

William Kentridge: retrospective exhibition at LACMA*

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O'Grady recounts an incident from her pre-art life in explanation of her response to the work of the white South African artist.

To respond politically to William Kentridge's very political work, I have to begin by going back to a "South African" story of my own, which may shed light on my encounter with it.

In 1959, when Kentridge was 4 years old, I was closer to 24 and on my first job out of college. It was at the U.S. Department of Labor, as one of two people monitoring labor conditions in Africa. The highlight of the year for me was being made Vice Chair of the African Study Group, which consisted of the all of 250 people in the government working on Africa (Africa was never high on anybody's list). There were two blacks in the group (the other was a middle-aged male from the Army Map Service). The only activity of the African Study Group was to meet once a month for lunch-and-a-speaker at the downtown YWCA.

The ASG's Chair was the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, who got to sit to the speaker's left during lunch and introduce him afterwards. As Vice Chair, I got to do all the work, sit to the speaker's right, and moderate the question period. The first speaker of my tenure was the Ambassador of South Africa.

I'd been terrified, but the Ambassador had proved perfectly delightful. An English-speaker, not an Afrikaaner, he and I chatted amiably—about our families, about life in D.C.. Soon feeling at ease,

* Published in *X-Tra*, vol. 5, no. 3, Winter 2003. [A version of this article was originally read as a paper for "Animating Insights: A Conversation on the Work of William Kentridge," a panel moderated by David Theo Goldberg at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art on September 14, 2002. Other panelists included Rosalind Krauss, Yvette Christianse, and Fred Moten. William Kentridge was a respondent to the panel.]

I'd set aside my luncheon plate, its rubbery chicken and limp salad mostly untouched, and attacked the more promising dessert. The Ambassador noticed and, placing his hand on my arm in an avuncular gesture, said, "But my dear, you can't live on pumpkin pie alone!"

Then it was time for the Q-and-A. Three years earlier, in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the U.S. had been forced to begin the process of dismantling the legal structures separating its 15% black population. South Africa, with an 80% black population, was beginning to solidify them. The first question related to the recent decision to convert the bantustans into independent countries. No, the Ambassador did not question his government's policy on the bantustans.

The Vice Chair traditionally followed up. I tried to be gentle. Was there not something inherently contradictory about separate and equal? Was his government not concerned about South Africa's ability to compete economically? The Ambassador's eyes passed over the top of my head to the audience as he answered.

No, the moral, physical, and intellectual gaps between the two races are too extreme ever to be bridged, he said. So we were off, round and round again on the old loop.

I was young, and after 10 years of excessively sheltered all-female education, just entering the world, still trying to figure out how it worked. The Ambassador had confirmed something I earlier only suspected: once racism has taken up its seat in the soul, it is protected and nurtured by a madness beyond appeal, not just beyond that of reason, but perhaps more terrifying, beyond the appeal of love. I wondered what would happen to the Ambassador's children when they understood this.

I wondered too about white radicals and white liberals in South Africa, and what might be the differences between them. For white radicals, I imagined ultimately suicidal gestures—like living with a black mate, joining the Communist Party, or even training at a terrorist camp in Zimbabwe.

For white liberals, I imagined less dramatic gestures—like speaking up at dinner parties, voting as far left as the ballot box allowed, offering one's services as a doctor, lawyer, or writer, but, sadly, always, always returning to those clean streets, those clean

houses, the books on those neat shelves, and the ability and time to read them.

Guilt. It felt like strangulation. The throat so constricted that nothing could go down or come up. It was all those severed heads that were my first point of entry into Kentridge's work. Another was the repetitiveness, the over-and-overness, the obsessive, futile determination to understand what can never be understood since it lives in a place not just beyond appeal but beyond comprehension.

I do understand that doggedness, but perhaps I don't really *like* the work until it gets beyond that, until, as they say, it "gives it up." The works I liked best in Kentridge's retrospective are among the most recent, the 1999 *Shadow Procession* and *Sleeping on Glass*.

His animation film *Shadow Procession* seems a summum of much of what has gone before, a statement of the understandings gained from the earlier animated series *Drawings for Projection*, 1989-1999, and from *Ubu Tells the Truth*, 1997. The shift in method from rendered drawings, reworked and filmed, to animated cutouts seems summary too, the kind of didactic simplicity that makes one wonder if there will be a new complication in the work.

The blank screen which opens *Shadow Procession* fills first with sound—the familiar strains of "What A Friend We Have in Jesus," now translated into an African language, reminding us of the colonizing, subjugating tasks on which Christianity has so often been employed. A line of shadows appears from the left and trudges across the screen, heads down, some reading Bibles it seems, others newspapers, but all equally pacified. Next come, in single file, a line of halt and maimed being pushed from behind, a line of forced prison labor, blind men in hats holding each other's shoulders, people carrying heavy possessions, workers, hanged men, megaphones.

