

Visual Arts**William Kentridge at London's Royal Academy – an autumn show of beauty and brutality**

The South African's sensuous draughtsmanship underpins a wonderful exhibition that extends to film, animation, sculpture and performance art

Jackie Wullschläger SEPTEMBER 21 2022

What an elegiac, unexpected and wonderful exhibition London's Royal Academy offers for the largest-ever showing of William Kentridge in the UK.

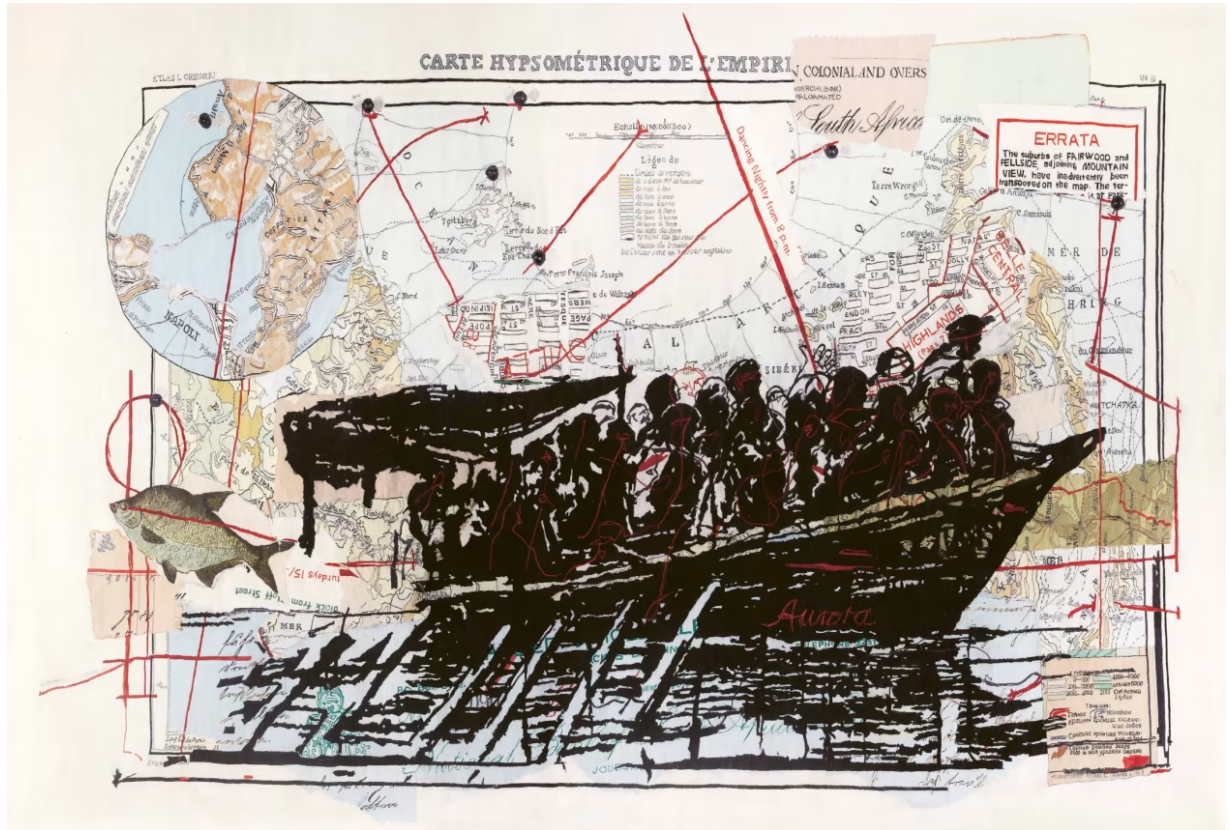
It begins with monumental charcoal drawings from the 1980s, when the young South African artist, already seizing the history and future of his country as his inevitable subject, sets out on a precarious journey. In the "Embarkation" triptych, a truck drives away from a depleted landscape, sleepy, unsure people crammed in the front, a hyena lying on the roof, while in the back a naked couple dance, packed in among a forest of potted trees that tremble and bend even as they stretch, madly, towards the sky.

Huge trees return towards the end of the exhibition, in ink drawings from 2021 as expressive as ever, now with meditative titles: "The Unstable Landing Point of Desire", "Finally Memory Yields". Their display leads into the final installation: bright geometric props and costumes — reminiscent of Malevich's suprematist shapes and colours — from Kentridge's chamber opera *Waiting for the Sibyl*, in a cinema room screening his related short film *Sibyl* (2019). This relocates Virgil's legend from cave to modern office, but a typewriter transforms into a tree, and autumn leaves still flutter: at the gates of the Underworld, people ask the Sibyl their fates, and she replies on leaves lifted into the air, shuffled by the wind, so the questioners cannot know to whom the answers apply.



