

supercontemporanea

text by Cecilia Alemani

William Kentridge

Electa

Theatre of Shadows

Imagine a desolate landscape, touched with charcoal: a plain studded with pylons, chimneys, barbed wire and rusty old objects. Now note how this scene becomes transformed into a city, into a network of streets where a crowd gradually grows and swells, surging with a wave-like motion. Then the anonymous multitude turns into a parade accompanied by the resounding jazz notes of Duke Ellington. A protest march springs up under further touches of charcoal that blend with the numerous erasures and corrections. All at once two men emerge from the formless mass: one is fat and arrogant, dressed in a pinstripe suit, while the other is naked, seemingly lost in faraway thoughts.



David Goldblatt
**In the Waterberg,
 August 4, 1985**
 1985

The fat man holds a cigar between his fingers: the smoke drifts away and turns into a typewriter, while a coffeepot sinks through the floor and turns into a mine drill. A little further on a stethoscope changes into an old telephone and a movie camera into a machine gun.

This is the world of William Kentridge, a world of commonplace objects continuously morphing, a universe in black and white where every new touch of graphite always seems to correspond to an erasure, a *pentimento*.

Kentridge's films, videos and installations create a shadow theatre, a symphonic narrative of choral scenes and private dramas, and the old-fashioned technique of animation becomes an expressive medium of rare emotional force and extraordinary introspective power. Kentridge's art is expressed in a minor and vaguely retro technique but it is immediately comprehensible and very appealing. At bottom these are merely animated cartoons. But instead of representing the misadventures of cats and mice, the South African artist depicts struggles that are far fiercer and more ruthless: the disastrous downfalls of men, nations and ideals. Worlds away from the irony of Walt Disney or Pixar technolo-

gy: Kentridge treats animation as a tool for exploring memory and the unforeseen, often tragic, byways of history.

In his various works, drawings, animations and plays of the last two decades, Kentridge imagines the adventures of men and things, capturing them in their precarious imbalance. Shaped by mysterious forces, objects dissolve, people seem to melt and the landscape is swamped with a mysterious sewage that defeats all man's purposes. The works of Kentridge develop in a montage that progresses by free association, a flow of consciousness in which the images, rudimentary yet evocative, are linked to each other in dreamlike sequences that evoke Joycean hallucinations and Magrittean visions. Kentridge's world is a world in tumult: a world of unrestrained objects and words. But there are very few words, because Kentridge's films are sustained by the evocative and even hypnotic force of their music, inspired by the magic of the early cinema.

In describing a personal epic interwoven with collective traumas, Kentridge constitutes an isolated case in the history of most recent art. He is unanimously recognized as one of the most

William Hogarth
**The Idle 'Prentice at Play in
 the Church Yard during
 Divine Service, from
 'Industry and Idleness'**

1747
 Engraving
 26.5 x 34 cm



Francisco Goya
**They Avail Themselves
 from 'Disasters of War'**
 ca. 1810
 Etching, lavis, drypoint, burin
 and burnisher
 16.2 x 23.7 cm



important South African artists. In the late eighties, when Hollywood movies were dominated by special effects and when photography and video art were making the big time in the arts, Kentridge invented a low-cost, atypical medium that stepped across the boundaries of the classic categories of drawing and film to create a new and personal vocabulary. To the immediacy of video Kentridge prefers the slowness of animation and the intimate gestures of drawing. These choices are embodied in existential exploration, a personal quest, that retraces his own experiences and memories and is caught up in the inexorable course of time. Kentridge draws on the history of his country, South Africa, investigating memories of a troubled past, his place in the midst of a deeply divided people, and his personal identity as a white man in a country devastated by apartheid.

The principal question underlying all his work is: How can we come to terms with our traumatic past? Kentridge explores the possibility of reconciliation after a lacerating history, he seeks ways to mourn the suffering of a whole nation, resuscitating personal and autobiographical memories, without ever falling into Manichean or simplistic ethical judgment, but with a per-

sonal and at the same time universal approach. Then the nineties, in which Kentridge produced his principal works, were marked by a new and universal sense of belonging: they were the years of globalization, hence also of the spread of post-colonial studies and the understanding of the complex ties binding personal and collective, individual and political. They were also the years of the Gulf War, while in Europe and North America there was an upsurge in media forms, the reality of television, CNN, Internet and live reporting on the war. It was certainly no accident that in this very decade videos and cinema asserted their fundamental importance in contemporary art. By taking over the documentary format, artists explored the spectacle of society and the society of spectacle.

After Bill Viola and Gary Hill's early digital experiments, a new generation appeared on the international scene who worked with film as their medium and deconstructed it. Artists like Stan Douglas, Douglas Gordon, Isaac Julien, Lorna Simpson and Chantal Akerman began using video both to record reality with an objective eye and to create a fictitious world, focusing a critical gaze on the role of the media.



