



# DRAMA

## ON THE WALL

VIOLA'S 'QUINTET OF THE ASTONISHED' VIDEO INVOKES OLD MASTERS' IMAGERY IN MODERN MEDIUM

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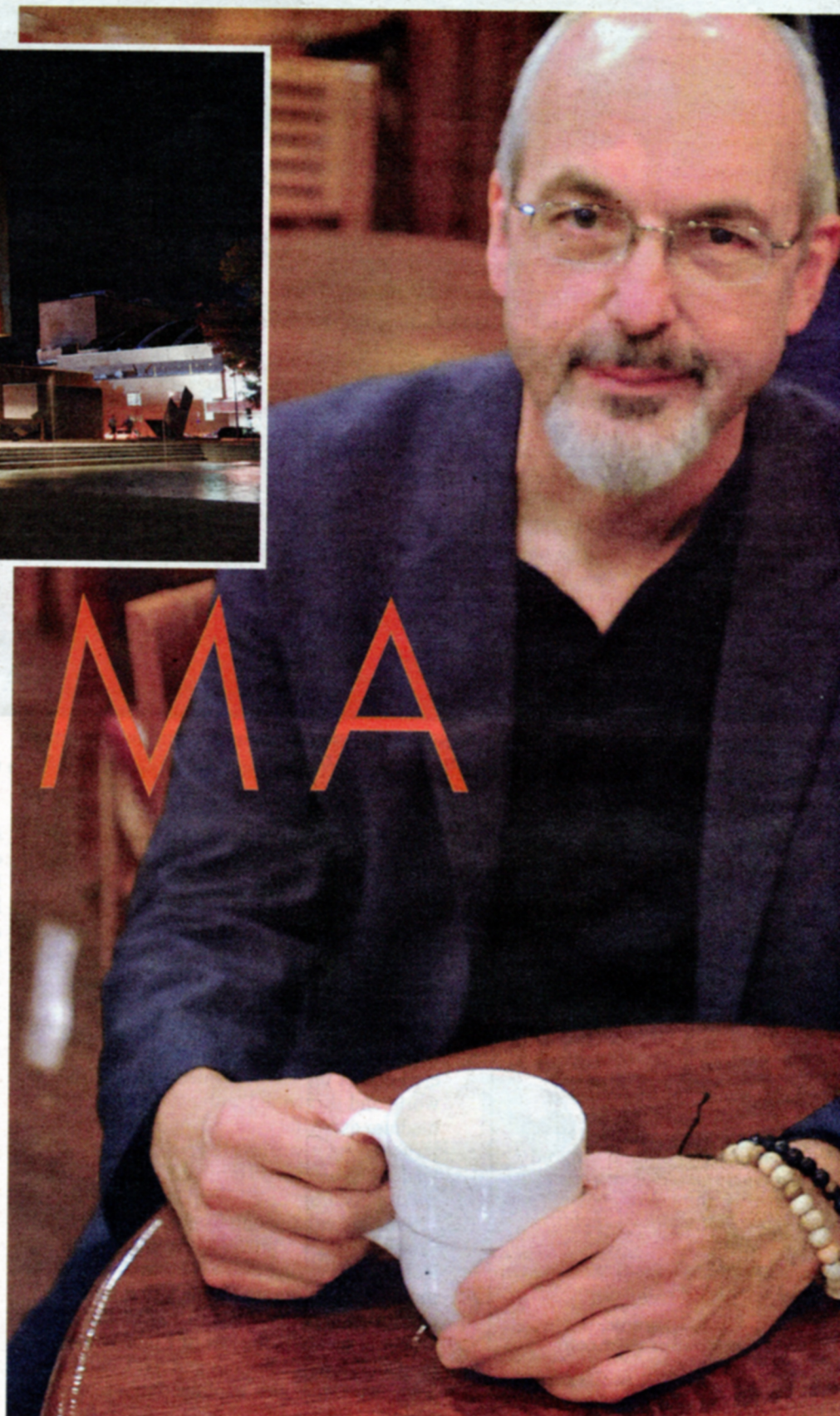
Head south on State Street over the next week or so, and you're likely to do a double take as you approach the Everson Museum of Art. The north wall of I.M. Pei's stately concrete building comes to life, animated by the ultra slow

motions of characters projected against its facade.

It's 1973 Syracuse University graduate Bill Viola's "Quintet of the Astonished," a video projection that is astonishing in its simplicity and beauty.

The piece is the latest installment in the Urban Video Project (UVP), an initiative of Syracuse University with technology provided by Time Warner Cable. It draws upon the resources of

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Peter Chen / The Post-Standard

**VIDEO ARTIST** and SU alum Bill Viola said working with actors in his latest video project was something new for him. His earlier work had involved simply turning the camera on himself. "I was worried," Viola said. "I had to just step back and let them work."





Courtesy of Kira Perov

John Malpede, Weba Garretson, Tom Fitzpatrick, John Fleck and Dan Gerrity perform in "The Quintet of the Astonished."

## DETAILS

**What:** "Quintet of the Astonished," by Bill Viola. Part of the Urban Video Project on view at the Everson Museum of Art's north wall.

**When:** Through Oct. 31.

**What to expect:** Monumental, 15-minute projection of the video on the north exterior wall of the museum. The work, inspired by old masters' paintings, explores universal themes, such as happiness, anguish and death.