William Kentridge's 'Finally Memory Yields' (2021) © Courtesy of the artist and a private collection; Royal Academy of Arts, London
From the start, Kentridge wanted “an art of ambiguity, contradiction, uncompleted gestures and uncertain endings”. Even — and spectacularly so — his medium is ambiguous: he describes “this ongoing walk between the paper and the camera, stalking the drawing”.

Underpinning everything is his fluent, sensuous draughtsmanship, naturally beautiful, but usually turned to scenes of horror — from the warthog ringed with a burning tyre necklace in a 1985 drawing to the giant mohair tapestry of a refugee boat bobbing on a map of oceans and empires, “Carte Hypsométrique de l’Empire Russe”, made for this exhibition.



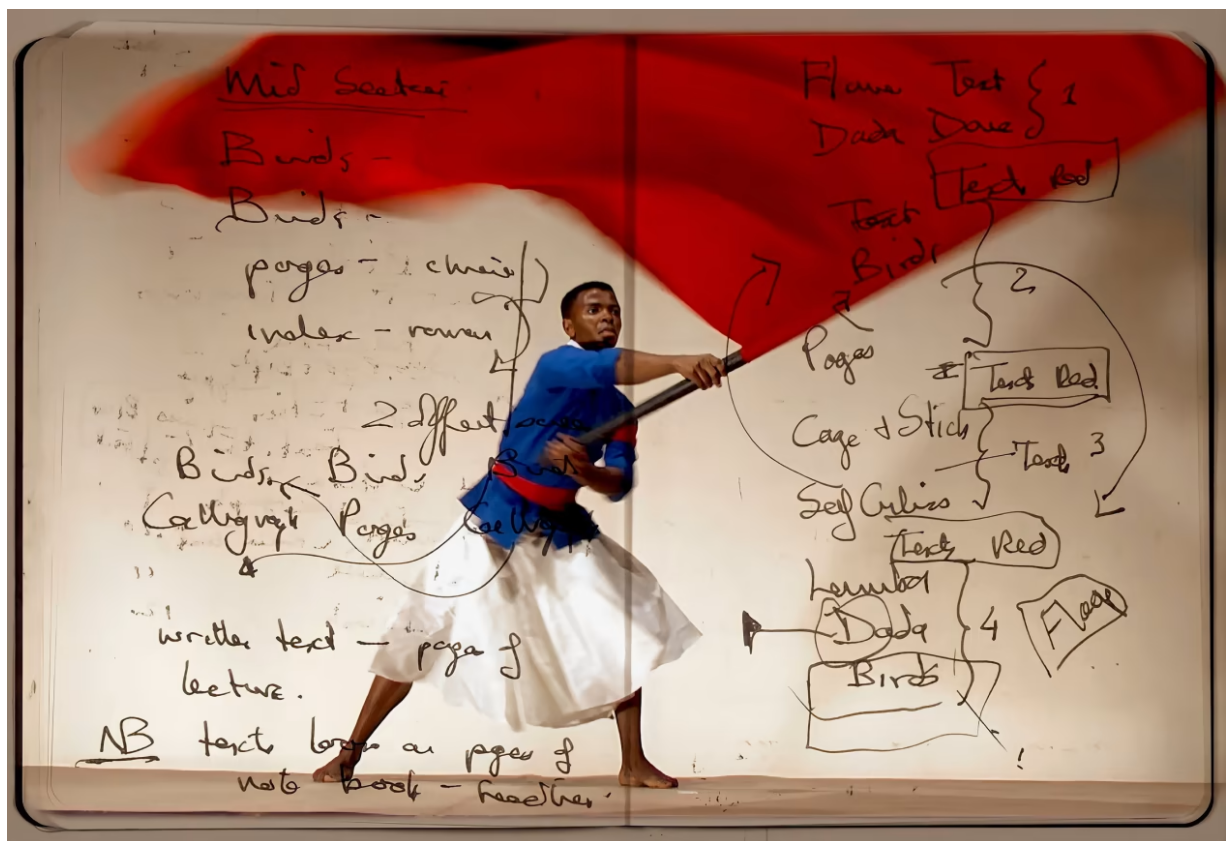
Kentridge's 'Carte Hypsométrique de l'Empire Russe' (2022) © William Kentridge Studio, Johannesburg

Working in film, animation, puppetry, sculpture, and as a director of performance art, Kentridge more compellingly than any living artist stages a theatre of the absurd. Society figures twirl while wild beasts cavort on dining tables in the limpid gouache “The Conservationist’s Ball”. In a series of small metal sculptures titled “Cat/Coffee Pot”, the domestic utensil morphs into a feral, menacing animal. In the film “Notes Towards a Model Opera”, an African ballet dancer dressed as a soldier pirouettes with a rifle.

