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Nothing wasted

The endlessly diverting world of William Kentridge

Drawn from life

William Kentridge is feted the world over for his art. **Miriam Cosic** talks to him on the eve of shows in Sydney and Melbourne

JOHN HOLCROFT

Top drawer . . . William Kentridge, pictured in his Johannesburg studio, laces his art with political themes

IT'S a measure of William Kentridge's view of the world that he calls his childhood a "normal, middle-class, suburban family life". The fact he grew up in apartheid South Africa, the child of two prominent anti-apartheid lawyers, is apparently by the bye.

His father, Sydney Kentridge, took part in the inquest into the death of Steve Biko, an event that rallied world opposition to the South African regime. He was eventually knighted for his work. Kentridge's mother, Felicia, nee Geffen, also fought some well-known cases and helped establish legal aid in Johannesburg. His paternal grandfather was an MP; his maternal grandmother the first female barrister in South Africa, the second in the Commonwealth. Both sets of grandparents fled anti-Jewish pogroms in Russia.

"I would have been more aware of the unnaturalness of South African society than many of the other kids at school with me," Kentridge eventually concedes. His parents' importance evaded him at the time, however, and there were no sense of fear, no heightened security, in the house.

"Maybe there should have been, but there wasn't. Other lawyers were sometimes under threat, activists, but I never had a sense of that," he says. "Either they hid it from me or it wasn't a factor."

Kentridge is speaking by telephone from the compound in South Africa that includes the original family house as well as his studio. His parents moved to London in the 1980s, but he has never strayed far. Though he travels the globe constantly — this month to Australia, where a large-scale commercial show will open at Annandale Galleries in Sydney and *William Kentridge: Five Themes*, originally curated by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, at ACMI in Melbourne — home base remains Johannesburg.

His art, as more than one critic has pointed out, explores the universal through the local and the personal. It is laced with the political themes — justice, equality, anti-racism — that permeated his childhood. Yet, while thought-provoking, they are never didactic.

"When I tried to marry the two, I didn't really like the art at all," he says of his early years in the field. "It was only when I relaxed that need that there started to be a fruitful relationship between the two. When I said, 'Let's see what the picture is', rather than 'This is the Leninist message that must be conveyed.' "

Kentridge is one of the most interesting artists on the world scene. His work anchors biennales; the operas he designs and directs are staged in leading opera houses; his quirky animations push boundaries.

Australia has seen quite a lot of him in the decade and more since he came to international renown.

His take on Monteverdi's opera *The Return of Ulysses*, made with South Africa's Handspring Puppet Theatre in 1998, played at the 2004 Melbourne arts festival. The same year, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney held a retrospective and Kentridge's Australian dealer, Bill Gregory, mounted one of the many shows he has held through the years at his Annandale Galleries.

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, who has written perceptively of him, commissioned an installation for the 2008 Sydney Biennale, which she directed.

While Kentridge's art is highly conceptual, all of it is grounded in his first and still primary practice, drawing. The work, like the man who makes it, is a beguiling mix of sincerity, humour, curiosity and craftsmanship. Christov-Bakargiev calls it "an art of resistance to modernism *and* post-modernism".

Key themes and characters reappear in his work, often in Kafkaesque scenarios where Everyman is buffeted by the turbulence of the world: poor blacks, morally bankrupt businessmen, idealistic but hapless intellectuals. Sometimes his personages are given concurrent roles as victim and perpetrator, redemptor and redeemed.

The animations, and the drawings that compose them, seethe with ideas. See one and you immediately want to start the loop again so you can search out the details you missed the first time. And the second time. Most intriguing are the messy traces of the artist's hand which are everywhere. Echoes of previous frames linger as the action moves forward.

Much about Kentridge's work seems felicitous, contingent. One thing morphs seamlessly into another. Ideas proliferate. His version of Shostakovich's satirical opera *The Nose*, based on the Gogol short story, was highly acclaimed when it opened at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 2010. He not only created sets and video material for *The Nose*, he directed it too. It was the perfect vehicle for Kentridge's multimedia practice and his worldly realism. It also provided material for a short animation and loads of stand-alone sketches.

Nothing, it seems, is wasted. Nor does Kentridge take anything for granted, not even the very act of seeing on which an artist's work depends.

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Part of an ensemble of maquette figures for *The Nose*, above; 2010 silkscreen *Rumours and Impossibilities*, left

THE BEST ART LESSONS I'VE HAD WERE IN THE POLITICS COURSE AND IN THE THEATRE COURSE

WILLIAM KENTRIDGE

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"One often thinks of seeing as a completely natural activity — your eyes open, there is the world in front of you, you're not doing anything, just seeing," he says. "But what the studio and the process of making images demonstrates is that the activity of seeing is about constructing the world, constructing coherence."

He means it literally — "taking two different flat images on each of our retinas and combining them to one three-dimensional image of the world" — and metaphorically. "We are very involved in building coherence, in taking fragments that come from all places and acting as if there is a single coherent narrative around."

Kentridge will give Harvard's Norton lectures this month on this very subject. His title is Six Drawing Lessons, but the subtitles of each lecture — including In Praise of Shadows and A Brief History of Colonial Revolts — summarise his multiplicit body of work.

Kentridge was born in 1955, the second of four children. It was "a good safe spot in the family" from which to observe the world. He made art in the way all children do, he says, but didn't abandon it at the usual age. He attended Saturday and evening classes — life drawing classes initially, to keep his mother company. She painted after she retired from the law.

He remembers examining the prints his parents had on the walls — of Cezanne, Matisse, a Miro in his bedroom — and being intrigued by ambiguous marks: "those unsolveable riddles that keep us coming back to a painting or a poem", he says.

