

Installation of William Kentridge

Académie des beaux-arts

Erik Desmazières' speech

Wednesday, February 12, 2025

Dear William Kentridge, where do I begin?... Your work is so rich : there's drawing, printmaking in all its forms, animated film, theater and opera direction, acting, mime, performance, sculpture and even tapestry... Lots of fun, lots of influences from the great creators of the 20th century, and yet it's history that you're confronted with from the very beginning, and that's where we should start.

Your great-grandfather fled Lithuania and its pogroms in the early 20th century, and you were born in post-war South Africa, where a society divided by the violence of the apartheid regime was flourishing, a regime that even then was hardening in contrast to the decolonization movements already underway around the world.

You were one year old in 1956 when Nelson Mandela was arrested, and he was defended by your father Sydney Kentridge, a lawyer and tireless advocate of the fight against apartheid.

In 1960, the Sharpeville massacre, in which dozens of unarmed demonstrators were killed by the police, led to a hardening of the conflict between the communities, and you inadvertently discovered photographs of the massacre. It's a shock for you, and the little boy, barely five years old, becomes aware of the violence of the world in which he lives, a world, you say, "that's not the way you thought it was.

You grew up in an increasingly tense political climate in which South Africa was banned from the United Nations and extremely isolated, even though the major powers such as Great Britain, France and the United States were reluctant to impose a total economic boycott, contenting themselves with suspending arms sales...

But at the same time, you're starting to get interested in art. You're not even ten years old when your grandfather gives you a book on landscape painting with a painting by the 17th century Dutch painter Hobbema on the cover, and you suddenly discover landscapes very different from those around Johannesburg... already glimpsed on your first trip outside Africa, to Great Britain and Italy.

On April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis. Then came May '68 and you were only 13 years old, far too young to be part of the worldwide uprising that affected so many universities around the world. In South Africa, apartheid was still being enforced with the Black Homeland Citizenship Act of 1970, which stripped non-white ethnic groups of their South African citizenship.

You couldn't escape the news and the political situation in your country, and in 1973 you decided to study political science and African studies at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, which you did for three years. Then, in 1976, you changed direction and enrolled at the Johannesburg Art Foundation, while at the same time moving into theatre.

Together with friends, you founded the Junction Avenue Theatre Company, the same year as the Soweto riots in June, which left hundreds dead after a peaceful protest against the requirement for schoolchildren and students to be taught in Afrikaans, a riot that is still remembered today.

And that's not all : the following year, activist Steve Biko died. - a name that remains with us - who died in custody under suspicious circumstances on September 12, 1977. Your father will once again represent the family at the inquest. Your mother, Felicia Kentridge, herself a lawyer and anti-apartheid activist, founded the South African Legal Resource Center in 1979 to defend black South Africans against apartheid.

You were 23 when you acted in Tom Stoppard's play "Travesties," designed the sets for "Play it again," and made your first animated film, "*Title/Tale*," a 2-minute film.

You draw and engrave at the same time. Charcoal drawings "the burnt stick so emblematic of Africa". Intaglio, lithography, heliogravure, xylography and serigraphy are the means of expression that will always remain the foundation of your art. A graphic universe in black and white. You work with printers in South Africa as well as with the ITEM workshop on the rue du Montparnasse in Paris, run by Patrice Forest.

In 1979, you had your first solo exhibition at the Market Gallery in Johannesburg, entitled "the Pit," where you showed a masterful ensemble of large monotypes, some of which show the influence of Francis Bacon.

During this time, you became friends with John Maxwell Coetzee, who later won the 2003 Nobel Prize in Literature and who, like you, juxtaposes political reality and allegory in his novels.

In 1980, the United Nations decided to boycott cultural exchanges with South Africa, causing many black artists to leave the country. This was a time of doubt for you, as your heart was torn between theater and the visual arts: you abandoned the visual arts for a while in favor of theater, and in 1981 you came to Paris to study mime and theater at the Jacques Lecoq School of Mime (1921-1999). This school teaches body play and movement, the preferred mode of expression at a time when the face is frozen into an impassive mask.

It was also at this time that you made a foray into Joëlle Serve's etching class on the rue Daguerre, a place that has since become my studio...

In 1982, you married Anne Stanwick, whom you had met in high school and then met again at university, where she was studying medicine. You have three children.

