obtained after a journey through the stages of Hell.

Marco Fusinato (born 1964)

Australia

Rose #11 from A Dozen Roses 2006

digital c-type photograph on Fujicolor crystal archive paper

Chartwell Collection

Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

purchased 2007

In the years immediately following the student protests of 1968 a new era of utopian thinking was shaped by race riots, student protests, anti-Vietnam War marches, the women's movement, environmentalism and other causes. Many institutions and their structures, including art schools and the art system, were scrutinised, critiqued and targeted to effect hierarchical change and embrace more democratic systems of representation. Art linked to society and actions was part of this tendency. Foremost in this atmosphere was the German conceptual artist Joseph Beuys, who established his actions for 'Direct Democracy' in the heady days of the early 1970s realpolitik environment.

During the *documenta 5* exhibition, Germany's gathering of contemporary art which surveyed the artistic zeitgeist of a five-year period, Beuys established a series of performances, lectures, interactions – even a boxing match – under the banner of the 'Office for Direct Democracy by Referendum'. Beuys' instigation has had its effects in the acceptance of instructional pedagogic performance art as a perennial aspect of contemporary art, along with relational aesthetics and the concept of social sculpture which persists in various forms as part of the conceptual menu.

One of the remnant artefacts of Beuys' Direct Democracy moment is a multiple lithograph which shows the artist wearing his ubiquitous hunting hat, sitting at a table in dialogue with a visitor (one of the many he interacted with over a 100-day period). On the table rests a glass vessel with a long-stemmed rose settled in it. This 1972 lithograph, titled *Ohne die Rose tun wir's nicht, da können wir gar nicht mehr denken (We won't do it without the Rose, because we can no longer think)*, pops up in various collections around the world.

A year later, a subsequent multiple was spawned from Beuys' democracy event. *Rose for Direct Democracy*, 1973 – a long-stemmed rose now settled into a thinner glass cylinder with measurement marks and a handwritten inscription printed in sinuous verticality tracing the growth of the rose. It was Beuys' metaphor for the slow progression of the new democratic movement, from green bud to full-bloomed red flower.

In the lithographic image *Ohne die Rose tun wir's nicht, da können wir gar nicht mehr denken* there is a charm, even a nostalgic hue. By 1973, in the next iteration *Rose for Direct Democracy*, the charm has been replaced with a chilly commercialism and, perhaps most importantly, the original plain, unadorned glass container has become a clinical, somewhat medicinal flask – more calculated, more calibrated, harder. It is this variation that Marco Fusinato duplicates in his series, *A Dozen Roses*, 2006, from which *Rose #11* derives.

There is a lot of political and social space between 1972 and 2006. If Beuys thought things would inch, like his rose, towards a new blooming democratic era he might be disheartened at the turn of events in the 21st century. Democracy has been routinely tested and many new world orders have evolved since his domestic dialogue – not all of them reaching for equality.

Fusinato reiterates Beuys' 'rose' and its vessel to both acknowledge and test what such a gesture might mean now. In this exhibition it is shown with Callum Morton's political satire, *Cover Up*, and a bust, *Dante's Beatrice*, with downcast countenance. Together they make up a trinity of works that comment on the workings of contemporary governments.

Fusinato's newest iteration is a glossy number. A glamour icon in a sterile setting with all the allure of a pharmaceutical product shoot. The graduated flask seems altogether scientifically clinical, the rose hot-housed and incubated to perfection. Right now, it is impossible not to associate this singular stem as emblematic of democracy grown impotent – uber cultivated, genetically modified, cut away from its source of growth – the grass roots. Democracy in this instance has become a collectable, artistic appearance.

Fusinato's iteration has now collided with a grim reality. During the Covid-19 pandemic the failures of democracy in the United Kingdom, the United States, some South American and Asian nations, among others, exposed the stark inequalities and social discrepancies that incubated the ongoing disaster. Exacerbated by malfeasance in leadership that has contributed to over 3 million deaths through inept, and worse, indifferent governance, Fusinato's rose has taken on a mortuary aspect. The last flowering of a spent movement, or one held in artificial stasis by the fiction of direct democracy.

