

WILLIAM KENTRIDGE

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William Kentridge is considered one of South Africa's top artists. His work has both a personal and a universal approach: while Kentridge reflects personal and biographical memories, he simultaneously mourns the suffering of a whole nation.

Kentridge was born in 1955. His parents were lawyers who defended victims of apartheid. After obtaining a BA in politics and African studies, he completed a diploma in fine arts (Johannesburg) and studied mime and theatre in Paris. He lives in Johannesburg with his wife and three children.

The Johannesburg surroundings dominate Kentridge's work. A series called *Memory and geography* was presented together with Doris Bloom. An anatomical drawing of a heart is whitewashed in a scorched field. In another image a burning gate forms a 'fire drawing'. While the gate symbolises the fear of wealthy Johannesburg citizens and their attempt to protect their property, the fire reflects the violent political situation in South Africa at the time. The decorative heart-shape metal of the bars form a symbolic barrier, which engenders easier communication than a solid wall.

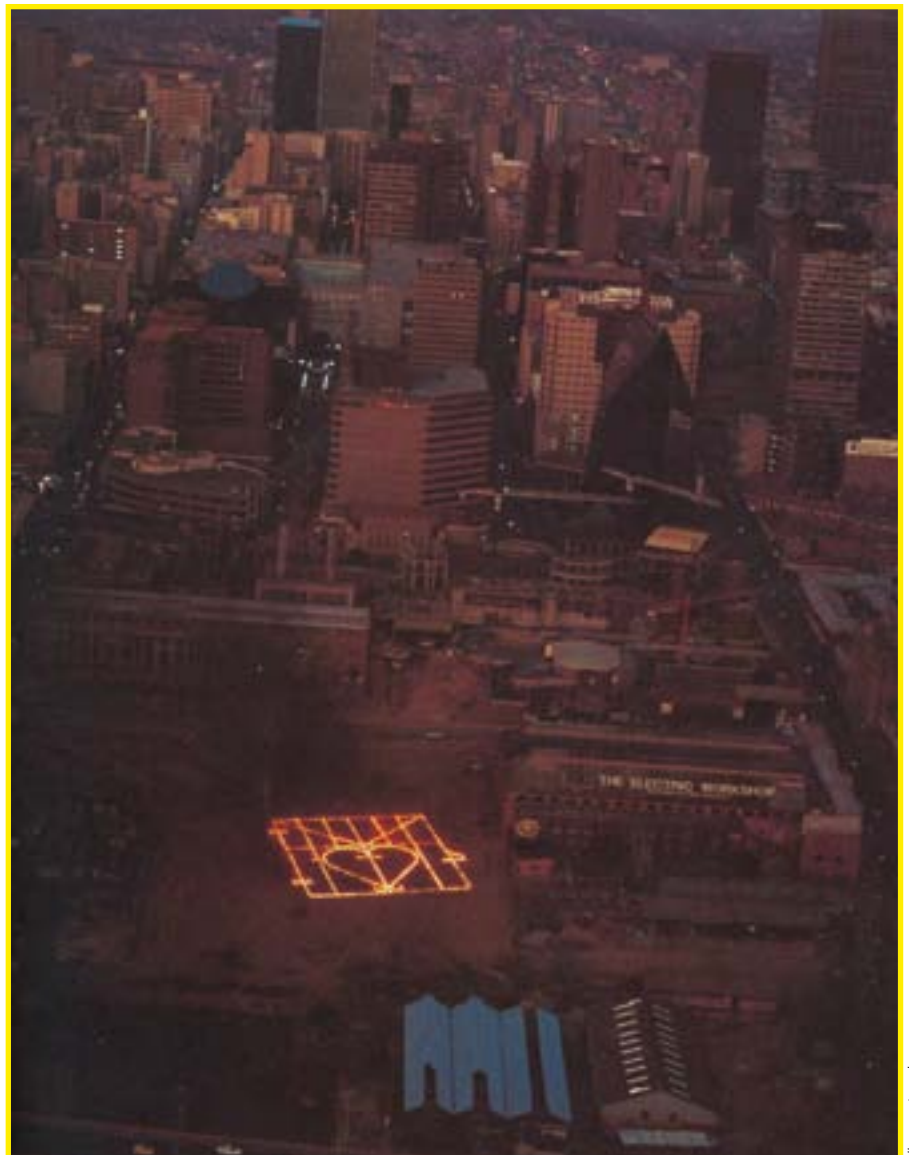


Illustration 1

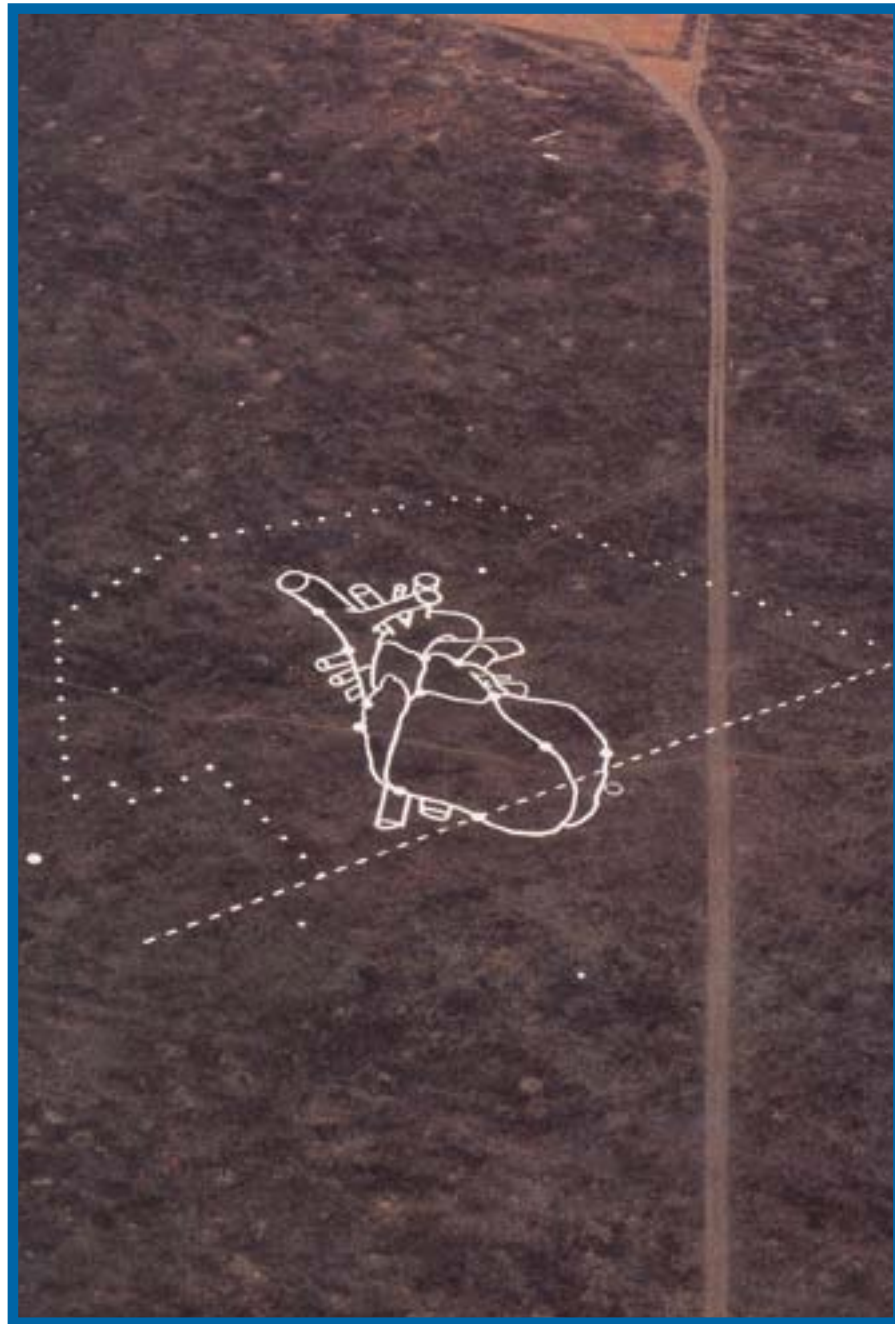


Illustration 2

When special effects dominated Hollywood films and artists explored video art and photography, William Kentridge developed a deliberately primitive, personal vocabulary. In 1989 he started making a series of nine short animated films, called *Johannesburg, 2nd greatest city after Paris*. The title ironically refers to the effect of the early gold mining and commercialising of Johannesburg on its inhabitants.