It's hard to tell if these dispossessed are fleeing or being forced to move. Now Ubu comes out of the swamp to the sound of terrorizing martial music and dripping water, cracking a whip, laughing, his fat jiggling like masturbation, and we recognize him. His name could be Hendrik Verwoerd or Idi Amin. The orchestrator.

When they resume, the lines of the dispossessed have become revelers at Carnival, and Ubu is among them. Victims and victimizers have become one, and nihilism and optimism seem both beside the point: the megaphones have won. It's impossible to watch *Shadow*

Procession without being reminded of the dance of the damned that closes Ingmar Bergman's *Seventh Seal*. We are post-plague and living in the mind of *Revelations*.

Watching these latest films, one begins to feel that Kentridge was able to slog his way through the particulars of his South African situation to reach a larger understanding of it only by staying true to himself. He seems to have avoided getting caught in the saccharine quicksand of the criticism coming his way, the kind of treacle that uses words like "universal" and "human condition" too often for his or anyone else's good.

Kentridge seems to have fought for the understanding that can only come from the work. Now, hopefully, he can move on. As for the word "universal," one of the most politicized and contested in the language, now might be a good time to retire it from serious discourse. In experiencing Kentridge's work, there is never a moment when I am not aware of watching a white liberal eye dissecting a white liberal dilemma, and I am grateful to him for presenting that process with such rigor.

Yes, there are lacks. There always are. In *Drawings for Projection*, there are only two characters, Soho Eckstein and Felix Teitelbaum. Because there are no black characters (the figure of the black woman, Nandi, is not yet a character), what happens to black bodies in the films is not drama but melodrama, not emotion but propaganda. I don't fault Kentridge for this. On the contrary, I admire his artistic integrity in not being tempted to speak about what he doesn't know.

I was more troubled by his failure to make *Mrs.* Eckstein other than the usual empty vessel (why *did* she go back to her husband? what was she getting out of his world?). For this reason, I found *Sleeping on Glass*, 1999, an advance on the earlier films. By assigning the dream to the white woman, Kentridge begins to tackle some of the most difficult issues in his world. And he is fearless. In this more recent work, combining animation with live film, he examines the complicated complicity of the white woman in apartheid and even hints at clues to the character of Nandi. His approach is not as tortured as in the earlier films, and the move from Dada to Surrealism, from absurdity to the irrational, serves him well. In gazing at the unfamiliar "other" and allowing himself the luxury of unconscious freefall, Kentridge brings back nuggets of cautious truth that might serve as grist for a later political mill. *Sleeping Glass's* use of language is his

smartest to date, as well as both his most allusive and explicit. When a screen containing a tree labeled "THIS IS HOW THE TREE BREAKS" splits into two halves labeled "TERMINAL HURT" and "TERMINAL LONGING," when the screen of the Semaphore Woman divides her signals into "ADAPTABILITY" and "COMPLIANCE," then resolves them in a screen labeled "SILENCE," the effect seems less dreamlike and metaphoric than straightforwardly descriptive of the white woman's situation under apartheid.

In maintaining his integrity and pressuring his gifts, forcing them to expand, Kentridge has benefited himself and others. If I might resuscitate that despised word "universal" for a bit, I am grateful to William Kentridge for bringing me his portion of the "universal" situation that is South Africa. He has whetted my appetite for more.

Now I would like to see images of Nandi, comparably extensive to those of Felix and Soho, made by Nandi herself. And as a person of long-term mixed race, I find that I am less fascinated by Johannesburg, Kentridge's *mis-en-scène*, than by Cape Town, with its mixed-race near-majority. The fact that South Africa's 10% white population produced a population eight percent mixed raises interesting questions on the meaning and history of "apart-hood." I long for images by a Coloured artist the equal of the Cape Coloured activist-poet Dennis Brutus, who broke rocks on Robben Island with Nelson Mandela and wrote poems on the survival of the spirit in prison and political exile, and I hope the art market will permit me to see him or her.

Of course, I don't expect the art market to indulge me in what I know is a fantasy, which is to see a South African equivalent to such fascist talents as Louis-Ferdinand Céline and Ezra Pound. But while it may be important to have what one already knows confirmed in unexpected ways, as Kentridge does so ably, our culture now seems to need other information—not just to "sophisticate up" its understanding of distant, so-called victims, but to acquire a handle on forces which never quite go away and may be closer to home. I am still haunted by a question many of whose answers I will not be able to imagine without artistic help.

Who *are* you, Mr. Ambassador?