



David Lammy MP on the themes of injustice in Kentridge's work, which also link to the artist's family

Shocking, funny and sometimes utterly absurd, William Kentridge's exhibition at the RA throws you in all directions. We are exposed to a comedy which serves to observe and analyse the dark histories that are explored. The artist grew up in apartheid South Africa and themes of oppression, injustice and resistance run through all aspects of his work.

His charcoal pieces evoke images of art associated with the Holocaust. The bold strokes of black with subtle hints of colour reminded me of the 'girl in red' in Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List*. One drawing depicts a group wandering into the sea, one person with the Star of David on their back, another with a Cross (drawing for *Tide Table*, 2003; page 66). They waded into the unknown. Freedom or death awaits them, perhaps both.

Scale is no obstacle in this exhibition. Huge, handwoven tapestries of old Empire and colonies stretch across the walls. The maps are covered with images of women with packed bags, another with a group squeezed onto a small rowing boat (*Carte Hypsométrique de l'Empire Russe*, 2022; page 6). The glory of conquest emblazoned with the reality of its legacy.

The exhibition comes to a magnificent crescendo with *Notes Towards a Model Opera* (2015; still, left). Across three screens we see the mesmerising South African ballerina Dada Masilo dancing with a rifle slung over her shoulder and wearing a red cap. The revolutionary ideals of China, Africa and France are thrown together in a magnificent medley of music, dance, calligraphy and slogans. But there is also a nod to China's new role in Africa, with incantations such as 'Smash the iPhone 6' appearing on the screens.

My life and that of the artist do in fact intertwine. William's father, Sydney Kentridge, is a legal heavyweight who represented the family of the anti-apartheid campaigner Steve Biko and was part of Nelson Mandela's legal team during his imprisonment. He was also my legal 'sponsor' when I was called to the bar at Lincoln's Inn almost 30 years ago, and he remains a true hero of mine. His son's dedication to the depiction of injustice is a quality that runs throughout their family, albeit in different forms. I have my own connection to his home country, having taken a DNA test in 2007 which showed Bantu South African heritage, particularly interesting given that my wife, Nicola Green (page 66), has white South African roots.

Kentridge's range is astounding. His art deals with histories varying from the genocide of the Herero and Nama peoples in the early 20th century, depicted in *Black Box/Chambre Noire* (2005) using harrowing mechanical puppets, to South Africa's post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in *Ubu Tells the Truth* (1996-97). The latter took the form of a theatre production, a film, an etching series and now includes a set of drawings made directly on the RA's walls. Born in a country ravaged by colonialism and its legacy, Kentridge shows us the inescapable spectre of Empire that hangs over us all.

David Lammy is the Member of Parliament for Tottenham and Shadow Foreign Secretary. He is the author of *Tribes: A Search for Belonging in a Divided Society* (Constable)

Breaking free

As South African artist William Kentridge fills the Royal Academy's galleries, RA Magazine asks four figures to respond to his work: politician David Lammy MP, artist Nicola Green, playwright Bonnie Greer and novelist Gillian Slovo



Previous page: still from *Notes Towards a Model Opera*, 2015, by William Kentridge

This page, from top: *Finally Memory Yields*, 2021; drawing for *Tide Table*, 2003

Opposite page: still from *Drawing Lesson 17 (A Lesson in Lethargy)*, 2010



Artist *Nicola Green* explores the political and personal scrutiny underpinning Kentridge's vast oeuvre

As an artist myself, I have always been in awe of Kentridge's powerful and beautifully executed charcoal drawings and films. However, I was not aware of the extent of his immense artistic breadth, scale and vision. This exhibition takes you on the artist's lifelong journey of self-reflection as a white man, and his critique of the world we share, as well as exploring the inner and outer turmoil of living in South Africa. Through the exploration of the depths of human pain, injustice, privilege and conflict there are fleeting but ever-present symbols of hope and light, and explosions of Dada-esque humour.

Both myself and my husband David Lammy (page 65) have South African heritage. We have a complex, powerful and deep-rooted relationship with the country, and as our children have both black and white African ancestors we make it a priority to take them there as regularly as we can. It is my experience that most of us in the UK are not forced in our daily lives to face up to our shared history of racism, colonialism and violence. In South Africa the weight of history is carried daily.

I have explored in my own work the mixed heritage identity of my family and how we understand dualities within ourselves. Kentridge's work grapples with these issues, as he interrogates notions of self and other. I could have sat and watched his gallery of animated films for days as the images emerged and vanished; the memories, dreams and realities ebbing and flowing until they almost became mine as well.

The commanding vastness of Kentridge's drawings, tapestries and video installations is juxtaposed by their simultaneous impermanence. Kentridge's work exists in the grey areas and the blurring of boundaries, and presents a challenge to the absoluteness of the oppressive gaze. Kentridge draws over and rubs out images again and again, but even when one image disappears, it leaves a trace; it's impossible to erase or forget.

At the end of the show we see Kentridge's experimentation with Indian ink in the form of gestural and expressive renderings of trees (*Finally Memory Yields*, 2021; above left). The South African environment was integral to the construction of the settler colonial myth, and Kentridge has described the pre-war paintings of the country's famous landscape artists as 'documents of dismembering'. One cannot sever the connection between memory and landscape. In a show packed with such intense political and personal scrutiny, the trees create a space for reflection. They root the story back into nature, reminding us that every person originally comes from mother Africa, encouraging us to contemplate what it means to be human.