He filmed a single charcoal drawing repeatedly after changes were made by erasing and redrawing parts of it. This animation technique deviated from the conventional method of painting separate cells or digitally developing scenes. The changed sections did not rub out completely, forming a 'memory' of previous actions. Small quantities of red and blue pastel constitute the only colour on these pictures. Apart from being part of the

film, the single drawings were displayed as independent art works as well.

Social and political themes are shown from a personal view. Ordinary subjects like smoke or a coffee pot morph into a typewriter or a mine drill. The background changes, almost like the backdrop of scenes in a play: objects dissolve, and the landscape is swept away. His work resembles the hallucinations of Joyce and visions of Magritte. There is no dialogue and few intertitles. The only sound is music (recalling the soundtracks of the early silent movies) and sound effects of the actions taking place. Two characters, Soho Eckstein and Felix Teitlebaum, reflect the emotional and political struggle of many South Africans and alternate on the screen. Soho is a greedy South African property developer, always dressed in a black pinstriped suit and smoking a cigar. Felix, his alter ego, is always depicted naked, thoughtful and romantic, pursuing an affair with Soho's wife. She leaves Soho for Felix, but returns again. Both Soho and Felix are middle-aged Jews.

Casspirs full of love (page 52) appear to be heads in boxes. The title provides an ironic reference to the crowd-control tanks used during the riots. The heads belong to those killed in riots and demonstrations. The drawing *Felix crying* (1998-9) is from his short film **Stereoscope**. The crying man stands in a blue pool formed by his tears, streaming out of his pockets. Soho is obsessed with feelings of guilt over his crimes and the painful memories of the harm that he has inflicted on others.

In **The history of the main complaint** Felix lands up in hospital in a coma as a result of his stubborn blindness to past events. Through Felix's failing health, the fear of loss and bereavement is portrayed.

The last film of the series, **Tide table** (page 53), reflects nostalgia, beginnings and endings. An aged Eckstein sits on the Muizenberg beach, dressed in his pinstriped suit. The Art Deco architecture of Muizenberg's prosperous years and background carnival music form an eerie contrast with patrolling generals. Thin cattle,



Illustration 3

from the pre-Colonial period, alternate the memory of European children playing in the sand. Bare light bulbs are suspended from the ceilings of bathing booths, reminding one of Picasso's **Guernica**. Members of the Zionist Christian Church meet for a baptism on the beach, pointing to the contradictions of extreme poverty and ecstatic religious experience in Africa.

The boating party (1985) is based on Renoir's painting with the same name. The relaxing, disinterested group is surrounded by a ravaged, torn and burnt area, highlighted by

triumphing over 'Evil' - In **Faustus in Africa** the 'devils' stay, while the final result is being negotiated. Footnotes are drawn from colonial engravings, botanical drawings, hospital settings, maps and anatomical dissections. These themes are also reflected in his etchings, lithographs and silk screen prints. In William Kentridge's own words: 'All my work is part of a single project ... In **Il Ritorno d'Ulisse** I was looking for a metaphor for our relationship to memory and the unconscious, acknowledging that there are things

Kentridge's style and choice of colours.

The same message is portrayed when Soho overindulges while he ignores people's suffering around him.

Kentridge projected videos for backdrops to productions of the Handspring Puppet Company. Three-quarter life-size puppets, based on his drawings, were carved in wood.

The combination of puppets, live actors and animation form a multi-media approach. The productions were based on the plays of Goethe and Büchner: **Woyzeck (on the Highveld)**, **Faustus and Ubu (and the Truth Commission)**, are interpreted from the Johannesburg experience. Kentridge's production differs from Goethe's '**Good**

happening under the surface ...' (William Kentridge, 1999 p.23.)