**Kentridge films his charcoal marks, then alters or erases them . . .
The remnants of smudged strokes are like scars or memories**

“Black Box/Chambre Noire” is a miniature mechanised theatre, cranky and handmade, with marionettes and projections including a German colonial film of rhino-hunting set to music from *The Magic Flute*. The rhino is shot, but in another frame it somersaults away over an automaton with a megaphone and a sign reading “Trauerarbeit”. Is art the work of grief? The black box denotes both

theatre’s enchanted space, and colonialism’s heart of darkness, specifically here the 1900s genocide in German South West Africa (now Namibia).



A video still from Kentridge's 'Notes Towards a Model Opera' (2015) © Courtesy of the artist



'Cat/Coffee Pot II' (2019) © William Kentridge Studio, Johannesburg

Most paradoxical throughout is the recurring, concentrated circle of references — silent movies, the Russian Revolution, Mayakovsky, Kafka — through which Kentridge, although reimagining them in the contexts of African landscape or with African music, takes key moments of European history and culture, and old-fashioned media, as foundations for his withering critique of racist brutality and postcolonial global inequality.

He acknowledges it in the earliest drawings “Koevoet (Dreams of Europe)” (1984), the Afrikaans word alluding to a notorious counter-insurgency unit, the images of dark-suited cruelty and grotesquerie reminiscent of Max Beckmann and German Expressionism. It is there too in the title of the first major animated projection “Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City after Paris” (1989), featuring the semi-autobiographical, enigmatic Everyman character Soho Eckstein, white mine owner and civic benefactor, who lilt through Kentridge’s films over the next 40 years.



The figure of Soho Eckstein in Kentridge's short film 'Tide Table' (2003) © William Kentridge Studio, Johannesburg



A still from Kentridge's animated film 'City Deep' (2020) © William Kentridge Studio, Johannesburg

He is the middle-aged man nostalgically skimming stones on a beach in “Tide Table” (2003), where black women enter the waves like a baptism, and among seven cows, one withers in seconds to skin and bone: social change as a sort of magic realism. In “City Deep” (2020), when his mines are closed and Zama Zama miners chop at the Earth’s surface in a hole that becomes a grave, Soho stares down at the void as confusedly as he stares at pictures in the art gallery established by a philanthropic relative, which suddenly crumbles and implodes. Time’s rhythms — speeded up, slow-motion — play out fantastically to scores by Franco & L’OK Jazz, and Nhlanhla Mahlangu’s “Imimoya”, evoking ancestral spirits.

It is impossible not to fall under the spell of all this in the Royal Academy’s sumptuous main galleries, which are ample enough also to unfold the steps in the process from drawing to film. Kentridge films his charcoal marks, then alters and partly erases them, continuing to record them as they evolve. Remnants of smudged strokes dominate the animation images like scars or memories, history’s wounds, waning though still visible. Drawings blur into each other, shadows suggest a segueing between the real and the illusory.

“Something about shadows make us very conscious of the activity of seeing,” Kentridge says — and in a sense this entire show is a shadow play of reflections. There are the silhouettes cast on the wall by the exquisite little bronze figures, limping, stumbling, tumbling and surging in “Procession”, and their *chine-collé* mirror image on a *leporello* of found encyclopedia pages in “Portage”, all heralded by the lines of bedraggled, desperate souls in the opening charcoal drawings for “Johannesburg, 2nd City”.



'The Execution of Maximilian' (2017) © Courtesy of the artist and a private collection

This show is not quite a retrospective, and the omission of the epic, hypnotic multiscreen parade “More Sweetly Play the Dance” (2015), greatest of all Kentridge’s processions, is a sad one. But the RA movingly traces an unswerving yet varied endeavour, seeking what Kentridge calls “an art (and a politics) in which optimism is kept in check and nihilism at bay.”

Recently, there has been an inward turn: three-metre-high monochrome collages in Indian ink and torn paper depict flowers in vases, translucent as the still-lives that Manet made during his final illness, to which these refer. Beneath the abundant bouquet in Kentridge's 2017 "The Execution of Maximilian" is an image of that painting by Manet: a convergence of the personal and political. And littered round a jar of hydrangeas is a fuzzy reproduction of a photograph of Manet, with his laughingly resigned look, and a sheet of paper inscribed with the drawing's title, "Oh To Believe in Another World".

The grisaille flowers are about to fade, like the photograph. The image is gorgeous yet sober, and the inscription implies the whole history of modernism's utopian hopes and disappointments underlying Kentridge's oeuvre. Thoughtful, graceful, original, this is a perfect autumnal show to start the season.

September 24-December 11, royalacademy.org.uk

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