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**The  
College  
of  
Wooster  
Art  
Museum**

Ebert Art Center

“ . . . It should be possible to make a political art that captures within it the kind of ironies, ambiguities, and contradictions that are there in the political world. One of the things that one normally associates with political art is a clarity of purpose, of thought, of program, and I think that clarity of thought, purpose, and program is often absent in the real world, and that behind the clarity of rhetoric, there is often a great confusion of goals, aims, and agendas. The films have been saying or have been trying to say, in a way, that that open-endedness which is part of the films does also reflect an open-endedness outside of them.”<sup>1</sup>

—William Kentridge

In this survey exhibition of the graphic work of South African artist William Kentridge, a wide array of images and themes fluctuate between the political history of South Africa, and the artist's personal, yet universal, poetic commentary. Kentridge works across several creative fields and the narratives found in his prints, films, and theatrical productions collapse historicism and contemporaneity into a distinctive palimpsest where a panorama of characters grapple with a range of human traits. His richly associative art feels familiar, and its complexity stems in part from what the artist describes as an “anxiety about not coming from the center, but from the periphery, so more is needed.”<sup>2</sup>

Part of the white minority in South Africa, Kentridge was born in Johannesburg in 1955, a descendent of Lithuanian immigrants and the son of two distinguished anti-apartheid lawyers. He studied politics and African studies at the University of the Witwatersrand in the 1970s, painting at the Johannesburg Art Foundation from 1976–78, and mime and theatre in Paris at the École Jacques Lecoq in 1981–82. Upon his return to South Africa in the early 1980s, the artist worked in experimental theatre and as an art director, and began producing his animated “drawings for projection,” consisting of charcoal drawings that are filmed, erased, redrawn, and then filmed again, frame by frame. These provocative short films, where imperfect erasure is part of the substance of the films, were introduced outside of South Africa to international acclaim in the late 1990s, after sanctions and boycotts were lifted with the end of apartheid in 1994.

This exhibition features over ninety prints ranging in date from 1976–2004, and includes examples of numerous printmaking processes such as linocut, sugar lift, silkscreen, drypoint, etching, and photogravure. It chronicles Kentridge's development as an artist, beginning with the 1976 linocut of his grandfather in a suit and hat at Muizenberg Beach in South Africa, through a variety of prints reminiscent of the artist's film and theatrical productions, such as *Felix in Exile*, 1994, and *Learning the Flute*, 2004.

Perhaps one of the more disconcerting images in this exhibition can be found in the drypoint *Casspirs Full of Love*,



*Casspirs Full of Love*, 1989/2000  
copper drypoint and engraving on Vellin Arches Crème paper  
65.75 x 37.01 inches  
edition of 30  
Published by David Krut Fine Art, New York/Johannesburg  
Collection of the Artist

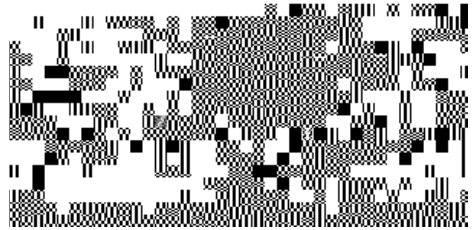
1989/2000, depicting a ladder-like form holding seven decapitated heads. A Casspir is an armored personnel carrier used by South African police and defense forces, and the ladder/coffin in the print mimics the Casspir's shape. The print and its title were suggested by a radio program Kentridge heard in 1989 that broadcast messages of support to South African service personnel. One mother closed her message with “from Mum, with Casspirs full of love.”<sup>3</sup>

The resulting print was the artist's response to the ambiguity of what this apartheid-era mother might have been referring to.

Like other artists who have commented on extraordinary events in their art—artists such as Goya, Picasso, Kollwitz, and Beckmann—Kentrige's images and visual narratives run the gamut from apartheid and its aftermath to the props of domestic life. Themes that appear in Kentrige's work include: avarice and greed; aspects of communication and surveillance; the tragicomedy of modernity; and the powerful shadow myth of colonialism. Commenting on his studio practices, the artist states that the "authority of knowledge and certainty are the worst way to begin."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it is the inherent fallibility of hubris that Kentrige repeatedly explores through selective references to historical literary and theatrical narratives.