Max Beckmann
The Night
 1918–19
 Oil on canvas
 133 x 154 cm
 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-
 Westfalen, Dusseldorf

Otto Dix
Big City Triptych
 1927–28
 Mixed media on panel
 181 x 402 cm
 Galerie der Stadt, Stuttgart



The South Africa where Kentridge did his early work was still isolated and torn apart by the end of apartheid. The first free elections were held only in 1994 and were followed by the difficult years of post-apartheid and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, formed to restore human rights and record the abuses committed in four decades of tyranny. In this setting it is hardly surprising that Kentridge refused to use the swiftness of media information as the key to an understanding of his own work and his country. While the world recounted the drama of apartheid and the colonial legacy in newspapers and newscasts, Kentridge's animated drawings sought to dig deeper: they unfolded slowly and used fictional or epic narrative in the quest to achieve a personal voice that would reflect the new cultural landscape. It was the same quest that other South African artists also embarked on in their very different ways, as in the work of the documentary photographer David Goldblatt and the dissident agitator Kendell Geers. But Kentridge's training was completely different from that of his fellow artists. He was born in Johannesburg in 1955, into a family of Lithuanian and Jewish-German origin, and he has spent

most of his life in Johannesburg. His father, Sydney Kentridge, was well-known as a lawyer who since the sixties had been actively engaged in defending victims of apartheid. While still an adolescent, Kentridge took evening art classes at the private Johannesburg Art Foundation. In these years he met the artist Dumile, well-known in Johannesburg for his charcoal drawings with a powerful social and political charge. Thanks to Dumile, Kentridge discovered the expressive energy of figurative art. At Witwatersrand University Kentridge studied art but majored in Politics and African Studies, graduating in 1976. In the mid-seventies he had already begun working in theatre with the Junction Avenue Theatre Company, with whom he performed as an actor.

In 1981 he moved to Paris where he lived for two years, studying mime and theatre at the École Jacques Lecoq. On returning to Johannesburg, Kentridge gave up acting and devoted himself entirely to directing movies and working as artistic director on TV and film series. These years of experience in theatre and film were to leave an indelible mark on Kentridge's work. The characters in his films are portrayed

with Brechtian hues, while their soundtracks, which alternate jazz and symphonic music, recall the musical accompaniments played live during screenings of the early silent movies. In 1984 Kentridge returned to drawing after letting the medium lapse for some years. He embarked on what was to become a steady artistic development. In 1989 he made the first of his famous "Drawings for Projection," animations produced by using charcoal drawings. In 1995, after the end of apartheid, he took part in the first Johannesburg Biennial, but he attracted international interest at the Documenta X in 1997. He held his first major solo show at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels in 1998. Despite his international success, Kentridge's work remained unparalleled in the nineties. He participated in the spread of an increasingly multimedial form of art—his films and installations combined music, cinema and animation—while his expressive vocabulary had its roots in the history of the theatre, movies and the early historical avant-garde. Among the artists who influenced him most directly, Kentridge loves to cite such unsuspected figures as William Hogarth, for his grotesque irony, and Goya for his apocalyp-

tic visions that spring from direct observation of the dramas of history. In Kentridge's drawings and animations you can also find the influence of the painters of the Neue Sachlichkeit ("New Objectivity"), a movement which spread through Germany in the twenties after the tragedy of the First World War and disenchantment with the failure of Rosa Luxemburg's revolutionary dreams. Max Beckmann's great representations of German society, Otto Dix's tortured visions and George Grosz's Post-Expressionist paintings provided Kentridge with models of how to depict the world around him, where he encountered the same phantoms that had infested the world in the earlier twentieth century. It seems to have been by following these examples that Kentridge avoided the risk of turning memory into spectacle, as happens with a great deal of art that describes itself as political. On the contrary, Kentridge starts from autobiography, using a subdued narrative tone that shuns direct and superficial proclamations and accusations. His works seem to avoid taking up banal positions or making peremptory claims, just as his films abound in erasures, revisions and sudden *pentimenti*.



Georges Méliès
Le Voyage dans la Lune
 1902
 Frame

In the late eighties Kentridge began making his animations based on charcoal drawings called "Drawings for Projection." They have no dialogue but refined musical accompaniments of actions and sequences, which at times alternate with brief intertitles.