Nicola Green is an artist and social historian. Her work is held in public collections including the International Slavery Museum, Liverpool, and the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, Washington D.C.



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The playwright *Bonnie Greer* on the bonfire Kentridge makes of his privilege and certainty

We are in an age in which permission must be sought. A time of boundaries erected and carefully, very carefully, crossed. Of course, we also know that all truly great art – whether in writing, dancing, painting, music or other forms – is the very opposite of permission sought and acknowledgement won. It drives you and hides you and you fight to get ahead of it because the energy is relentless. That art demands a special kind of courage which must be won every day. It is often about breaking things: smashing them, transforming them, making new boundaries, being beyond permission; being deeply in love, in thrall to the work itself and the process of making the work; being reckless in the conventional world.

In their inner essence William Kentridge's series of video self-portraits (*Drawing Lesson 17 (A Lesson in Lethargy)*, 2010; above) reminds me of Rembrandt's self-portraits: the artist unsure of himself, yet exploring, scrutinising, celebrating himself with exuberance, irony, humour. Kentridge's depictions of himself making art, thinking, are not the heralds of martyrdom of a Van Gogh, nor the inner celebration of his own genius like Velázquez. They are more. They are partly what he sees, hears, feels, touches, tastes, smells. They are also what he intuitively feels from his place in history.

Violence is omnipresent in his work. The violence of racism. Of capitalism. Of banal modernity. Of the destruction of nature. All of this creates a kind of melancholy, combined with the play of references and allusions, the wit, playfulness and the workings of metamorphosis. The exuberance of creation; the celebration of resistance and beauty. Which are often the same things.

His art is an auto-da-fé of his own white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, fill-in-the-blank privilege. This artist is consuming himself, breaking boundaries and reclaiming with everything he makes. Above all, he is reclaiming the right to his inner self.

Like Goya, he draws not what is outside but inside of himself. And yet, like Goya's, his images are steeped in the experience of the reality surrounding him. He is his own *Maja desnuda*, his own *Tres de mayo de 1808*. Unlike Picasso, whose precocious painterly intelligence always kicks in no matter what, Kentridge can bumble and stumble and fall right in front of your eyes.

He is those lines in that short story by Beckett:

All known all white bare white body fixed one yard legs joined like sewn. Light heat white floor one square yard never seen. White walls one yard by two white ceiling one square yard never seen. Bare white body fixed only the eyes only just.

*Bonnie Greer is an author, playwright, novelist and Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. Her latest play is *Douglass*, about the Black American abolitionist Frederick Douglass*

Below and bottom:
The Conservationist's Ball, 1985 (Triptych, Part 2);
Warthog and Necklace, 1985

The South African-born novelist *Gillian Slovo* recalls the country's two worlds in conflict that Kentridge depicts

Walking into the RA's galleries, I was almost floored by my first sight of one of William Kentridge's drawings. I experienced the shock of recognition not so much of the image but more of the feelings it engendered in me.

The drawing is *Warthog and Necklace* (below right). The more I looked at it, the more difficult it was to work out whether the warthog was inside a building with high glass windows, or outside it. The warthog, passing a carpenter's bench on which is hung a butcher's hook, is heading for the viewer. In the air above the animal hangs the necklace: what at first glance might have been a giant cake or even a crown with flaming candles turns out to be a burning tyre.

Kentridge drew this in 1985. Then, as Nelson Mandela was beginning the third decade of his life sentence, a popular uprising was gripping South African cities. Though Casspirs (armoured police vehicles) arrested protestors en masse, the demonstrations continued. And with them came one of the most violent manifestations of collective rage: known as necklacing, a burning tyre was used to kill suspected informers. In those days, three decades after I left the country as a child, my family in exile, I remember looking at South Africa in hope and in trepidation. Here almost 30 years later still, in a gallery in London, those feelings were returned to me. Rage, threat and celebration all bursting, like the warthog from that drawing.

When I turned my eyes diagonally across the gallery to *The Conservationist's Ball*, I understood what Kentridge was saying. In this triptych, also created in 1985, a woman accompanied by a cheetah wears a coat of cheetah skin, her blood-etched fingers matching the red lines of her dress; in the central panel (above right), a dead animal hangs from the ceiling above dancers cavorting as if in any decadent European café; and finally in the last panel, a roller-skated jackal stands on an abandoned car in a junkyard fenced by a tin wall, which is topped by barbed wire that might equally be a festooning of Christmas lights.

Turning back to the warthog I saw again the high arch of windows that had made me think the 'necklace' scene might be inside. Those were the same glassed walls as the conservationist's café. And that was the feeling I had recognised: those two South Africas in violent confrontation not only with each other but also inside each space. Oh troubled country that is returned to me by charcoal strokes of William Kentridge's visionary hand.

Gillian Slovo is a novelist and playwright. Her books include Red Dust (Virago), a novel structured around the hearings of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission

● **William Kentridge** Main Galleries, Royal Academy, until 11 Dec. Supported by the William Kentridge Supporters Circle, Goodman Gallery and Marian Goodman Gallery

