William Kentridge: 'In retrospect, apartheid is even more bizarre'

How South Africa's greatest artist came to see that nothing in life is ever black and white

By Mick Brown

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William Kentridge lives in a large and airy house in an affluent neighbourhood of Johannesburg, behind a high wall surmounted by an electric fence. It is the house where he grew up, and to which he returned in the 1980s – with his wife Anne and their three children – when his parents, Sydney and Felicia, retired to England. It is also the house where a six-year-old Kentridge once opened a box on his father's desk, thinking it contained chocolates. Instead, he found horrific photographs of the 69 victims of the 1960 Sharpeville massacre, killed after police opened fire on a crowd of protestors.

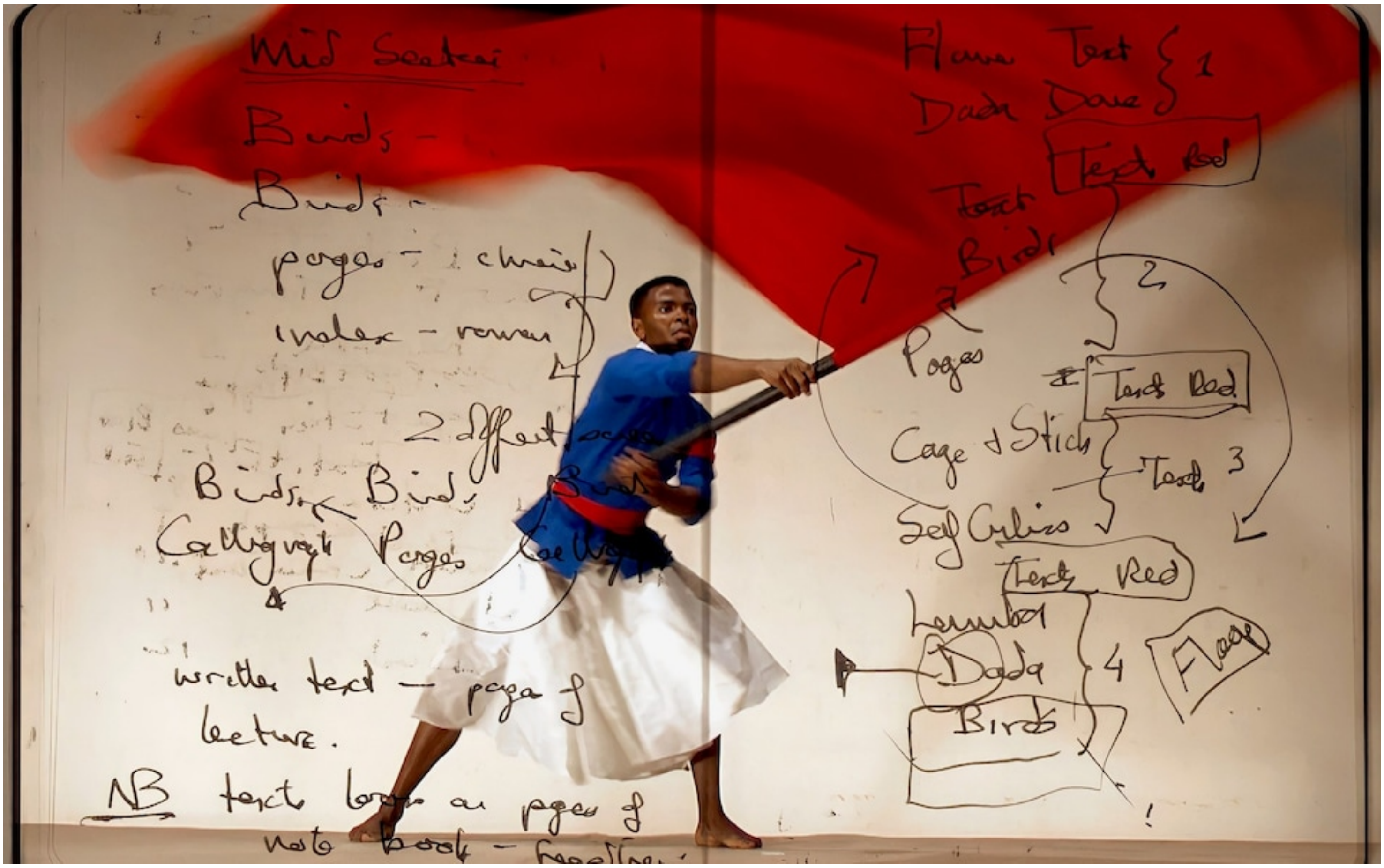
Sydney Kentridge, who turns 100 this year, was South Africa's most famous defence lawyer during the apartheid period. As well as representing the families of the Sharpeville victims, he successfully defended no fewer than three future Nobel Peace Prize laureates: Desmond Tutu, Albert Luthuli, the head of the ANC, and – in the so-called Treason Trial of 1956-61, in which all 156 accused were acquitted – Nelson Mandela. He went on to represent the family of Steve Biko, the activist who died in police custody in September 1977.