'... So much of Western art consists of representations of the surface, yet there is that whole other side of us, our interior ...' (William Kentridge, 1999, p.33.)

'**Weighing and wanting** and **Stereoscope** ask how to maintain a sense of both contradictory and complementary parallel parts of oneself. Since James Joyce there has always been in modernist writing the notion of a stream of consciousness - floating connections rather than a programmed, clear progression. What I'm interested in is a kind of multi-layered highway of consciousness, where one lane has one thought but driving up behind and overtaking it is a completely different thought ...

'It's a particularly South African phenomenon of the late 1980s and the 1990s to have contradictory thoughts running in tandem. You had people rebuilding their homes while simultaneously planning to emigrate. These contradictions work at an internal level in terms of the different views one has of oneself from one moment to the next. I was interested in mapping out that process, to see what would arise. In **Stereoscope** the central character, Soho Eckstein, is split in two ... the two Sohos combine to make one stereoscopic image. They seem identical, but sometimes get out of sync ...' (William Kentridge, 1999 p.30-31.)

'Drawing is to me about fluidity. There may be a vague sense of what you're going to draw but things occur during the process that may modify, consolidate or shed doubts on what you know. So drawing is a test of ideas; a slow-motion version of thought. It does not arrive instantly like a photograph. The uncertain and imprecise way of constructing a drawing is sometimes a model of how to construct meaning. What ends in clarity does not begin that way.' (William Kentridge, 1999 p.8.)

'When I began drawing, I tried very hard to make perfect erasures. I later understood that the traces left on the paper were



Illustration 4

integral to the drawing's meaning.' (William Kentridge, 1999 p.17.)

'When I made the series of eight etchings, **Ubu tells the truth** (1996-1997) ... I decided I might as well enact those poses myself. I placed the camera, with a self-timer, on one side of the studio, and I performed Ubu in front of the blackboard. I was not thinking of those poses as myself at all; they were the poses that Ubu needed.' (William Kentridge, 1999 p.31.)

'The themes in my work do not really constitute its starting point, which is always the desire to draw. It can become a self-centered reflection of whatever is around that interests me rather than great issues that have to be answered objectively.' (William Kentridge, 1999 p.8.)

Kentridge's drawings reflect his own grappling with emotions and memories. By including his self-portrait in his work, it becomes autobiographical as well. He is therefore not completely distanced from the events that take place. While he highlights the tumultuous situation in South Africa during apartheid, his work is not direct propaganda, but rather reveals people's motives, attitudes, suffering, et cetera. While they refer to a particular context, the human experiences shown are more universally identified with as well.

Books and videos on and by William Kentridge in stock

Books

Alemani, Cecilia. *William Kentridge / [Supertemporanea]* series edited by Francesco Bonami.- Montadori Electa, c2006.

Cameron, Dan. *William Kentridge*.- Phaidon, 1999.

Christov-Bakargiev, Carolyn. *William Kentridge*.- Societe des Expositions du Palais des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles, c1998.

Godby, Michael. *William Kentridge: drawings for projection: four animated films*.- Goodman Gallery, 1991.

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Kentridge, William. *William Kentridge*.- Museum of Contemporary Art, c2001.

Kentridge, William. *William Kentridge*.- Skira, 2003.

Lee, Donve. *William Kentridge: drawing us into a new world*.- Awareness Pub., 2006.

William Kentridge. *William Kentridge: (REPEAT) from the beginning*.- Charta, c2008.

Videorecordings

William Kentridge, artist: the end of the beginning.

William Kentridge: (4 films).

William Kentridge: drawing the passing.

References

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Alemani, Cecilia. *William Kentridge / [Supertemporanea]*.- Montadori Electa, c2006. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Kentridge.2009/07/21

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Illustrations

1. p.12, Kentridge, William. *William Kentridge*.- Phaidon, 1999.

2. p.11, Kentridge, William. *William Kentridge*.- Phaidon, 1999.

3. p.50, Kentridge, William. *William Kentridge*.- Phaidon, 1999.

4. p.52, Kentridge, William. *William Kentridge*.- Phaidon, 1999.

