

William Kentridge, Marian Goodman Gallery, London - Interview with Rachel Spence – *Financial Times*

Kentridge creates art that combines political awareness with the mysteries of the imagination.



©Victoria Birkinshaw
William Kentridge with his painting 'Lilium Casa Blanca' (2014)

In a month that has seen the world's conscience jolted by the refugee crisis, the latest piece by William Kentridge feels particularly poignant. On display at the Marian Goodman Gallery in London's Soho as the centrepiece of the South African artist's new show, the eight-screen film installation, which is entitled "More Sweetly Play the Dance", centres on a caravan of figures who dance, march and make music through an arid landscape as if trapped in an eternal exodus. Displaying a desperate, Beckettian jauntiness, the cast — all shown in silhouette — includes medieval skeletons, a brass band, African dancers and two 1950s-style lady stenographers. Bringing up the rear is a ballet dancer en pointe, her classical exactitude in mocking counterpoint to the Babel that precedes her. Kentridge has been stirring our emotions since he arrived on the international art scene in the 1980s. Since then his work, shown at venues including Tate Modern, the Pompidou Centre, Documenta and the Venice Biennale, has stamped him as a truly distinctive voice who speaks, often simultaneously, through the mediums of film, drawing, animation, performance and music.

Whether he is making films about South Africans rendered absurd by their country's lunacy or creating operas with his long-time collaborators the Handspring Puppet Company, Kentridge's vision is both mesmerising and mystifying. Strongly influenced by Dada, he eschews linear narrative yet his stories never lose their socio-political relevance nor their personal sentiment.

Once we are settled at a table in one of the gallery's luminous offices, I remark that "More Sweetly Play the Dance" feels horribly resonant right now. Kentridge, a stocky, white-haired figure, is genial, grounded and totally focused on the task in hand. As I speak, he tugs his iPhone from his trouser pocket and scrolls to an image from the BBC website of refugees reduced to featureless silhouettes

as they trudge across a barren European landscape. “I was very struck by that, given what’s in the next room,” he says, his eyes clouded with melancholy.

If Kentridge is an artist for our troubled times, it’s due in part to his own upbringing. He was born in Johannesburg in 1955 to Sydney Kentridge and Felicia Geffen, who were both lawyers devoted to working for those most at risk of betrayal by the country’s justice system.

“As a child I knew that it was an unnatural society we were living in,” he recalls in soft, even tones. “[The world] was clearly a place of provisionality and transformation. It made me aware from the start of the importance of the absurd.”

No one expected him to follow in his parents’ footsteps. Nevertheless his early days as an artist were stifled by his overwhelming sense of political duty. “When I started [as an artist] I had a Leninist view,” he remembers with a dry smile. “I thought: ‘What are the images the world needs?’”

As a strategy for fostering his imagination, it was hopeless. “I stopped for three years and went to theatre school. There was a voice in my head saying: ‘You do not have the right to become an artist.’” But he lacked a gift for acting. “Only after everything else had failed did I discover myself back in the studio. Simply wanting to draw. Needing to draw,” remembers the man who had been making images ever since childhood. (“Most children draw,” he replies when I ask him how he started. “I just forgot to stop.”) His recognition that drawing was for him less a moral responsibility than a private urge took the pressure off. “Suddenly I found I had a much easier connection to the world.”

Mark-making gave him a route towards a voice that is as authentic, humane and aware as that of any artist today. “Drawing is a space for thinking,” he says, adding that he sees it more as a space between writing and drawings. “My sketchbooks are usually full of phrases.”

Yet it is only one element in his armoury. Just before interviewing him, I watch a trailer for *Ubu and the Truth Commission*. This play, a collaboration between Kentridge, the Handspring Puppet Company and Jane Taylor, a South African writer, premiered in Johannesburg in 1997. Next month, it will relaunch the Coronet Theatre in London’s Notting Hill Gate. Focusing on South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission — which promised amnesty to the architects of apartheid in return for honest accounts of their crimes — it uses both puppets and real actors and, as well as Taylor’s script, text from the TRC’s archives.

The clip I watch features three South African generals whom Kentridge has imagined as a three-headed Cerberus-like puppet dog. It’s classic Kentridge: an image whose apparent absurdity lends it a biting realism. How did he think of it?

“We thought we’d have three separate dogs but we didn’t have enough people to manipulate them,” he replies with endearing honesty. “It was a formal solution to a problem that released a whole series of associations. That’s often how my art works.

“I have a strategy for never writing a script nor a storyboard or a proposal. The piece comes out of the physical process. If you’ve got too clear a mind, there’s no space for peripheral thinking.”

The rapport between centre and margin is a keynote of his thinking these days. Downstairs, the gallery is showing a series of paintings and a three-screen film installation originally produced for Kentridge’s recent show at the Ullens Centre in Beijing. The paintings are Indian ink drawings of flowers on found pages. Some are accompanied by slogans from the Cultural Revolution; others are paired with pages of propaganda from the Paris Commune in 1871.

The work emerged as Kentridge tried to think through Africa’s increasingly complex relationship with China. “Is it just a new colonialism or something different?” he muses. But even as he considered contemporary geopolitics, he was also remembering himself as a 13-year-old boy in Johannesburg. At that time, he recalls, the Cultural Revolution appeared in the South African media “mainly as an adjunct” to the student uprisings in Paris in 1968.

“So there I was, a boy in Johannesburg wishing I was 18 in Paris. But now I realise that both the French students and the people in the party in Beijing were hankering after the Paris Commune of 1871. So there was the periphery longing for the centre; a kind of dissatisfaction in each space as to one’s place in history.”

His words, allied to our world’s current miseries, remind me of lines in Yeats’s poem, “The Second Coming”. “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; /Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,/ The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere/ The ceremony of innocence is drowned”

I’d like to quote them but Kentridge must leave to babysit his two-year-old granddaughter. Given how much he has to offer us, I am glad such innocent rituals remain to him.

To October 24, mariangoodman.com

Ubu and the Truth Commission will play at the Print Room at the Coronet 15 October – 7 November
www.the-print-room.org