Before he became an artist of international renown, William was a student activist himself. And for more than four decades since, his art has explored the paradoxes, contradictions and moral responsibilities of life in Johannesburg, a city which he believes is "collapsing", the

promise of a post-Mandela "rainbow nation" dissipating into tension and violence.

Now 67, Kentridge has been described as "South Africa's Picasso", which – with all due respect to the Spanish master – somewhat undersells the extraordinary range of his output. A man of prodigious energy, Kentridge makes drawings, animations, films and sculpture; he also directs opera and theatre, creating grand spectacles with moving images and troupes of actors and musicians that are dazzling in their provocation and ingenuity.

While much of his work is steeped in the experience of apartheid, it feels wrong to describe Kentridge as only a "political artist". His recurring concerns include wider questions of culture and philosophy, language and identity, often represented in playful, Dadaist films, which show multiple Kentridges, dressed in his signature outfit of white shirt and black trousers, debating with one another.



A still from Notes Towards a Model Opera (2015) | CREDIT: ©William Kentridge

Having last exhibited in Britain in 2017 at the Whitechapel Gallery, he returns to the capital next month as the subject of a major retrospective at the Royal Academy, in the autumn blockbuster slot that in recent years has been occupied by Antony Gormley, Anish Kapoor and Ai Weiwei.

Among the drawings, tapestries, sculptures and animations on show will be films of Waiting for the Sibyl, his opera about the ancient Greek oracle, which was staged at the Barbican last year, and Notes Towards a Model Opera (2013), which draws parallels between apartheid-era South Africa and Mao's China in the grip of the Cultural Revolution.

"I showed it first in Beijing," he recalls of the latter. "There were people who said it would be stopped in a matter of days because of the images of Mao. But then somebody said, 'It's fine – you're showing it on the second floor of the gallery and the censors don't like walking upstairs.'"

Kentridge's liberal upbringing and his parents' active opposition to apartheid first singled him out at the all-white, English-speaking school he attended as a boy, where there was, he recalls, a near universal acceptance of the colour divide. "The attitude was: black people are second-class citizens; we're first- class citizens – it's just how it is. So it was unusual, but not unique, in class to have a different perspective; to say, this is an evil system and can't continue.

"I remember a teacher once said to me, 'If your father is a communist then it is my duty as a citizen to go straight to the Special Branch and report it.' That definitely made me understand there was a disjunction between an official narrative, which was the narrative of the school, and a different perspective. That was an important shift.

"But the extraordinary thing," he goes on, "was how apartheid was naturalised. You knew only white people could go to the cinema, but you didn't think every time you went to see a film: 'Isn't this ridiculous?'. In retrospect it gets more and more bizarre – how could it ever have been like that?"

At the University of Witwatersrand, where he majored in political science and African studies, Kentridge became active in student politics – in 1976 he was arrested under the Riotous Assemblies Act for marching in support of the Soweto uprising – designing posters and acting in political theatre. "Like agitprop, that kind of work, fairly crude."