In the 1980s, the political situation changed somewhat, with moves towards constitutional reform, but it was still far from challenging the apartheid regime, and it was in this climate that you staged Samuel Beckett's *Catastrophe* at the Wits Theatre in Johannesburg in 1984. You also wrote and directed a non-animated film, *Salestalk*, with real actors, a set and real props. That was the year Desmond Tutu won the Nobel Peace Prize.

You turned thirty (1985) and the pendulum swung back from the performing arts to the visual arts: you returned to drawing and film. You made *Verkoek: Fête galante* (2.41 min), an animated film in which you used the freeze-frame technique, which consists of modifying the drawing between each shot... It's a lot of work, and it's easy to understand why you use this method to make relatively short films, which are all the more concise and effective for it. In

1987 you made the animated film *Exhibition* (3mn). In the same year you made *Johannesburg, 2nd Great City after Paris*, a cartoon that opened your series *Drawing for Projection*.

You continued your graphic work and in November 1988 three of your works were exhibited at the Cassirer Fine Art Gallery in Johannesburg: "*Art in a State of Grace*" - "*Art in a State of Hope*" - "*Art in a State of Siege*", "Grace", "Hope", "Siege", Their titles are significant and show that something is happening somewhere., and indeed the following year in 1989 Frederik de Klerk succeeded Pieter W. Botha as leader of the National Party and became President of South Africa. Botha at the head of the National Party and became President of South Africa; he met Nelson Mandela - in prison - to discuss the country's future.

On February 11, 1990 - exactly 35 years ago yesterday !- Nelson Mandela was released from prison, and banned organizations were once again authorized - hearing De Klerk's speech in Parliament brought unspeakable emotion. Optimism was finally returning.

For you, these were the years that saw the proliferation of animated films - always graphic, based on drawings - the *Drawings for Projection*, but also the first *Procession*, with 1990's *Arc/Procession: Develop, Catch Up, Even Surpass*.

In 1992, you began working with Marian Goodman, who gave you your first solo show at her Johannesburg gallery, while you continued your *Drawings for Projections*.

In 1993, a resolution was passed calling for free elections, and Nelson Mandela and Frederik De Klerk were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. That same year, after an absence of 23 years, South Africa returned to the Venice Biennale, and you were one of the artists invited. South Africa's dark history began to unravel, the ANC won South Africa's first democratic elections, and Nelson Mandela was elected president on May 10, 1994 - another May 10! These were also the years of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This "political therapy" went on for months - in response, you created *Ubu Tells the Truth*, an animated film that combines documentary elements with a series of engravings.

With the end of apartheid and the dawning hope of reconciliation between these communities, who are able to move beyond a past made up of so much violence and injustice, your work will take a turning point, leaving behind the territory of your own country to expand and encompass other similar causes.

In 1999, you completed *Shadow Procession*, an animated film using paper cutouts and 3D objects. In the history of art, we think of Caesar's Triumph, the huge panels painted by Mantegna and now preserved in London, as well as the immense woodcuts of Maximilian's Triumph by Dürer or Albrecht Altdorfer. These processions are triumphs; yours are the opposite, inspired by black and white photographs of refugees, all those movements of people on the African continent after the various tragedies that have taken place, the Balkan wars and the images of refugees or prisoners at the end of the Second World War... Today's world is not lacking in tragic images of parades of displaced people of all ages marching endlessly along the streets...

You continue to produce elements of the 'Drawings for Projection' series. You also produced '7 Fragments for Georges Méliès, Day for Night' and 'Journey to the Moon', which was presented at the 51st Venice Biennale in 2005. You were bound to meet Georges Méliès at some point. Your affinity with him seems obvious: studio films, painted sets where the author directs himself... It's as if you were both looking for the total spectacle. Speaking of total

spectacle, opera is perhaps the closest thing to it: in 2005 you staged *The Magic Flute*, a wonderful creation that we saw at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris and which has also been produced in Brussels, Caen, Tel-Aviv, Naples, New York, Milan, Tokyo and, of course, Cape Town and Johannesburg. *Here's an excerpt from Tamino's aria in your production.*

But this isn't your first opera production; in 1998 you directed a (slightly reduced) version of Monteverdi's *The Return of Ulysses to His Homeland* with the Handspring Puppet Company - introducing large puppets to the production - and in 2011 Shostakovich's *The Nose*, to a libretto by the great Russian writer Evgeny Zamiatin, inspired by Gogol's short story, at the Aix-en-Provence Festival. There will also be *Lulu* in 2015 and *Wozzeck*, which will premiere at the Salzburg Festival in 2017 and be shown in more than 200 cinemas in France from New York until January 2020.

