

Hunger to know

One of the world's most sought-after artists came out of apartheid-era South Africa aware that the only way to cope with the human condition was to laugh, writes JOHN McDONALD.

Thinking against oneself," was a phrase used by German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno, whose late work was filled with melancholy reflections on the Holocaust. He was referring to the Nazis, who clung to a set of beliefs that allowed them to divide humanity into a master race and a disposable remainder. This is an extreme example but the basic point is that any kind of thinking that does not question itself, that insists on its own truth, creates the preconditions for inhumane behaviour.

One need not invoke the spectre of Auschwitz. Uncritical thinking is standard practice for the Tea Party in the US, whose faith in deregulated markets defies common sense, recent history and every major economist. It is the prime ingredient in all forms of religious fundamentalism. It is stock in trade for Australian politicians in their attitude towards refugees. Indeed, it seems amazing that anyone can talk about a "Pacific solution" or a "Malaysian solution", without hearing echoes of the Nazis' Final Solution.

Uncritical thinking was an essential component of the apartheid era in South Africa, where William Kentridge was born in 1955, the son of two liberal-minded lawyers. He lived and worked under that system until 1994, when majority rule arrived. As a white artist and theatre director, Kentridge found it hard to make much headway during the apartheid years. There were limitations on freedom of expression at home and South Africans were often treated as pariahs when they travelled abroad.

In the decade and a half since then, Kentridge's progress has been mind-boggling. Not only is he one of the world's most sought-after artists, he has worked with theatre groups, musicians, dance and opera companies. He has held some extraordinary residencies and this year will deliver the Norton Lecture series at Harvard. The most recent award he has received is the Dan David Prize, which is worth \$US1 million.

The exhibition *William Kentridge: Five Themes* was put together by Mark Rosenthal for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2009 and has been shown in eight cities around the world. The Australian Centre for

WILLIAM KENTRIDGE: FIVE THEMES

Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Melbourne, until May 27

WILLIAM KENTRIDGE: UNIVERSAL ARCHIVE (PARTS 7-23)

Annandale Galleries, until April 21



the Moving Image in Melbourne is the ninth and final venue.

At the same time, Annandale Galleries is hosting a museum-quality exhibition titled *William Kentridge: Universal Archive (Parts 7-23)*. I've written a catalogue essay for that show, so I'll steer the discussion in a different direction.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Kentridge's success is that it has left him completely unaffected. If anything, he seems a little embarrassed by the adulation he encounters on a daily basis.

The secret to his work and personality is this capacity for "thinking against oneself": Kentridge is a provider of questions rather

than answers. As with the best artists and thinkers, he seems to be driven by an insatiable curiosity about the world.

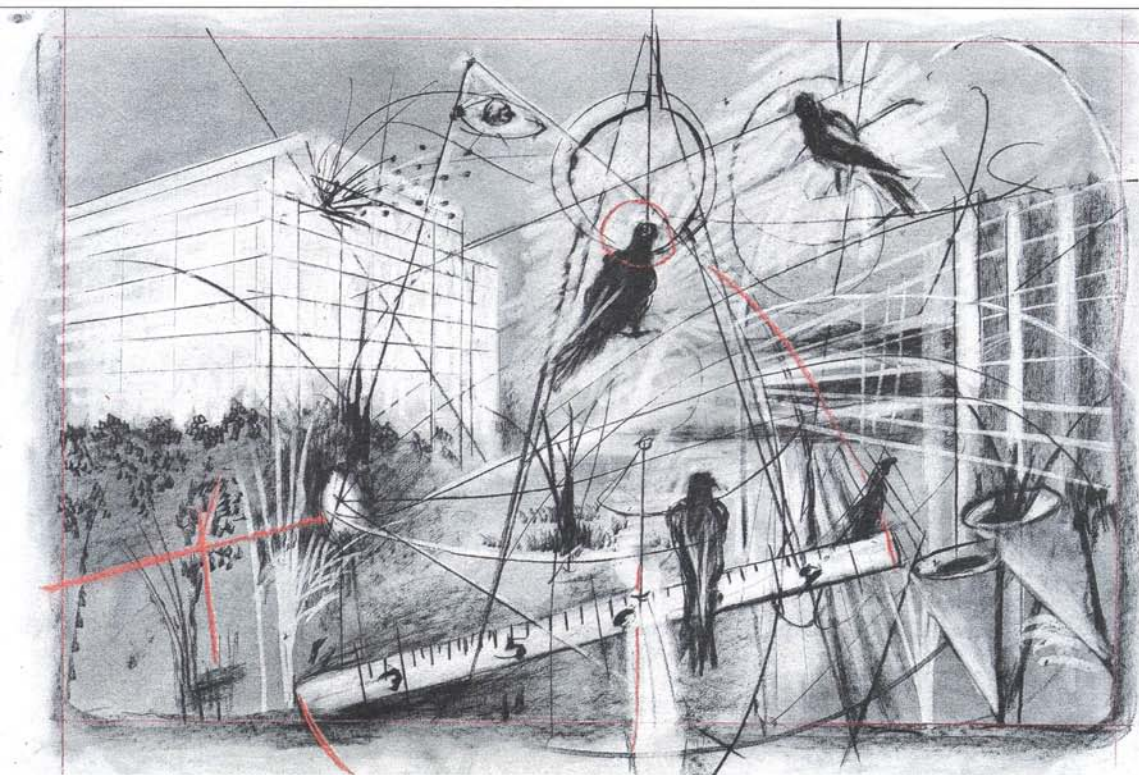
It might be partly a function of living for so long under the great lie that was apartheid and partly the sense of marginality common to so many artists born and educated far from the cultural centres of Europe and the US. In this sense, Kentridge's Australian counterparts may look upon him as a pioneer who has shown that one may live in a provincial city, even one as desperate and dangerous as Johannesburg, and still be considered a world artist.