'It's very lucky that I found a field in which invention would be celebrated and not castigated': Kentridge in his studio | CREDIT: Marc Shoul for the Telegraph

In 1975, while on a lecture tour of South Africa, the American art critic Clement Greenberg dined at the Kentridge home and gave William a word of advice: take care of the art and the politics will take care of itself.

"At the time I couldn't understand it," Kentridge tells me now. "Later on, I understood what he meant: if you [make art] with an agenda, if that's not who you are, the bad faith will shine through.

"It doesn't mean I'm not interested in the political, but [the art] is very much not saying: 'This is the axe I'm going to grind over you.'" His duty as an artist is rather, he believes, to identify the questions that need asking, even if "they are usually unresolvable questions of paradox and contradiction."

He quotes a slogan from the early days of the Russian Revolution that he has used in a new film about Shostakovich, which will be shown at London's Goodman Gallery at the same time as the RA exhibition: "We will drive you into happiness with an iron fist."

Kentridge's studio, which he describes variously as "a physical and psychic space" and "a model for making knowledge", is situated in the garden of his home, down a path lined with flowers blossoming in a riot of spring colour.

He is a stout man of medium height, his face an arrangement of creases and pouches around a hawkish nose, a heavy brow flanked by wings of white hair. In repose he wears an expression of melancholic introspection, occasionally illuminated by a wry smile. As he moves around the studio pointing and talking, his hands talk with him as if pulling thoughts out of the air.

The walls are hung with monumental pen and ink drawings and there are large desktops, scattered with notebooks, papers, photographs and potential captions for works in progress: "Episode 6: Self Portrait As A Coffee Pot", reads one.

There is a movie camera and lights – the space is large enough to workshop his theatre and opera productions. Up a flight of stairs there is an editing suite with a bank of five computer screens where assistants are at work on a new project. A battered sousaphone stands to one side; one of Kentridge's assistants has rigged an iPhone to the mouthpiece and the piano music of the Ethiopian nun Emahoy Tsegue-Maryam Guebrou fills the air.

As a young man, Kentridge briefly considered following in his father's footsteps, "but I realised I would not be a good lawyer because I didn't have the memory or the patience, and I'd have been much more interested in inventing the evidence. It's very lucky that I found a field in which invention and fabrication would be celebrated and not castigated."

When he first started drawing, he says, he saw it as a progress towards oil painting – a destination at which he never actually arrived. "I'm tone-deaf. I can hear when someone is singing out of tune, but if I sing I can't push myself into tune. It's the same with colour." So pen and ink it remained.

At university he worked with a theatre group as a director and actor. "And then I was given strong advice to choose; you can't be a jack of all trades, master of none. I thought, OK, good advice." He stopped making art and moved to Paris to study at theatre school, "where I discovered I was not an actor".



The Conservationists' Ball (1985) by WIlliam Kentridge | CREDIT: © William Kentridge/Rembrandt van Rijn Art Foundation collection, Rupert Museum, Stellenbosch, South Africa

He went on to work in film as a set designer, "and then discovered I was back in the studio making drawings". This led to him making animated films, with a local theatre group.

"Suddenly I was back with films and drawing and theatre. So that was a long process of undoing advice, and also a series of failures – as an actor, an oil painter, a film-maker – in which I came to understand the only hope for me was the cross-fertilization between different media and genres."

He laughs. "If you come out the other end, then you can always describe yourself as being rescued by your failure."

Kentridge was still unknown outside a small following in South Africa when in 1987 he had his first show in London at the Vanessa Devereux (now Vanessa Branson) gallery, exhibiting prints based on Hogarth's suite A Rake's Progress, and a series of drawings inspired by life in Johannesburg. "He came into the gallery with big sheets of cartridge paper rolled up under his arm and unfurled them," Branson remembers. "And we hung them on the wall with bulldog clips."

