

William Kentridge. 'A beacon against forgetting.'¹

Jen Webb

History often seems a quarrel over whose truth is true, whose right is right. William Kentridge's work buys into this history but brings to the argument an idiosyncratic reflexive gaze, a way of seeing that is at once coolly objective and passionately engaged. There is an absurdist streak in his work, and a dense theatricality: funny in a sometimes cartoonish way that is both intelligently incisive and desperately sad, his etchings, drawings and films move from mood to mood and moment to moment as unpredictably as the cat that appears and disappears throughout his animated works. At the base of his art, it seems, is a dedicated attention to history: first, art history, as reflected in his homages to ancestors like Francisco de Goya, William Hogarth, Honore Daumier, George Grosz, Max Beckmann and Otto Dix,² but also social and political history. Especially, he turns his attention to the small local stories of individual lives (the exiled Felix Teitelbaum and the industrialist Soho Eckstein, for instance) and to the broader sweep of national history, from the colonisation of South Africa³ through apartheid to the post-apartheid period.

The works he makes are reservoirs of his culture, capturing moments that are outside the conventional, legitimate zones of knowledge, such as official histories, government records, or theoretical analyses. Thus his art brings to its viewers' attention a different way of looking at the world. This doesn't mean the works are necessarily 'true' in an ontological way: they're as likely to be borrowed or salvaged glimpses, metaphorised images, disconnected or half-truths, put together to make something that gestures and suggests rather than announcing a truth. Photographs are like nouns – a record of what is seen; but paintings and drawings are verbs – more to do with the act of seeing, and the artist's senses (and history, ethics and aesthetics) at the moment of making. As Kentridge has said, 'drawing is a testing of ideas; a slow-motion version of thought. ... What ends in clarity does not begin that way.'⁴

His etchings, drawings and 'drawings for projection' (the animated films) all seem to be about this testing of ideas, but they end in great clarity. Though his works are not specifically 'about' apartheid, for me, and surely for anyone else who grew up in Johannesburg during the 1960s and 1970s, they offer the shock of recognition: the huge flat sky, the wasted city, the endless crowds, the mine flats and dumps, the

rows of exhausted people waiting for the 'blacks only' buses to take them home to the townships after another day's work in white people's homes, gardens and factories, and those same glossy homes in the northern suburbs: all are images that resonate 'Johannesburg'. And though his work is not 'about' apartheid in a didactic manner, it is deeply informed by that half century of violence, and the need to respond to it. He says, 'I am interested in a political art, that is to say an art of ambiguity, contradiction, uncompleted gestures and uncertain endings.'⁵ An art, one might say, that sneaks up on the viewer rather than shouting out its ideologies. The delicate drawings and etchings, the marks of the artist's hand across the paper, and the evocative lines; all capture the eye, and only after we are captivated by, say, the perfect heads in *Casspirs full of love* (1989), does their statement, or perhaps suggestion, become apparent: something awful is going on; things are not as they should be.

Ubu tells the truth (1997) is the first of his short films that directly addresses South African politics. This 'report' on the apartheid era is deeply distressing, though it begins with a kind of pratfall humour, reflecting its origins in Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*. Watching the film I am both the horrified eye swivelling to stare across the picture plane, and the controlling eye/camera, the carnivalesque destroyer that controls the scene. His Pa Ubu is grotesque, clownish, and intimately invested in the regime: at once the strutting bully and the panoptic eye (the dancing camera) that teeters about on its tripod, seeing everything, recording everything, and implicated in every act of torture, every murder, every moment of brutality. The film has an angry, urgent quality, shot through with threat, from the appalling scenes of torture and murder, through the newsreel shots of security forces firing with complete indifference into groups of unarmed demonstrators, to the harshly cadenced official voice (de Klerk?) announcing off camera 'There is no other alternative for South Africa' and the megaphoned shout, 'Gevaar!' (Danger!). The coda, for me, is the sequence where the man falls, tumbling and falling, outside the building (John Vorster Square?) from which he has been hurled, while about him are clouds of cries. He calls out too, in anguish, 'Oh, Suid Afrika!' – and his voice is the voice of a whole nation in mourning.

