

Bill Viola / Michelangelo: expressing the inexpressible by Ben Okri

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Maybe the highest function of art is to act as a bridge between worlds, between realms.

One of those realms is the here and now, that most commonplace of aspects of the numinous, that most mysterious of realities which we call the real, that most misunderstood of phenomena. If art reconciles us to the here and now, it would already have done one of the most difficult things it can do in the experience of life.



Bill Viola, *Surrender*, 2001

For what is closest to us is often what is farthest and people often have to travel round the world, go through extreme experiences, undergo suffering in order to encounter the magical quality of the here and now. For the here and now is really only a veil over the intensity or the dimness of our consciousness. All reality is in our consciousness of it. Hence all the great spiritual traditions speak of waking us up. But it is not a waking us up from sleep as such, but from the dream of everyday life that obscures the higher life. The first point of the triangle of transcendence is not in our stars, but in us, in our awareness. The moment after a car crash that you survived, reality looks different. The convalescent often perceives life freshly. When you receive news of the death of your mother the world looks smashed up and new. Nothing has changed out there, but our consciousness has, our perception has. In that sense here is the home of the eternal. Now is the nest of transcendence.

The other realm that art leads us to has no name. Some call it the emotions, some call it dreams, some call it the realm of the heart, and some call it the mysterious territory of the soul. Some maintain that it leads us to the unconscious or it leads us from the unconscious. Whatever the realm is that art leads us to, it is certainly a place where we feel something of our spirit's enlargement, something of our inner magnificence. This is concealed from us most of the time by what we call real life. We live in this real life so much that we think there is no other. We accept and work with this situation of ourselves within the provisional realm of the senses, and we navigate our way through life with intermittent fits of reason,

which we take to be the defining and the persistent truth of our lives. Occasionally we dream, but we perceive dreams to be in some way erratic, and possibly even an aberration of consciousness. We love and perhaps fall in love and even the seaswell of that emotion, bursting the banks of real life and its acceptable definition, we soon bring within the realm of reason. The fine madness which love ought to bring, its immeasurable inspiration, itself then becomes canalised by the conflicting, the restricting, impulses of civilisation. We conduct our lives as if it were a business, within the four square walls of the real.

It is out of this living coffin, this prison in the flesh, that art leads us. The real question is: does it lead us out or does it lead us in? Art is always an allegory of our sunkness in the human condition. Some might say that the world is an allegory. In which case art is an allegory of that allegory. All true allegories are felt before they are understood.

And what it is they make one feel cannot be put into words, because they belong to a realm that transcends words, a world of pure being and within that a deep veiled inner knowing. Which is to say we know but do not know that we know. Hence that inward disturbance. The disturbance is there because we have blocked the feeling's journey towards transcendence. Often we block it with our heads. We block it with our attempts at understanding. It is one of the errors of rational civilisation that everything ought to be explained. Our humanity begins where understanding leaves off.

This is not an attempt to denigrate the very noble and necessary task of understanding and grasping the mysteries of our world. Science makes its great progress from this relentless application of the limits of reason to the limits of the world. But art has much of its power in that which cannot be expressed, in that which is invisible to us, that which is intangible in us. No calliper can measure the dimensions of spirit that we rise to in moments of a Beethoven symphony or a Mozart sonata. Those feelings are incommunicable and inexpressible to anyone else. They are unique to us and unique inside us. You can't thrust your hand into your heart and pull out the feeling and display it throbbing in your open palm. That incommunicable something is the beginning of the secret dimensions of the human. The trouble with the pathology of understanding that which surpasses the understanding is that we always try to fit the dimension of the human within the purely measurable and explicable. Every human being is greater than the size into which they can be measured, whether that structure be a coffin or a dress. We have, with space exploration, exhausted the outward journeys and perhaps discovered that, wonderful as distant planets with their unyielded secrets might be, some day with study and measurement we will find that they are no more mysterious or wonderful than Earth is itself. And even then we will still carry that something that feels wonder and experiences the mysterious, that something which is always, in words from *The Great Gatsby*, "commensurate to our capacity for wonder". Maybe we need to exhaust all the outer journeys before we embark, objectively, on perhaps the greatest journey of all, the inner journey, the journey that was at the heart of all the allegories and all the mythologies that has hinted at the immeasurable magnificence of the human.

Art, like us, is a double being. This is perhaps why, like us, it puzzles and fascinates us. That is why it changes with our changes. That is because half of the reality of a work of art is in the work itself. But the other half is in us. In those intersecting circles of art and our consciousness reside both the greatest mystery of art and the greatest mystery of us. The greatness of a work of art is really the extent of those intersecting areas between the work and our consciousness. A work of art is awoken by us just as much as the work awakens us. This is transcendence. And there is sensory transcendence as much as there is conceptual transcendence. But if there is no transcendence, there is no art. For transcendence is not an add-on; it is not something that you can put into a work that might become a work of art. It is at the heart of its conception and realisation. It is perhaps what pleases in the beginning and it is certainly that which is at the heart of a work's endurance through the centuries. In an odd way transcendence in a work is what makes it constantly relevant to us. A work of art may have spoken to its times through contingent concerns, but it speaks to us centuries later through speaking to its times.