In the catalogue essay "Resistance and Ground: The Prints of William Kentrige," poet and author Susan Stewart states that "Just as Kentrige's theater work has been concerned with reviving and juxtaposing early and contemporary art, so does his printmaking turn back and renew many dimensions of the traditions of the form, including its relations to theater, chronicle, and moral reflections."<sup>5</sup> Some of the repositioned narratives that appear in this exhibition were conceived as part of larger, collaborative projects with other artists. They include the etchings, *Industry and Idleness*, 1986, from the project *Hogarth in Johannesburg*, and *Little Morals*, 1991, based on Theodor Adorno's *Minima Moralia*. Other references to moralizing tales are found in the suite of etchings, *Ubu Tells the Truth*, 1996–97, which alludes to both the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa and playwright Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, 1896, an absurd tale of greed, cowardice, and stupidity. The print ensemble, *Zeno at 4 AM*, 2001, comes from Italo Svevo's novel, *The Confessions of Zeno*, 1923, and both the *Ubu* and *Zeno* print suites either informed or were informed by productions directed by Kentrige, created in collaboration with the Handspring Puppet Company based in Cape Town, South Africa. The artist chose the story in Svevo's novel because it is about a character living in a provincial city on the periphery who has perfect self-knowledge but is ineffective in using that knowledge to act. In *The Confessions of Zeno*, Kentrige saw numerous parallels to what it felt like to live in Johannesburg in the 1980s.

Later works in this exhibition, such as *Portage*, 2000, and *Atlas Procession*, 2000, are comprised of starkly black processional figures superimposed on antique encyclopedia pages or maps. In explaining his use of the silhouette, Kentrige states that he is aware of "the limits of knowledge because there are limits to looking when looking at shadows, as they are the deception of the real."<sup>6</sup> By using the illusionary mediation of shadows in his prints and theatrical productions, he asks how to "bring back the light" given "our willing suspension of belief or unwilling suspension of disbelief." Further, through the deceptive simplicity of shadow figures, Kentrige asks the question, "Once awareness of deception is achieved, who has the duty to bring the truth beyond the shadows to the light?"<sup>7</sup>



Ubu Tells the Truth, Act 1 Scene 2, 1996–1997  
suite of eight etchings  
hard ground, soft ground, aquatint, drypoint, engraving on  
Fabriano Rosapina Bianco 220 grams/square meter paper  
14.17 x 19.69 inches  
edition of 45  
Published by Malcolm Christian,  
The Caversham Press, South Africa  
Collection of the Artist

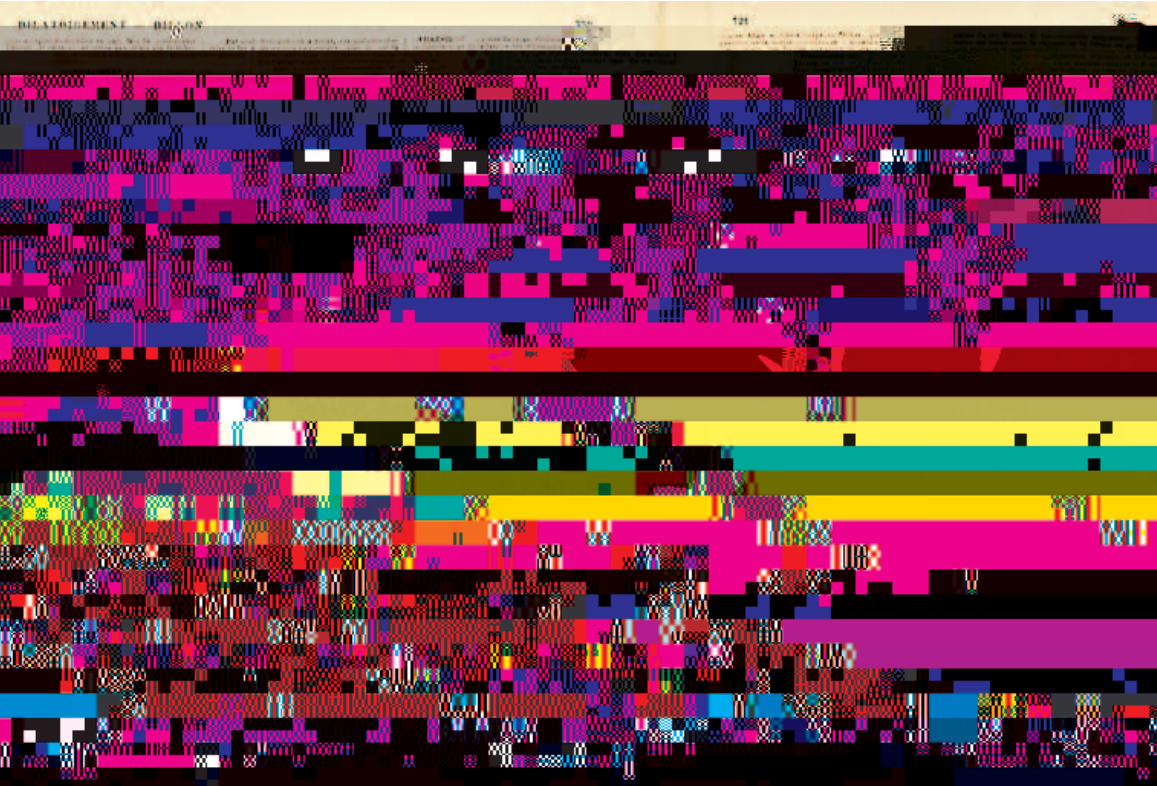
Unlike traditional narratives with beginnings, middles, and ends, William Kentrige's art is fundamentally rhizomic in nature.<sup>8</sup> Similar to plants that propagate themselves through their root systems, Kentrige's prints, films, and theatrical productions are interconnected, and experiencing any of them is akin to an Internet search that veers off in many related directions. By resisting linear thinking and hierarchical structures, William Kentrige has, for over twenty-five years, assiduously argued for "open-endedness." Although he reflects on the classical drama of hubris and its inevitable tragic denouement, as well as the convenience provided by the erasure of historical memory, in his art, Kentrige attempts to keep nihilism at bay by bringing "light to the shadows."