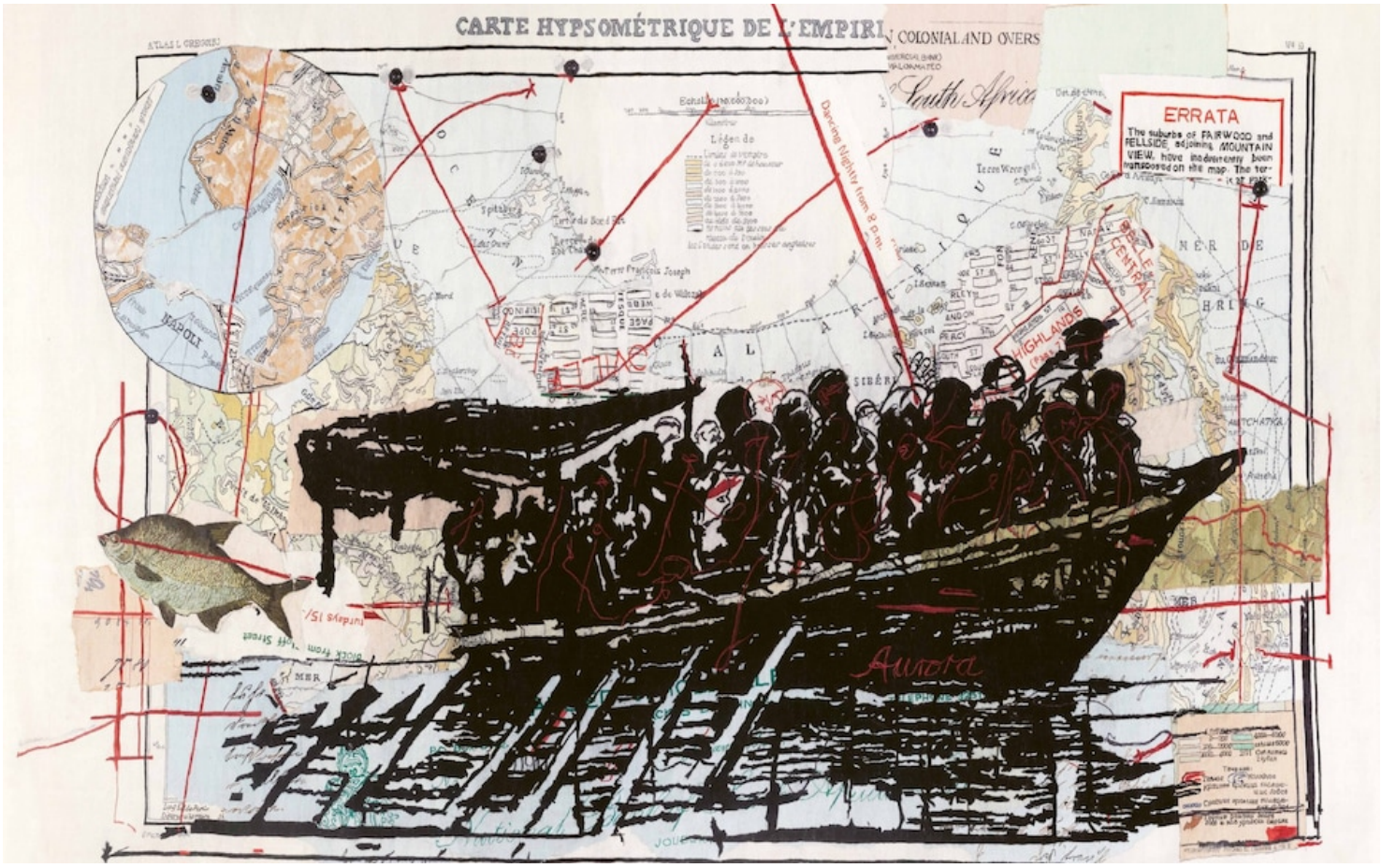
The drawings were of landscapes devastated by mining, a piece entitled Hands Across the Sea, which depicts Eva Peron locked in an embrace with the South African president F W de Klerk, and a warthog carrying a burning tyre on its back – a reference to "necklacing", a means of summary execution used by some in the black community to punish those who were perceived as collaborators with the apartheid government, where a burning tyre is placed around a victim's neck. "They were extraordinarily powerful. You could read a lot of political messages into them but they were subtle, not didactic, more observational," Branson says. The show was a sell-out.