It hurts to watch this film, and to know what we are capable of doing and being; but it is important to face our past. Paul Ricoeur writes that history is 'one of the ways in which men "repeat" their belonging to the same humanity',⁶ and in Kentridge's tellings of history we can enter into a conversation with the past which throws light on that shared humanity. Still, we humans are remarkably able to bury the past, to forget and thereby repeat history, denying justice (truth) to the dead and the living. We watch this happening in the film *Felix in Exile*: bodies litter the landscape, draped with newspapers, and then crumble into heaps of anonymous earth: their brief lives disappeared, their brief deaths unreported. Kentridge points out, 'The very term "new South Africa" has within it the idea of a painting over the old, the natural process of disremembering, the naturalisation of things new.'⁷

But those deaths didn't just happen in the past; and nor has the past been painted over. It remains to undermine the 'disremembering, the naturalisation of things new' in the traces found in stories, in our deep memories, and even in the carriage of our bodies. Kentridge's *Sleeper* (1997), for instance, shows a man lying on a narrow plank, asleep but not peaceful; his posture seems awkward; and his bulky body appears to be deeply inscribed, perhaps by the marks and statements that have brought him to this place, to this state. His skin reminds me of Franz Kafka's nightmare of the writing machine that etches onto and into the body the crimes committed against the state. Like the prisoner in Kafka's *Penal Colony*, we carry the marks of history in our bodies, and decipher them with our wounds.

Kentridge's animated works insist on this remainder/reminder too, because he uses what he calls a 'stoneage technique'⁸ in which every shot bears the mark of the artist's hand, and the traces of each scene that went before it. Unlike conventional animation, in which every cell is clean and new, Kentridge uses the same several drawings – up to twenty or thirty for each of his films – over and over, making tiny erasures and redrawings on the page to signal movement. And because of this technique, each drawing retains the memory, or the history, of the entire sequence that is being animated across its plane. A piece of paper flutters across a street (in *Felix in exile*), and its passing remains visible, every movement ineradicably recorded. Soho Eckstein (in *Mine*) drives his coffee plunger down through his bed, through the floor, through the mine shacks where the weary men sleep, down into the depths of the gold-soaked Witwatersrand, and every juddering movement of the plunger is recorded ineradicably. And Felix Teitelbaum, falling in love with Soho's wife, spills fish

(sperm?) from his body; they flail about, leaving the memory of their movements and passion on the page.

All this is a reminder that nothing just happens, and then disappears; it is always *made* to happen, *made* to disappear. Nietzsche once suggested that where there is meaning, we can trace the struggles, battles and violence that produced it, and in Kentridge's works is the possibility of tracing this manufacture of meaning. Kentridge himself states, 'I believe that in the indeterminacy of drawing, the contingent way that images arrive in the work, lies some kind of model of how we live our lives. ... It is in the strangeness of the activity itself that can be detected judgement, ethics and morality.'⁹ So we are left, leaving his work, with a sense of indeterminacy and radical contingency, but also with the assurance that the world can be seen through wakeful eyes, and the past kept in sight and in mind.

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¹ Title taken from a statement by Kentridge in the documentary video *Drawing the Passing* (Maria Anna Tappeiner/Reinhard Wulf, Westdeutscher Rundfunk, 1999).

² This has been widely canvassed in writings on his work; see Dan Cameron, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and JM Coetzee, *William Kentridge*, London, Phaidon, 1999; Lynn M Herbert, *Outbound*, www.camh.org/cam_exhandprograms/cam_archive/outbound/kentridge.htm 1996 (April 2003); *William Kentridge*, Harry N Abrams, NY, 2001.

³ His *Colonial Landscapes* (1995-96) show idealised scenes overwritten with red surveyor's marks: Africa intruded upon by 'progress'.

⁴ Kentridge in conversation with Christov-Bakargiev, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁵ Kentridge, cited Philippe Moins, 'William Kentridge: Quite the Opposite of Cartoons', *Animation World Magazine*, 3/7, 1998.

⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, Evanston, North Western UP, 1965, p. 29.

⁷ In *William Kentridge*, 1999, p. 127.

⁸ In *Drawing the Passing*.

⁹ Kentridge in conversation with Christov-Bakargiev, *op. cit.*, p. 35.