Kathleen McManus Zurko  
January 2005

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Drawing the Passing*, VHS, directed by Maria Anna Tappeiner and William Kentrige (Johannesburg, South Africa: David Krut Publishing, 1999).
- <sup>2</sup> William Kentrige, (lecture, Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH, November 2, 2003).
- <sup>3</sup> William Kentrige, *William Kentrige Prints* (Grinnell, IA: Grinnell College, 2004), 44. According to Kentrige, the anagram "Casspirs" comes from the initials S.A.P. (South African Police) and C.S.I.R. (Council for Scientific and Industrial Research), who jointly developed the armored personnel carrier.
- <sup>4</sup> William Kentrige, (lecture, Grinnell College, Grinnell, IA, November 20, 2004).
- <sup>5</sup> Susan Stewart, "Resistance and Ground: The Prints of William Kentrige," in *William Kentrige Prints*, 16.
- <sup>6</sup> See note 5 above.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> This comparison of Kentrige's art practices to a rhizome derives from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's "Introduction: Rhizome," in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translation and foreword by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). In the introduction to the book, Deleuze and Guattari argue against linear hierarchy and for multiplicity, and use the example of a rhizomatous root system (e.g., ginger or crabgrass) to suggest that there are many points of entry in an open system.



## ABOUT THE ARTIST

William Kentridge was well-known in South Africa prior to his participation in the 1997 Documenta X in Kassel, Germany. In the years since, solo shows of his work have been presented at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, among others. In 1998, his first retrospective exhibition was organized by the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, and toured to Munich, Barcelona, London, Marseille, and Graz. This was followed in 2001 by another touring survey exhibition co-organized by The Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, that was presented in Washington, D.C., New York, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, and Cape Town. Kentridge's works have been included in major international exhibitions such as the Sydney, Havana, and Istanbul Biennials, and in 2002, the film *Confessions of Zeno* was created for Documenta XI. In January 2004, another survey exhibition opened in Turin, traveling to museums in Düsseldorf, Sydney, Montreal, and Johannesburg during 2004 and 2005.

In 1999 he received the Carnegie Prize at the Carnegie International 1999/2000, Pittsburgh, and in 2003, Kentridge was awarded the Kaiserring/Goslar Award for Modern Art, Munchhaus Museum für moderne Kunst, Goslar, Germany, in recognition of his contribution to contemporary art.

In 2005, Kentridge will direct a production of Mozart's *Magic Flute* commissioned by Theatre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels; also scheduled for 2005 is a substantial project commissioned by the Deutsche Bank Guggenheim in Berlin.

The artist lives and works in Johannesburg, South Africa and is represented by Marian Goodman Gallery, New York and Paris; the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg; and Galeria Lia Rumma, Naples and Milan.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The College of Wooster Art Museum gratefully acknowledges the generosity of the many individuals who made possible this extraordinary exhibition at The College of Wooster Art Museum. They include, but are not limited to William Kentridge and his assistant, artist Anne McAlleron, and the staff at the Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College: Lesley Wright, director; Daniel Strong, associate director; Kay Wilson, curator of the collection; Milton Severe, director of exhibition design, and Karla Niehus, curator of education.

A special note of appreciation and congratulations is extended to Kay Wilson, the curator of this exhibition. Kay's expertise in the art of the print and interest in artists from the periphery have resulted in a number of very special print exhibitions at Grinnell College over the last few decades.

At Wooster, the museum staff—Doug McGlumphy, preparator and Joyce Fuell, museum administrative assistant—once again made the difficult look easy as Joyce prepared the materials for the exhibition and Doug designed the beautiful installation in the Sussel Gallery and the Burton D. Morgan Gallery.

### FRONT/BACK

William Kentridge  
Portage (detail), 2000  
chine coll. of black Canson paper  
on pages of *Le Nouveau Larousse Illustré* (c. 1906)  
11.4 x 10 x .7 inches folded  
10.8 x 166.5 inches unfolded  
edition of 33  
Courtesy Grinnell College Art Collection, Grinnell, Iowa