**Hours:** 6 to 11 p.m. daily.

**Admission:** Free.

**Information:** [www.urbanvideoproject.com](http://www.urbanvideoproject.com).

Light Work and, of course, the Everson. Previous installations have included projections onto the Onondaga Historical Association building, Syracuse Stage and the Monroe Building. This is the Everson's inaugural UVP and, seeing how Viola's work brings the stark building to life, it's a natural venue for the project.

The choice of Viola's work for the Everson is particularly appropriate. Viola is considered one of the leading video artists in the world and is credited with establishing the medium as a vital component of contemporary art, and it was the Everson, under the leadership of James Harithas, that gave Viola and the medium an early endorsement.

"When the Everson's visionary director James Harithas hired Viola's classmate David Ross to be the first ever video curator at the museum, Ross curated Viola's first museum exhibition at the Everson in 1973," Jeff Hoone, executive director of Light Work and the Coalition of Museum and Art Centers at Syracuse University, explained in a recent e-mail.

Hoone is also one of the driving forces behind UVP.

Viola stands among the greats of the medium and of contemporary art, with his works recognized for their intellectual rigor, technical brilliance and aesthetic grace. The awards he's earned over the years are

impressive, placing him in the company of only a few artists. His awards include a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, aka "Genius Grant" in 1989; an honorary doctorate from SU, in 1995; Commander of the Order of Arts and Letters, awarded by the French Government, in 2006; and the honor of representing the United States at the Venice Biennale, a major contemporary art exhibition, in 2007.

Viola is a slight man — thin and small in stature. He sits one morning in the lobby of a local hotel still getting over a case of jet lag. He's in town to receive the George Arents Award — SU's highest alumni honor, presented annually to alumni who have made outstanding contributions to their chosen fields. A couple of weeks ago, Viola and his wife, Kira Perov — who is also his studio manager — left their home in Long Beach, Calif., and traveled to London and Melbourne, Australia, working on various projects. They've been back in the country about a week.

When we meet, Viola is reserved. His legs are crossed; he folds his hands in his lap and speaks in a soft voice, with little modulation. His movements are restrained and measured, like one of the figures in the video, but when he looks at you, his eyes tell you he doesn't miss a thing.

Viola created "The Quintet of the



"Astonished" in 2000, shortly after the death of his father. The piece captures the ever-changing facial expressions and movements of five actors in ultra slow motion and alludes to the painting style of the old masters. Like most of his work, this piece explores degrees of emotion: anger, fear, love, joy and pain. Viola is as interested in eliciting an emotion from the viewer as he is in capturing those feelings on video. It's the slow motion that seems to pull you into the vortex of each character's emotional state. Even though we don't know the circumstances that have brought each character to this critical point, we empathize with each of them because the work reveals facets of the universal human condition. The characters' stories become ours in some unspoken way.

To create a piece like this, Viola is part scriptwriter, director, cinematographer and producer, but you get the sense his direction is thoughtful and measured.

"I give them (the actors) an emotion to think about," he explains when I ask how he elicits such profound responses from the actors.

Viola says beginning to work with other people — actors — as his subjects was, at first, challenging and daunting. In his early works — "The Migration" (1976), "The Space Between the Teeth" (1977) and "Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House" (1982), Viola is the subject, turning the camera on himself. There's something safe about that. You know who you are and can determine your behavior. When you're working with actors, you sacrifice some of that control.

"The first morning I woke up and knew I was going to the studio to work with actors was scary," Viola says.

"I was worried. I had to just step back and let them work."

The results, as seen in "The Quintet of the Astonished," are profound; some might call the piece high drama, and the monumental scale of the work unfolding across a wall of the Everson adds to the grand performance. Steven Kern, the Everson's executive director, says this quiet monumentality is one of the reasons the piece is so effective.

"Because the video work is silent, because it is without direct narrative, because it is truly monumental in every way," affirms Kern in an e-mail, "its

impact when projected building-size onto the Everson is breathtaking."

Engaging the Everson as part of the work of art itself adds another unintended, but vital, consequence to the piece. It brings art to the people and softens the barriers that seem to be inherent to museums of art today. It's what some call the "de-museumizing" of art and, according to Hoone, making art accessible is one of the

primary goals of UVP.

"We hope that the UVP will engage the community and expand the value and appreciation of the visual arts to the widest audience possible," he concludes in his e-mail.

Look for the next installment of the UVP to run at and on the Everson from Nov. 1 to 30. It will be a continuous digital animation loop by the artist Eva Davidova titled "Location One & Two" (2005). You can view an excerpt of the piece at [www.urbanvideoproject.com](http://www.urbanvideoproject.com).

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**ARTIST BILL VIOLA** (left) and David Ross got together when Viola received the George Arents Award from Syracuse University earlier this month. The pair were classmates in the Experimental Studios program at Syracuse University in the early 1970s.



Courtesy of Steve S

**"QUINTET OF THE ASTONISHED"** 15-minute video that captures the changing facial expressions and movements of actors in slow motion. It will be projected onto the exterior of the Everson Museum of Art's north wall nightly through Oct.

— Steven Kern,  
Everson Museum of Art  
executive director