Yet he didn't plan a life in art. In his final years of school he toyed with the idea of architecture or following the family tradition into law. He ended up taking a degree in politics and African studies from Witwatersrand University.

So far from being a detour, he says, the experience was formative. "Those years were fundamental to shaping how I saw the world, and in some ways fuelling everything I've done in the arts in the last 20 years."

Afterwards, he toyed with various things. He set up an etching studio, then closed it to study acting at the Jacques Lecoq school in Paris, where he learned he wasn't an actor. He joined the South African film industry. In a way, they were all apprenticeships.

"Certainly the best art lessons I've had were in the politics course and in the theatre course," he says.

Fortunately for everyone, his wife, Anne — whose Australian family moved to South Africa when she was a teenager — was a good provider. They met at university, where she was studying medicine, married in 1982, and her income steadied their early years. He learned a lot, he says, from the anatomy texts that littered their bed while she was studying, and she remains his "medical dramaturg". She appears in his drawings and, he adds deadpan, "she's always a very clear critic of what she thinks of the work, put it that way".

While he was marking time in the film world, two momentous things happened. His parents left home, moving to London in 1984. In the same year, the first of his three children, a daughter, was born. "That was an enormous thing," he says. "Instead of the focus being 'What am I? What must I become?', it all became completely secondary to 'Who is this other figure in the world that I'm here to look after?' It was an enormous relief. All my thoughts didn't have to be anxiety about myself."

His new confidence fired him. He quit his day job and prepared a suite of charcoal drawings for exhibition. "I thought I'd see how long I can survive off those drawings before I had to go back to the terrible work of the film industry," he says.

"I had one exhibition and managed to survive long enough on the sales to produce another body of work for a second exhibition. And I still haven't had to go back to being a props man in the South African film industry — which I was really incompetent at, by the way, I was always one step ahead of being fired." It was only when he turned 30, he says, that he stopped putting technician on visa applications and had the courage to write artist.

His first works were a dialogue between drawing today and drawing of the past, he says: copies of Brassai's photographs, reworking of Hogarth's engravings, the work of Watteau, Goya, Velazquez's *Las Meninas*.

He considered his first animations a hobby, light relief from the main game. He entered a couple in animation festivals. But when the first curator suggested showing a film in an exhibition, he was offended. "What's wrong with my drawings?" he demanded. The curator skilfully hosed him down and the rest, as they say, is history.

"Most of the interesting things in the work have come in spite of me rather than through me," Kentridge says. "Other people have had to point out what's there, that I've made but I haven't seen."

His trademark erasure marks are no exception. "For the first while, I apologised to everyone because my erasures were not perfect and you could see them, traces of what was there before," he says. He sought different kinds of paper, various systems for eliminating the remnant of previous marks. "It was only when other people said, 'We like those traces, leave them!', that I thought, 'Well, I don't like them, but I'll leave them for a bit and see.' "

His animations are core to his body of work. So are the short films in which he appears, often in plural, in enigmatic representations of the self, usually discussing art or some paradoxical quirk of existence. A dozen of his films will be shown in Melbourne alongside other artworks. In Sydney, three will be set up alongside drawings, tapestries, sculptures and etchings.

When I express surprise that so much has been happenstance, since his work seems so purposeful, he breaks the Zen-like calm of his conversation. "No, no, no," he exclaims, "you must understand that the studio is the vital component in all of this. It's a category not often spoken about or written about, but it's essentially a safe space for stupidity. A space where stupid actions can be done without the fear of being jumped on from a thousand miles before they've had a chance to develop."

It is, he agrees, a form of play: "Lightness and speed are essential." It is also very hard and careful work: he can spend up to a year on a nine-minute film. It seems an impossible timeframe to make viable. "But when you think at the end of that you have both a film and a full exhibition of drawings," he points out practically, "a year to prepare a big exhibition of drawings is not a lot."

Not everything takes so long. The quirky *Drawing Lessons* that Annandale will show were each made in an evening. *Anti-Mercator*, a two-week project — a tricky collage of handwriting, page turning, metronome clicking, Kentridge delivering fragments of a lecture on the nature of time, and images of a coffee pot, a nude, a globe, a cat, disintegrating and reaggregating — came out of workshops for a Documenta installation titled *The Refusal of Time*, which will go up in June.

Documenta, the influential survey of contemporary art that takes place every five years in Kassel, in Germany, is being curated this year by his great supporter and biographer, Christov-Bakargiev.

Gregory says when he visits Kentridge, he often finds a troupe of people around, rehearsing something or other, breaking only for a communal lunch that Kentridge often has a hand in preparing. At other times, when only the core team is present, people work quietly and purposefully.

What always surprises Gregory, though, is the way Kentridge can step away from a three-ring circus, perhaps just a couple of hours before a performance premiere, and focus utterly on something unrelated that is to happen on the other side of the world in six months.

He is a great collaborator, too: he has worked with the same film editor and composer for 20 years. He has said that anything that can't be made with cardboard and Scotch tape requires collaboration.

I ask Kentridge about the lack of introspection that others have noted. "I think to be an artist one does need a lack self-consciousness, not thinking too hard about 'What am I saying? Who am I?' " he says. "Who you are is going to be what you've made. There's no escaping from who you are when the work is finally put together. If a work is pretentious, that tells you who you are. If it's cautious, that tells you who you are. Whatever the subject matter, in the end it becomes about the person making it."

William Kentridge: Universal Archive (Parts 7-21), *Annandale Galleries, Sydney, March 7 to April 21.*
William Kentridge: Five Themes, *the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Melbourne, March 8 to May 27.*