Kentridge's major breakthrough came soon afterwards when he embarked on a series of short films, using a technique of drawing with charcoal, then erasing and drawing on the same sheet of paper, filming each iteration up to 500 times. "You can change a charcoal drawing as quickly as you can think," he says. Thus, in Mine (1991) the smoke from the mining plutocrat Soho Eckstein's cigar transforms into a bell summoning the miners to work, while the coffee pot on his desk morphs into a machine spewing out stock market prices – all to the strains of Elgar's Cello Concerto.

Through the characters of Eckstein, the archetypal capitalist, and his antagonist, the impoverished artist Felix Teitelbaum, Kentridge tracks Johannesburg's troubled and complex history, to create "a kind of self-portrait in the third person", as he puts it.

Described by Kentridge as a "slow-motion version of thought", the animations have no storyboard or script. He improvises. "With all projects, if you have a clear message, that is a good reason to stop the work before you begin. It has to do with the process of making the work and giving it the benefit of the doubt to see where it leads."

Kentridge dislikes certainty, and what he calls "the grand idea". "Political uncertainty, philosophical uncertainty, the uncertainty of images is much closer to how the world is," he says. "But people say, no this is the way the world is – and they misunderstand their role in constructing that certainty. It's Freud saying, this is the interpretation of the dream, or this is how utopian society should be; and there is always an authoritarian soldier standing there with a gun protecting that certainty, in whatever field. That's something we've very much learnt the hard way through the 20th century; there are so many failures of grand ideas."



Carte Hypsométrique de l'Empire Russe (2022) | CREDIT: ©William Kentridge

In opposition to the grand idea, Kentridge has founded The Centre for the Less Good Ideas in Johannesburg, "a safe space for failure" for experimental arts projects exploring ideas "at the periphery". In an era when black African artists are coming to the fore internationally, Kentridge continues to be venerated as the grand eminence of South African art – one who has always put encouragement and collaboration with black artists, actors and musicians at the heart of his work.

Kentridge has a second studio in the centre of the city, where he makes sculptures. The old Johannesburg in which he grew up, is "being erased", he says, like one of his charcoal drawings. Handsome art deco buildings that once would have housed offices, department stores and shops now look time-worn and neglected, groups of youths gather listlessly at the street corners. You are advised not to go for a walk. The city's infrastructure is crumbling; "load shedding" a euphemism for power cuts, is a regular occurrence. There is an undercurrent of unease, and a drip-feed of people (white people, that is) leaving for Cape Town where life is safer, or wherever South Africa's plummeting currency can afford sanctuary.

"I used to say I'm quietly pessimistic…" Kentridge says, contemplating the future. Would he leave Johannesburg, too? There have been times, he says, when it seemed a good idea not to be in the "political maelstrom" of South Africa. But to leave would be to abandon the city and the people that have always been fundamental to him and to his work, and the studio where he makes it.

"We once had a gathering of some friends, all in their 60s," he says. "And the question was, if you didn't have to work, what would you do? 'Oh I can't wait; I'd go to a farm on the Cape and just enjoy the days and grow a few grapes.' 'I'd be able to focus on my stamp collection,' or whatever. And my answer was, if I didn't have to work, I could spend so much time in my studio." He laughs. "Really, I don't know what else I would do."

William Kentridge is at the Royal Academy, London W1 (royalacademy.org.uk) from Sept 24 to Dec 11

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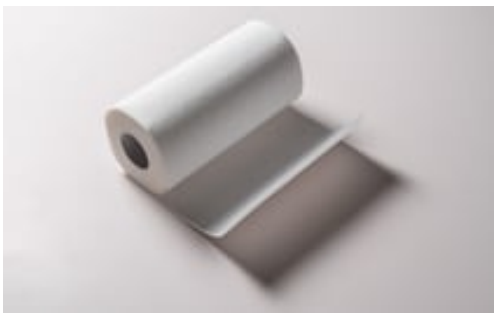

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