The series initiated in 1989 with *Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City After Paris*: It contains in brief all the technical elements and characters more fully developed in the following years. In these animations Kentridge uses an extremely original technique. Unlike classic animation, in which a single second of film can call for twenty-four different drawings on as many sheets, in his films Kentridge only uses a few sheets of paper laboriously drawn in charcoal, erased and then redrawn. The artist starts with a large white sheet hung on the wall and draws the first scene. Then he goes to the film camera (normally a 16mm Bolex) and films the drawing for a few seconds. Then he stops the camera and returns to the drawing. He alters it with erasures, additions and endless overdrawing, and so develops the image to suit the storyline. He again films the drawing, which has grown out of a metamorphosis of the previous one, whose memory still lingers

on the paper. After numerous alterations, a drawing will often become almost indecipherable, being completely covered in marks and smudges. At this point the artist takes a new sheet of paper, on which he again builds up innumerable additions, corrections and erasures. For a whole film Kentridge never uses more than forty sheets and in general each sheet corresponds to a sequence of several minutes. Each sheet retains the memory of a whole sequence and in the duration of a scene the viewer can see the traces of the drawings that linger as if trapped in the image. This kind of montage, with its imperfections, evokes the early cinema and the fantastic atmosphere in the work of Georges Méliès, while the alternation of fixed scenes and sudden movements of the camera also suggest the unusual juxtapositions found in the films of Sergei Eisenstein.

The stories in the "Drawings for Projection" relate the lives of the two principal characters in Kentridge's work, Soho Eckstein and Felix Teitlebaum, against the backdrop of Johannesburg in the last years of apartheid and immediately after its end. Soho Eckstein is a greedy, unscrupulous businessman. A big, hulking figure, always dressed in

a grey pinstripe suit and with a smoldering cigar in his mouth, Soho is a real-estate magnate and his business empire is Eckstein & Co. Kentridge's alter ego in the animated films is Felix Teitlebaum, always depicted naked and thoughtful, an incurable romantic, suggesting the stereotype of the melancholy artist searching for his own identity. Both white and probably Jews, the two characters alternate on screen. While Soho builds an industrial empire with the earnings from goldmines and real-estate development, Felix has an affair with Soho's perpetually dissatisfied wife.

The adventures of the two men continued in numerous subsequent works, where we see the gradual (and probably insincere) repentance of Soho, now obsessed by feelings of guilt over his crimes and painful memories of the harm he has inflicted on others (*History of the Main Complaint*, 1996). The two characters are often portrayed in the intimacy of their homes or at the office, while the outside shots are mostly crowd scenes. Whether the masses are shown engaged in protest marches, working or fighting among themselves, Kentridge always presents them as a background in perpetual movement,

Kara Walker
**They Waz Nice White Folks
 While They Lasted (Says
 One Gal to Another)**
 2001
 Cut paper and projection
 on wall
 426.7 × 609.6 cm





Anselm Kiefer
**Ways of Worldly Wisdom:
 Arminius' Battle**
 1978
 Wood-enzaving in 31 parts,
 blottingpaper and hand-made
 paper, repainted with acrylic
 and shellac
 320 x 360 cm
 Saatchi Collection, London

against which stand out scenes in the mining districts and outer suburbs of Johannesburg devastated by civil strife.

Besides the "Drawings for Projection," Kentridge has produced a large body of drawings on paper or on pages torn out of books, where shadows appear more often. Whether the technique used is charcoal on paper or large images projected onto a wall, these all-black silhouettes are mysterious and disquieting figures shown marching in processions and parades in a limbo between light and darkness. The handling of shadows in the 1999 series titled "Shadow Procession" is comparable to the aesthetics of Kara Walker, an American artist who since the nineties has devoted numerous intense works—drawings, cut-outs and animations—to the tragic history of black slavery in America. William Kentridge and Kara Walker are poets of the oppressed races, singers of minorities. At a time when contemporary art is dominated by auction prices and general superficiality, they continue to probe human suffering in works that draw on minor and neglected techniques.

Besides his animations and drawings, Kentridge has also worked in the theatre, a passion he has

never abandoned since the seventies, when he first worked as actor, producer and set designer with the Junction Avenue Theatre Company and the Handspring Puppet Company of Johannesburg. Combining actors, puppets and back-screens, Kentridge expands his work in a new three-dimensional form, creating a language that blends different media while creating his usual nostalgic and introspective atmospheres.

Among his most important pieces for theatre, *Faustus in Africa!* (1995) deals with European colonialism. In it the African landscape becomes the theatre for imperialist violence, ecological devastation and cruel murders. Events in South Africa returned in his 1997 play *Ubu and the Truth Commission*. Here Kentridge reflects, now with less disenchantment and a new harshness, on the political events surrounding the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, set up in 1996. Its public hearings paired the complaints of the victims in search of justice and confessions from the perpetrators of the violence in quest of immunity. In one of his most recent works, *The Confessions of Zeno*, 2002, Kentridge returned to the anti-hero of modernity, Italo Svevo's Zeno, chosen as an emblem of mankind paralyzed by

a profound crisis of identity that is no longer racial but much deeper and more universal. In recent art history, artists such as Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer have consecrated their work to epic narratives of the traumas of the present. Kentridge also devotes the work of a lifetime to the drama of history and the shadows

of the human condition, like wraiths floating in darkness. His works for theatre, films and drawings depict humanity with fluctuating and mysterious outlines, born from a dark imagination worthy of Kafka, but one that seeks redemption from both past and present in the graceful notes of a score by Mozart.