This precise paradox can be seen in the works of Michelangelo. We know that his massive sculpture, David, was addressing the contemporary concerns of Florence at the time; David was meant to be symbolic of the courage of Florence in standing up to its enemies. But that is not what strikes you about this giant sculpting if you see it with your own eyes at the *Accademia* in Florence. What you see is this colossal figure. You see the calm of his limbs and the anxiety of his knitted brow. And you might notice a certain glow round the figure. It is not caused by any lighting. It is perhaps caused by the way the sculpted body, in the perfection of its shaping, gathers to itself an inexplicable light, a palpable aura, the force and presence, the mythic force and the mythic presence, of a great personality. That aura, that mythic force, is transcendence, the sum total of craft and art and spirit that went into the work, and which the work then acquires in the centuries of being admired and being the object of constant aesthetic pilgrimages. But transcendence calls to transcendence, magnetises it. And no work can draw to itself a transcendence that it doesn't already have, which it reveals in us in the aesthetic wonder of our encounter, whether it be for the first or the thousandth time.

The first sighting of the Pietà in the Vatican, made when Michelangelo was still in his twenties, causes in one a revelatory gasp that one never quite recovers from. It is perhaps the single most beautiful piece of sculpture in the world, barring perhaps the anonymous Greeks, and encountering it sets up in the soul such a charge of wonder and awe and pity and tears and joy and immortal longings that perhaps the soul itself overflows with the immeasurable beauty of its achievement.

Perhaps one can say that transcendence in a work of art is the combination of qualities that perceived as a whole stops the mind in its restless tracks, brings analysis and cogitation to a halt, stills the million cogs of attempted understanding, and in the stillness, in that cessation of thought, in what Joyce calls "aesthetic arrest", the mind, rendered incapable of dealing with the enchantment that has held its process in abeyance, now becomes transparent to the higher and more mysterious revelations of the spirit, things without word

or thought, where the individual, for a moment, is lifted far beyond themselves, into a numinous state, where they experience what can best be called the bliss of the soul, which the mind interprets as beauty.

Transcendence in Michelangelo is inseparable from the ideas that animated him, the new ideas which wherein fact rediscoveries of ancient ideas, the rediscovery of Greek form in sculpture, the translation of the Egyptian-Greek texts of the Corpus Hermeticus by figures like Ficino, and the re-entry of the philosophy of Plato into Western thought after its quiescence in the culture. The works that artists create can be no greater than the central ideas that animate them, that give their work its resonance. But the artist has to be ready for those ideas, has to be of such a level of artistic and spiritual development that the ideas embody themselves naturally in the forms that realise them. The best artists of the Renaissance were particularly receptive to the possibilities of transcendence because the key ideas infiltrating the culture were ideas that magnified the human, that linked the human with the divine, best exemplified in that mysterious code of the Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus of the Corpus Hermeticus: “As above, so below.” This Hermeticisation of Christianity, this Hellenisation of Christianity, created an unprecedented conjunction.

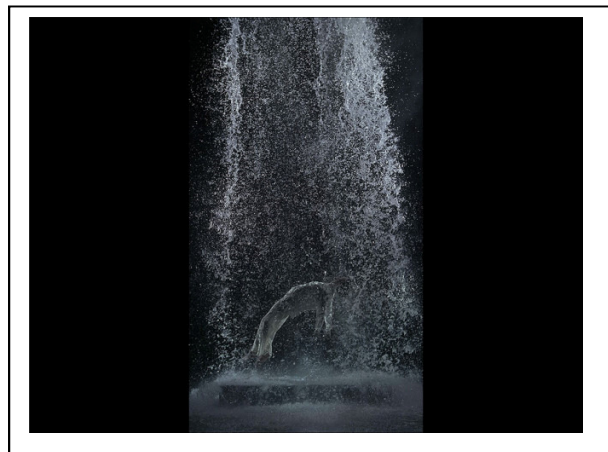
For the first and last time these great bodies of thought came together in an extraordinary synthesis, a kind of rare cultural alchemy, and Leonardo and Michelangelo are the chief hierophants of this golden realisation of the magnification of the human. The magic of Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, for example, or in those late gigantic unfinished sculptures, is the way he gives a new stature to the possibility of the human. The light of that sacred knowledge shone in Western art for a while and then it never blazed with quite that concentrated brilliance again. There is no getting away from it. Art reveals the greatness or the poverty of what a people truly believe or what they take to be their highest truths.

Ben Okri, Man Booker Prize Winner, is a poet and novelist. His latest novel is *The Freedom Artist* (Head of Zeus).

Bill Viola / Michelangelo: Life, Death, Rebirth. Main Galleries, Burlington House, Royal Academy, 26 January – 31 March 2019. Exhibition organised by the Royal Academy of Arts, London in partnership with Royal Collection Trust and with the collaboration of Bill Viola Studio.



Michelangelo Buonarroti, *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, c. 1540.



Bill Viola, *Tristan's Ascension (The Sound of a Mountain Under a Waterfall)*, 2005.