



William Kentridge: Tide table



William KENTRIDGE, b 1955 South Africa, *Tide table* (detail), 2003
still from animated film, 35mm film, video and DVD transfer with sound, 8:53 minutes
Purchased 2005. Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales, © William Kentridge

This was in a paper she gave at a conference on *Modernity and Contemporaneity* in Pittsburgh in November 2004. She discussed the notion that at the heart of modernism lay medium specificity: the narrative is subordinated to the medium and the process of production. This sounds like a Duchampian proposition which makes it a little surprising and certainly contrary to Greenburg's view of Duchamp as postmodern. However this is also a definition of Modernism that could be used to describe aspects of early modern art as much as its twentieth century manifestation. I think for example of Velázquez animating his paint surface, often quite independent of narrative obligations but rather as a way to activate the viewer's attention to the material and the process of production. It is a means of moving the eye around the surface that can also be seen in an extreme form with the smeared (photographic) surfaces of Gerhard Richter's paintings. Kentridge's frame-by-frame progress explicitly reproduces every action, taking us on a similar tracing of the hand of the artist; by implication our eye moves in synch with that action.

Kentridge's films generally focus on individual characters. Soho Eckstein is a ruthless Johannesburg industrialist in pinstripes and Felix Teitelbaum is the sensitive poetic type and an artist; possibly they are two sides of the South African persona, or even aspects of Kentridge himself. In *Tide Table*, Soho Eckstein contemplates for the first time the devastating impact HIV and AIDS has had on South Africa. It begins with a seascape of cliffs and sand and a calm sea, then gradually bungalows, beach chairs, and breaking waves come into view. Soho appears on a hotel balcony while on a floor below three generals stand, each looking outwards through binoculars.

Soho is next seen reading his morning paper on the beach; he falls asleep, at which point the surroundings take on the quality of a dream. A black woman soothes the sleeping Soho, one beach chair begins to move about in a strange dance, and cattle appear within the beach huts and on the sand. Some of the cattle are drowned, slaughtered, and hung on meat racks while the carcasses of others are washed ashore. And so other characters including a young child come and go throughout this unfolding dream.

His work not only explores the political through personal experience as do artists like Mike Parr and Doris Salcedo, but his process of making the films is highly manual and reveals a strongly expressive gesture that encourages an empathy between viewer and artist in the act of mark-making and erasing; our eye follows the actions of his hand.

To create his films Kentridge does not use traditional single cell animation where thousands of individual images are drawn to make a sequence; instead he continuously alters the drawings using charcoal and an eraser. These drawings are not systematically planned but rather seem to evolve with the process of drawing, using dozens of separate charcoal drawings for each film that are continually erased and modified. Each modification is filmed on a 35mm camera to create a sense of movement. In *Tide table* he animates his charcoal drawings, rather than collaging found film footage and shadow puppetry as he has done in previous films. In some ways the subject of the film then becomes the process of drawing and erasure almost as much as the narrative it describes; living with the day-to-day reality of privilege at the expense of others requires a constant erasure of memory, even of sensibility and ethical attention.

Rosalind Krauss once used Kentridge as an example of her definition of Modernism.

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Anthony Bond

William Kentridge was born in Johannesburg in 1955, and continues to live and work in South Africa. His unique artistic practice offers a distinctive vision of the complex history of South Africa, the legacy of apartheid and, more broadly, the nature of human emotions and memory. Through his drawings, films, installations and sculpture, the artist reflects on the psychological landscape of a country which has experienced great upheaval – violence, racial and social injustice, the horrific effects of colonialism and the politics of apartheid, and more recently, the confronting acceptance of responsibility and the telling of truth.

Kentridge is not preaching about apartheid from a distant or moral high ground but speaking from the position of implication. Like many South African Jews he is vehemently against the abuse of human rights but lives in a society privileged as a result of the suffering Blacks endured. The films are intensely personal as well as making important political statements about the banality of evil that most of us at some time have condoned.

"I am interested in a political art, that is to say an art of ambiguity, contradiction, uncompleted gestures and uncertain endings. An art (and a politics) in which optimism is kept in check and nihilism at bay."

Anthony Bond OAM is Assistant Director, Curatorial & Head Curator International Art, Art Gallery of New South Wales

The Samstag Museum of Art is grateful to the Art Gallery of New South Wales for so generously agreeing to lend William Kentridge's *Tide table* for this exhibition.

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