

Exhibition review

## William Kentridge at the National Gallery in Cape Town: A retrospective exhibition, 30 November 2002 to 1 March 2003

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Much has been said and written about the art of William Kentridge, most of it complimentary. More comments might seem like a case of carrying coals to New Castle. However, after I had visited Kentridge's exhibition at the National Gallery in Cape Town (30 November 2002 to 1 March 2003), I thought more discourse was warranted. In the context of his *oeuvre* (two decades of which was on show), I position *Zeno Writing* (2002) as a kind of watershed work. To me Kentridge has taken a new stylistic and conceptual direction in this work.

A retrospective exhibition, a rare but precious event in the South African context, offers the opportunity to holistically assess the growth of an artist. Some of Kentridge's strengths seem to be his utilisation of intermedia and the fact that he has never been bound by the conventions of discipline or, even when was acting or directing, pretended to be more than simply an artist. At the same time, up to *Zeno Writing*, Kentridge has shown marginal changes and development in stylistic and conceptual orientation. A few years ago I saw *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patri* at the State Theatre in Pretoria and was intrigued by the virtuosity of the artist in terms of the interdisciplinary dimension and by his articulation of the mental machinery of the various characters. However, I was disappointed to perceive a familiarity in his drawings and a similarity to what he had been producing earlier (mostly quite academic drawings firmly entrenched in formalistic visual pleasure).

I had the same impression walking through the retrospective exhibition of 2002: Up to *Zeno Writing* (2002) the techniques used in his earliest to the later works vary very little and mostly concern a process of reiteration without much stylistic or conceptual alteration. Formalistically, the seductive signature of Kentridge charcoal, as well as cut-outs in various forms, both still and animated, dominates, and the imagery seems disturbingly alike throughout the exhibition. It would seem that the skill of the artist is located more in the scope of his output in interdisciplinary terms than in the articulation of a conceptually complex narrative.

The stylistic similarity and conceptual correspondence of the work up to 2002 makes it difficult to chronologise in terms of style and orientation without checking titles. Very specific examples are, for instance, the drawings of Soho behind his desk in *Mine* (1991) versus those of Soho behind his desk in *Stereoscope* (1998-1999), as well as the landscape drawings for *WEIGHING ... and WANTING* (1997) and those for *Johannesburg, 2<sup>nd</sup> Greatest City after Paris* (1989). Conceptually, there is continuation of the same existential

questions on mythical journey, space, time and place, centralised within the confines of psychoanalysis and local political histories.

However, the main problem I'm grappling with is Kentridge's particular approach to the articulation of pictorial narrative in the work leading up to *Zeno Writing*. In a general sense, given Kentridge's paradigmatic boundaries of the revisitation and deconstruction of South African socio-political history, the actual *stories* are simplistic, the social comment is not subversive or astute and the related histories of a country in trauma are not revelatory. In my opinion, the absence of thorough storyboarding and conceptual development in several works often leads to one-dimensionality and, may I dare, showiness. The narrative is revved up by a delightful and expert play of mark, line and tone, which adds an air of artistic sophistication. Kentridge's process of reappropriation becomes readily acceptable in view of his conscious project of the dissolution of historicisation, his rendering of mythological similarity and his identification of the universalism inherent in his existential themes. At the same time, what could be expected in a context of repeating and reappropriated imagery, and what is missed most in his work, is a painful, self-critical deconstruction of the expressive gesticulation and the historical position taken in *previous* work.

South African thematic clichés abound in the form of the devastated (Kiefer) landscape, the medical laboratory, human organs, journey, voyeurism, and so forth. From a psychoanalytic perspective, various themes such as voyeurism and visual gratification exist in potential only and are never fully developed or explored, although the imagery is often sexually charged. Mirror imagery and the articulation of the gaze in *Felix in Exile* (1994) are basic and do not begin to consider the Lacanian moment in history when subjectivity finds a form which is never altogether lost. The complexity of the manifestations and the histories of memory and emotion could be explored further in terms of the behaviour of Kentridge's characters as individuals. Memory should never become simply a commodity.

However, in *Zeno Writing*, Kentridge has made major conceptual and technical breakthroughs. In this work, surrealist hybridity and dissonance interface with subconscious alterity and highly sensuous acts of writing; word as line morphs lyrically into line as memory and history; three-dimensional form dissolves in silhouette; and sky becomes smoke through fantastical shapes and lines. A progressive and mature Kentridge emerges in *Zeno Writing* and narrative's naturalistic grip and the stereotype that have held him captive for two decades are undermined through imaginative suggestion and expressive abstraction.

Kentridge has never really offered his films for consideration in terms of film as genre or discipline. His films have always been conceptualised as artworks, although the boundaries between art as film and film as art are blurred. Nevertheless, the artist could most definitely be considered as a great *auteur* in the sense of an articulated individualism and experimentation

with new cinematic forms in opposition to established genres. In *Zeno Writing*, puristically considered within the domain of the discipline of film, signs of *film noir*<sup>1</sup> and Italian Neorealism<sup>2</sup> can be traced in the work. In the imagery an existentialist mood intermingles with Neorealist aspects in the depiction of a banal real and the pessimistic rendering of empty promises with frustrated desire; an oscillating relationship develops between desire and the real; and there is close proximity of the real to the surreal. Urban myths fuse with medieval references and old-fashioned handwriting with blurry new media effects. The well known Kentridge imagery of gates, wire, showers, axes, books and so forth, are resurrected and amended in surrealist fashion, resulting in a deeply layered polyphony that does not need the drama of interdisciplinary performance.

In this latest work of Kentridge, the experience of captivating subtleties in both form and content allows for existential moments of loss of time and place. I look forward to the next work of William Kentridge.

Elfriede Dreyer

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<sup>1</sup> The Soho Eckstein narratives are clearly inspired by *film noir* pessimism.

<sup>2</sup> Fellini's autobiographical style as well as the similarity of his *Fellini's Roma* of (1972) to Kentridge's silhouetted figures in several works such as *Shadow Procession* of (1999) is quite distinct.