Although the political situation on the African continent has changed (although not all is rosy, of course), you continue to explore the dark side of colonisation through your artistic creations: for example, *Black Box/Chambre noire*, staged in Berlin in 2005, deals with the genocide of the Herero people in the former German colony of South West Africa (now Namibia), who were massacred in 1904. And in 2007, *What will come (has already come)* deals with an episode from the Italian war of conquest against the Ethiopians in 1935-1936.

In 2010, you'll be exhibiting in France at the Jeu de Paume Museum, where the show is called *Cinq Thèmes*, and at the same time at the Louvre Museum with *Carnets d'Égypte*.

In 2012, together with the South African dancer Dada Masilio (who died too soon last December) and the composer Philip Miller, you created the installation show "*The Refusal of Time*", a reflection on the perception of time - narrative, fragmented, slowed down or accelerated time - which was shown at the Documenta in Kassel and which also led to the publication of a magnificent book by the late French publisher Xavier Barral.

In 2016 you completed *Triumphs and Laments*, an immense procession pasted on the walls of the Tiber quays in Rome (in a technique reminiscent of the works of our colleague Ernest Pignon-Ernest), an ephemeral work that will be eroded by pollution and bad weather, in the image of time that will eventually erase everything: 550 metres long, 10 metres high, dozens of mythological or historical figures from the history of Rome, from Romulus and Remus to Pasolini, murdered on the beach of Ostia, not forgetting the burning news of a boatload of migrants crossing the Mediterranean...

Studio is important and essential to you. Just like yours, in 2017 you co-founded the Centre for the Less Good Idea in Johannesburg with visual artist Bronwyn Lace (with the observation that too many good ideas are the source of catastrophic utopias), a space for collective work and encounters, an interdisciplinary laboratory bubbling with ideas. The Centre extends its activities and experiments beyond the borders of South Africa: it's "the Centre outside the Centre". In the spring of 2024, for example, it performed at the Fondation Cartier in Paris, where, through a series of concerts, music and percussion workshops and encounters, it "exported the energy of Johannesburg, this difficult yet beautiful and vibrant city that swings like a pendulum between the exquisite and the tragic", as Bronwyn Lace puts it.

As you told *Le Monde* last spring: "Our space is not the perfect black box or white cube, but a wonderful workshop that invites everyone to rethink everything from the very first steps and to

mix all disciplines. For example, a choreographer might want to work with a poet. In its 9 years of existence, the Centre for the Less Good Idea has brought together several thousand artists.

In July 2024, you create *The Great Yes, the Great No in Arles*, commissioned by the Luma Foundation in partnership with the Aix-en-Provence Festival. A troupe of artists and actors will recreate the voyage of the Captain Paul Lemerle in March 1941. "between Marseille and Martinique by refugees fleeing war-torn Europe and persecution by the Nazis, Fascists and Franco. Among the passengers were André Breton, Claude Lévy-Strauss, the painter Wilfredo Lam, Anna Seghers, Germaine Krull (who took photographs during the voyage). There were also Aimé Césaire and his wife Suzanne, Léopold Senghor, Franz Fanon and even two historical figures from Martinique: Joséphine de Beauharnais and Joséphine Baker.

The show was accompanied by an exhibition entitled *Je n'attends plus*, a total, galvanising and incredibly rich work of art.

Dear William Kentridge, your work is total, world-famous, and in 2019 you were awarded the prestigious Praemium Imperiale, considered the Nobel Prize for art. Steeped in the history of your country, and more broadly in the history of colonization, you make it the essence of your creation. Like Callot, Goya, Daumier, Manet, Otto Dix, Beckmann, Kollwitz and Grosz, you transcend the tragic and transform it into works of great plastic beauty and poetry. But you manage to give them lightness and fun, the quirky, absurd fun that could be found, for example, in the Dada movement and the avant-gardes of the early twentieth century, with an acute sense of humor in which you willingly put yourself on stage as an actor, more than twice, sometimes doubled up in a face-to-face dialogue with yourself.

No, no, don't go, dear William, because we're delighted to have you with us.
Thank you very much.