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-Art, 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, Münchehouse Museum für moderne Kunst, Goslar, Germany, in recognition of his contribution to contemporary art.

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Art Museum Director/Curator

January 18–March 6, 2005

The College of Wooster Art Museum
Ebert Art Center
Sussex Gallery and Burton D. Morgan Gallery
1220 Beall Avenue, Wooster, Ohio 44691
330-263-2498 • www.wooster.edu/artmuseum
All works © William Kentridge

William Kentridge Prints was organized by the Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College, Grinnell, Iowa.
“... 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.”

—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 much need.”

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.

This exhibition features over ninety prints ranging in date from 1976–2004, and includes examples of numerous printmaking processes such as linocut, soft 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, 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.”

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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—Kentridge’s images and visual narratives run the gamut from apartheid and its aftermath to the props of domestic life. Themes that appear in Kentridge’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.” Indeed, it is the inherent fallibility of hubs that Kentridge repeatedly explores through selective references to historical literary and theatrical narratives.

In the catalogue essay “Resistance and Ground: The Prints of William Kentridge,” poet and author Susan Stewart states that “Just as Kentridge’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.” 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 Kentridge, 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, Kentridge 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, Kentridge 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.” 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, Kentridge asks the question, “Once awareness of deception is achieved, who has the duty to bring the truth beyond the shadows to the light?”

Unlike traditional narratives with beginnings, middles, and ends, William Kentridge’s art is fundamentally rhizomic in nature. Similar to plants that propagate themselves through their root systems, Kentridge’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 Kentridge 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, Kentridge attempts to keep nihilism at bay by bringing “light to the shadows.”

Kathleen McManus Zurko
January 2005

Notes
1 Drawing the Passing, VS, directed by Maria Anna Tappeiner and William Kentridge (Johannesburg, South Africa: David Krut Publishing, 1999).
2 William Kentridge, Lecture, Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH (November 2, 2003).
3 William Kentridge, William Kentridge Prints (Grinnell, IA: Grinnell, College, 2004). 44 According to Kentridge, 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.
6 See note 5 above.
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8 This comparison of Kentridge’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 rhizomatic root system (e.g., ginger or crabgrass) to suggest that there are many points of entry in an open system.
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