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Natural Suffering: Viola, Psellos, and a Christian Ecology of Pain

The installation by Bill Viola, 'Martyrs', depicts four suffering individuals without showing any outward pain. The onslaught of the four elements makes them victims, but their calm acceptance of their fate and unruffled composure raises the question of what, if anything, the viewer is meant to experience. Through some contemporary commentators, I raise the questions of Viola's choice of depicting a gore-less martyrdom and its effects. By retracing both the elemental aspects and the concept of painlessness in Christian writings, I attribute Viola's choice not only to a syncretistic outlook but also to a strand of representation compatible with a Christian world-view. Nevertheless, differences remain, and the question of whether real suffering can be depicted without outward signs is key for understanding the evolution of a medieval aesthetics, as well as for appreciating Viola's modern take on death.