

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester is first and only US institution to acquire Bill Viola's "Martyrs" series

Exhibition open October 11 through July 2018

Rochester, NY, August 14, 2017 — The Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester (MAG) is pleased to announce the latest acquisition and exhibition in its three-year *Media Arts Watch* program, the complete series of "Martyrs" by video artist Bill Viola. MAG is the only institution, public or private, in the U.S. to own this ambitious body of work, which is regarded internationally as one of the most powerful and significant by the artist to date. The exhibition *Bill Viola: Martyrs—Earth, Air, Fire, and Water* will open October 11th and remain on view through July 2018.

Originally commissioned by London's St. Paul's Cathedral, where another version of this body of work is permanently on view, MAG's series of "Martyrs" consists of four high-definition flat-screen monitors, each featuring a single figure who sustains the impact of one of the four classical elements. The four moving images are synchronized and unfold together to create a coherent whole.

"Martyrs" is overtly rooted in art historical and religious iconography. Viola said: "The Greek word for martyr originally meant 'witness.' In today's world, the mass media turns us all into witnesses to the suffering of others. The martyrs' past lives of action can help illuminate our modern lives of inaction. They also exemplify the human capacity to bear pain, hardship, and even death in order to remain faithful to their values, beliefs, and principles. This piece represents ideas of action, fortitude, perseverance, endurance, and sacrifice."

John G. Hanhardt, MAG's consulting senior curator of media art, is renowned as an expert in the work of Viola. According to Hanhardt, "Bill is a pioneer of the video medium and one of the most important artists in the world today." He continues, "To be able to bring one of his most extraordinary works to Rochester is a privilege and an honor."

The work has received wide acclaim in the U.K. In response to its installation at St. Paul's Cathedral, where it is situated above the tomb of the cathedral's architect, Sir Christopher Wren, Ben Luke of the *London Evening Standard* writes, "That the films are touching rather than unsettling is also down to their sheer beauty. The dust that rises in slow motion from the man immersed in earth is lit in such a way that it glisters—a form of alchemy, as base material becomes almost celestial" (May 21, 2014). In the *Financial Times* of London, Rachel Spence writes, "We identify on a visceral human level with his protagonists' trauma. Both their suffering and their epiphany is ours" (May 9, 2014).

"The presentation of all four works of the "Martyrs" series is a destination installation—it's worth making a special trip," says MAG's Mary W. and Donald R. Clark Director, Jonathan P. Binstock. "It

communicates directly, simply and with great intensity to people of all generations and backgrounds.” He further stated, “This body of work makes an especially resonant addition to MAG’s encyclopedic collection, bringing our narrative of 5000 years of artistic creativity into the present in exciting ways.”

NOTES TO EDITORS

About the Artist

Widely recognized among the pioneers of video art, Bill Viola (American, b. 1951) has earned international acclaim for his visually stunning productions, which often employ extreme slow motion as a means of linking his moving images to the measured experience of observing paintings. Viola’s video installations—total environments that envelop the viewer in image and sound—employ state-of-the-art technologies and are distinguished by their precision and direct simplicity. His works focus on universal human experiences—birth, death, the unfolding of consciousness—and have roots in both Eastern and Western art as well as spiritual traditions, including Zen Buddhism, Islamic Sufism, and Christian mysticism. His honors include a MacArthur Fellowship, Spain’s Catalonia International Prize, and the Japan Art Association’s Praemium Imperiale. His works have appeared in museum exhibitions and biennials around the world, including solo exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art and Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, the National Gallery, London, and the Mori Art Museum, Tokyo. Viola is the subject of a retrospective exhibition at the Guggenheim Bilbao, on view through November 9th, 2017. Kira Perov, his partner and collaborator, has worked with Viola since 1979, managing and assisting with the production of his video works and installations.

About “Media Arts Watch”

“Media Arts Watch” is a three-year initiative to introduce the art of the moving image into the curatorial program and permanent collection of MAG. Media art is art that explores the technologies and aesthetics of film and video as well as the emerging tools and practices of computers, virtual reality, the internet, software, and mobile devices.

About John G. Hanhardt

John G. Hanhardt is MAG’s consulting senior curator of media arts. Hanhardt began his museum career in the department of film and video at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, and from there went to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis to establish its film program and film study collection. From 1974 to 1996 he was curator and head of the film and video department at the Whitney Museum of American Art. He was the senior curator of film and media arts at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum from 1996 to 2006. He joined the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s staff in 2006, and was a consulting senior curator of film and media arts there until 2016.

As a native of Rochester and University of Rochester alum, Hanhardt was inspired by photography, film, and media arts during frequent visits to the George Eastman Museum and by the programming of the

Visual Studies Workshop. Hanhardt recently wrote a monograph on the artist, published by Thames and Hudson (2015), edited by Kira Perov.

NEWS

500 University Ave., Rochester, NY
14607-1484
585.276.8900 · mag.rochester.edu



Con't.

###

MAG on the web:

mag.rochester.edu

MAG Press contact:

Meg Colombo (585) 276-8934 / mcolombo@mag.rochester.edu