Juan de Juanes (circa 1523–1579)

Spain

Saint Sebastian 16th century

oil on panel

Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
gift of Sir George Grey, 1887

Well before Giorgio Vasari commented upon the melting beauty and life-like reality of Fra Bartolomeo's painting of Saint Sebastian, an image apparently so alluring that it stirred both women and men alike to acts of profane worship; before Oscar Wilde set eyes upon the lovely brown boy with the divine, impassioned gaze lifted towards Eternal Beauty, pierced through with arrows to add agony to his ecstasy; before Yukio Mishima and sundry others deliquesced at the sight of paintings and reproductions of the saint; in advance of Evelyn Waugh christening his Sebastian Flyte and Wilde transforming into Sebastian Melmoth; before the canonised figure was anointed anew as a gay icon – before all these accolades, stories and legends – Saint Sebastian was the patron saint of the plague.

When Italy was plunged into the Black Death from 1347 to 1351, it was to Saint Sebastian, Rome's third-ranking saint, whose body had absorbed and survived piercing arrows, whom the public turned for deliverance from disease and despair. With an estimated 25 million deaths accumulated during the plague, Saint Sebastian's efficacy is debateable, but it was from this time that the cult around him was established.

As much as anything, it was depictions in art, such as those encountered by Vasari and others, that kept the cult of the saint alive. The theme of Saint Sebastian tethered to a tree, torso exposed, arrows entering flesh, with his demeanour of transcendent pain, offered a subject of pious yet erotic possibility. As Susan Sontag noted in her 1964 *Notes on 'Camp'*: Saint Sebastian was an exemplary sufferer.

In visual art, one of the **most famous depictions of the saint** came to us from the hand of Guido Reni, whose masterstroke was to provide a none-too-subtle visual metaphor in the guise of a tag of loin cloth cleverly concealing yet revealing an impressive phallic shape hidden from view. His Saint Sebastian qualifies as the go-to vision of youthful ecstatic glorification, pain morphed into pleasure situated in sexy *sfumato* surroundings. Auckland Art Gallery is fortunate to have one of the eight known variations by Reni, which attests to the heroic, homoerotic voluptuousness of the figure.

But here we have a rather more sober version by Spanish artist, Juan de Juanes, from the 16th century. In this Valencian variation, Saint Sebastian is presented as a mature, wearied figure, which is in keeping with his actual biography as a soldier in Diocletian's army who embarked on Christian conversions of his men and prisoners – a mission that attracted the wrath of the emperor who committed him to death.

De Juanes' Sebastian is a devotional vision – pious, stoic and enduring – his quiet pain is suffered without the histrionics of upturned eyes and sensuous writhing. He is not a vision to attract a lascivious or longing gaze, but to encourage patience and perseverance.

Saint Sebastian remains important in Spain, where his status was elevated during the 16th-century Great Plague of Seville. His namesake town, San Sebastián, was the first place to report the emergence of the Spanish Influenza in 1918, which swept the world. While that is a neatly ironic detail, one new theory is that the flu might have originated in Kansas and travelled across the Atlantic.

Paul Nash (1889–1946)

England

Dead Tree, Romney Marsh 1930–34

1978 {reprint}

from: *A Private World, Photographs by Paul Nash*

photographic print

Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

purchased 2014

A major series of black and white photographs, Nash's *A Private World*, 1931–46 concentrated upon ancient trees whose timeless thickness has been pressured to bend, break and fall. Yet Nash imbues these with a curious vital life by virtue of a high level of detail which permits a study of the newly formed shapes and textures now exposed by force and tearing.

‘There are places, just as there are people and objects . . . whose relationship of parts creates a mystery,’ wrote Nash, and looking at his monster trees one is encouraged towards magical anthropomorphic thought as they take on personalities, the like which Tolkien might have suggested when he mentioned in a letter to the editor of the *Daily Telegraph* in 1971, that ‘forests represented as awakening to consciousness of themselves’. Nash's trees, wounded though they are, seem to be wakened to new possibilities which a moment later might see them heave themselves up and forward to march on as a different life force. Or as Nash himself said: ‘My love of the monstrous and magical lead me beyond the confines of natural appearances into unreal worlds . . .’