Despite its reputation, Johannesburg does not feel desperate to Kentridge. It is his home town and a constant source of inspiration. Although the works at ACMI engage with figures as diverse as Jarry, Melies, Mozart, Gogol and Shostakovich, there are profoundly African influences in everything Kentridge has produced. Some of this is symbolic and poetic, as in the small rhinoceros that wanders across Soho Eckstein's desk in the animated film *Mine* (1991) and the newsreel footage of rhino hunters included in the last part of his *Magic Flute* installation. The rhino is a kind of African animus subject to colonial assault, but survives.

Much of this is a byproduct of the autobiographical emphasis of Kentridge's work, with imagery deriving from dreams and his daily reveries in the studio. The first of a sequence of animated films, *Johannesburg: 2nd Greatest City after Paris* (1989), was largely based on dreams. Even the title came to Kentridge in his sleep.

This film was a guilty pleasure for the artist, who saw it as time away from his regular work. It was composed of charcoal drawings, erased and redrawn to give a crude sense of movement. He calls the technique "Stone Age filmmaking". The popularity of the first piece encouraged Kentridge to make more films in this manner and it was these animations that set him on the ladder to global stardom.

They include *Monument* (1990), *Mine* (1991), *Sobriety, Obesity & Growing Old* (1991), *Felix in Exile* (1994), *History of the Main Complaint* (1996), *Weighing ... and Wanting* (1998), *Stereoscope* (1998-99) and *Tide Table* (2003). At Annandale, one may see



Triumph of reason ... a 2004 Kentridge drawing for his production of *The Magic Flute*; (left) *Floral Dress*, 2010, a hand-painted linocut.

a film titled *Other Faces* (2011), made as part of a larger project that will be shown at the Kassel Documenta in June.

The two characters who recur throughout the films are Soho Eckstein, a business tycoon, and Felix Teitelbaum, a poet and dreamer. They both bear a physical resemblance to Kentridge and may be seen as opposing aspects of his psyche.

The events portrayed are surreal and often violent, reflecting the injustices of the old system. One could say these films are broadly political but not in any direct, didactic sense. Soho, for instance, is a villain who exploits his black workers but he is also ageing, ill and vulnerable.

Kentridge is aware that there is good and evil on both sides in most political confrontations. He can recognise injustice and intolerance but he does not speak from the standpoint of absolute truth. In these films, all things are shifting and provisional, such as the frame drawings that go through several different states until a scene is exhausted.

A room with two films and works on paper devoted to the early filmmaker Georges Méliès – recently celebrated in Martin Scorsese's *Hugo* – is a playful interweaving of motifs from the early cinema and the artist's own routines in the studio. It is not a rocket that crashes into the eye of the moon but Kentridge's coffee pot.

The final two sections of the ACMI show relate to *The Magic Flute*, which Kentridge

produced for the Theatre de la Monnaie in Brussels in 2005; and an installation associated with Shostakovich's opera, *The Nose*, created for the Metropolitan Opera of New York in 2010.

Sydney audiences might remember the installation from the 2006 Biennale, when it was exhibited on Cockatoo Island.

Kentridge has undertaken a wide-ranging exploration of the themes, sources and intellectual underpinnings of each opera. *The Magic Flute* is often treated with all the gravity of a children's pantomime (as

absurdist motifs of Gogol's original story with the failed aspirations of Russia's revolutionary avant-garde. The transcript from the trial of Nikolai Bukharin, a Bolshevik mainstay who has fallen out of favour with Stalin, appears on a screen. His pleas and excuses generate laughter among his accusers. While reading we are bombarded by pseudo-revolutionary music by Philip Miller and busy projections on all sides. It's useful to know that Bukharin would be executed in 1938 after writing one last despairing note to Stalin.

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in the recent Australian Opera production) but the central theme is the triumph of reason over superstition. When taken seriously, this can be a terrifying encounter and Kentridge is alert to every nuance. The triumph of reason that we know as the Enlightenment also acted as a supreme valorisation of European culture. Spreading the light to "darkest Africa" and other lands ushered in an age of imperialism with all its violence and cruelty. It is an irony that the instruments of reason are so easily transformed into weapons of destruction.

In the projections and installations based on *The Nose*, Kentridge combines the

Put on trial by the Central Committee, Bukharin tries to pin down the imaginary crimes that will cost him his life. In Gogol's short story, a hapless civil servant pursues a nose that has left his face and taken on a life of its own.

The absurdity in these situations reveals a tragicomic thread that runs through all Kentridge's work. He suggests that our predicament is so perilous that the only possible response is laughter. He depicts the human condition as a slapstick performance in which we must strive to keep our wits about us until the curtain falls.

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