

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Shadowy World of William Kentridge

Stephen West · Friday, November 25th, 2022

The South African artist William Kentridge, whose long career is being celebrated in a major exhibition at [The Broad](#) in Los Angeles, is hard to categorize.

First of all he's a prolific draftsman, a maker of moody black-and-white drawings. But he's also a film and video animator, sculptor, theatrical designer, and more. The exhibition, *William Kentridge: In Praise of Shadows*, makes this clear across more than 130 works from the past 35 years of his career.

When Kentridge gets a theme or subject, he'll obsessively try out the idea in all sorts of ways. A series of drawings may turn into a stop-motion animated film, or a sculpture, or a stage set. His interest in the little-known role of Africans in World War I, as porters and other behind-the-scenes workers, led to the performance piece *The Head & the Load* and then to the film *Kaboom!* of 2017-18 (top image).

In one scene in *Kaboom!*, a line of cartoon men drawn in silhouette carry a range of unlikely war supplies, including a head-and-shoulders portrait of a man, a bank of lights suitable for a football stadium, an enormous jug of water, an equally enormous bird. In the background is a scrubby landscape of sand dunes, grasses, broken telephone poles, and the occasional tree. Even with its surrealist tone, it clearly conveys the burden of the wartime porters, their anonymity, their lives in the shadows.

Kentridge was born in 1955 into a Jewish family in Johannesburg, where he's lived his whole life. His parents were both lawyers who frequently represented victims of apartheid. After studying politics and then art, he drifted into theater, discovered he had no talent as an actor, and settled for working as a director, stage designer, and artist. By the 1990s he was participating in major gallery and museum exhibitions.

One of the odder recurring characters in Kentridge's art is the Nose, which functions as the absurdist hero of a series of charcoal drawings in the exhibition, as well as in a large tapestry and a series of small sculptures. (The character is derived from a Dmitri Shostakovich opera that Kentridge directed more than a decade ago.) In the drawings, the Nose engages in various adventures, riding a horse, appearing in famous Impressionist paintings, getting executed by a sinister man with a pistol.



In the tapestry titled *Promised Land* of 2008, the Nose is on horseback, with human legs around the saddle. He's depicted in browns and blacks, with red lines that seem to show the inner structure of both rider and horse. The Nose points the way forward, as if he's leading the invasion of the land depicted in the background, an ancient map of the Middle East. It effectively satirizes the foolishness and vanity of colonial ambitions.

Nearby in the gallery is a series of small Nose-on-horseback sculptures created in dark bronze. Some are made with flat metal plates arranged to create a sense of three dimensions, others that seem more solid and substantial. In many cases, it's the horses, not the Nose, that are really the stars of the work.



While some of Kentridge's charcoal works seem like improvisational sketches, perhaps studies for some larger project, there are also big, splashy, finished drawings. Two of these, from a group of five published by the Italian newspaper *Il Sole 24 Ore*, depict a globe with mechanical legs striding across a desolate landscape and a head wearing a gas mask doing the same. Both *World Walking* and *Gas Mask* of 2007 are inspired by the Second Italo-Ethiopian War of the 1930s, a predecessor to World War II. They also seem like escapees from a sci-fi movie and are about as polished as Kentridge's work gets.



Another big drawing in ink, *The Shrapnel in the Wood* of 2013, presents a gnarly yet beautiful old tree, perhaps on the African veld. It's drawn on pages of the 1826 *Universal Technological Dictionary* and littered with small slogans like Keep Out of the Sun and Listing All Characteristics. The shrapnel in the title refers to a saying that woodworkers should avoid using German wood because it may contain metal fragments from World War II that would damage their saws. It's another oblique Kentridge comment on the destruction and futility of war.

William Kentridge: In Praise of Shadows runs through April 9, 2023, at [The Broad](#), 221 South Grand Avenue, Los Angeles. It then travels to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, where it will be on view in the summer of 2023. An extensive catalog is published by The Broad and DelMonico Books.

Top image: William Kentridge, Kaboom!, 2017-18, three-channel HD film installation: model stage, paper props, found objects, and three mini-projectors with stands; Jorge M. Perez Collection, Miami.

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