

KIA DOCENT PRESENTATION / PAPER

The Nose

Artist: William Kentridge

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Introduction

Artist William Kentridge was born in Johannesburg, South Africa on 28 April 1955, the second of four children born to Sydney and Felicia Kentridge. Both sides of his family emigrated from Russia/Lithuania around 1900 to escape the pogroms of those times. They became assimilated Jews – the family name had been Kantorowitz. They prospered as tailors, locksmiths, and tradespeople on their way to entering the legal profession, becoming part of a tiny liberal elite in a nation where an overwhelming black majority was ruled by a minority of highly conservative whites. Both his parents were leading lawyers in the anti apartheid (apart hate) movement. It is through his family that Kentridge understood they lived in an abnormal social situation.

His three siblings have left South Africa – his older sister lives in Toronto; a younger brother, a management consultant and a younger sister live in England where Kentridge's parents moved in 1981 under the weight of what appeared to be the never ending system of apartheid. William however stayed in Johannesburg with a few short stints for study in London and Paris.

Drawing was something he had always done, but as his interests were wide he also pursued other media in the art world. He tried for a time to become a painter in oils but discovered that the process of having to choose a particular pallet for a particular work became a roadblock to his unique way of creating. He worked for a time in film making. He had been involved with theater primarily as one building props and designing and painting posters, but he also studied to be an actor while at the Jacque Lecoq School in Paris. From this particular school have come some well known names in European theater including Luc Bondy whose stage direction of Tosca for the Met was panned. In the Lecoq method everything in the actor begins with movement rather than with text. There is a great deal of improvisation taught there. What Kentridge discovered is that everything he did seemed to look the same. So, as he says, he had “failed as a commercial film maker, failed as a painter and failed as an actor”. It is likely he truly wanted to succeed as an actor but as he says, “I was reduced to an artist and I made peace with it.” When he was 30 he began to write the word “artist” after his name. That was that.

During these years of wondering and searching, he had met Anne Stanwix, whose family had emigrated from Australia to South Africa. They met when they were still in school in South Africa. She is a rheumatologist and they are the parents of three and now grandparents as well.

How Kentridge works in his own words: How meaning is made in the studio

“I have worked intermittently with both shadows and silhouettes for 20 years.” This quote comes from an article in The New Yorker magazine in 2010, at the time just prior to the premiere of The Nose by Dmitri Shostakovich at the Metropolitan Opera. Shadows and silhouettes still offer Kentridge a doorway into the meaning behind the making now 30 years on.

There is “the obvious agency in making, but the possible agency in seeing.” Kentridge reflects continually upon what is going on in the process of making. It is as though he stands outside himself and observes the making. He observes the materials responding to the process of the making – he can reflect on a typewriter producing a letter upon a piece of paper, then reflect upon a piece of paper followed by a reflection upon the action of the key upon the inked ribbon, the paper receiving the ink, the pressure of the metal key crushing the paper into the shape on the key that we then see as the letter “b” as though it were merely floating on the paper’s surface rather than having fundamentally altered the structure of the paper. In a profound way everyone is being acted upon as well as bringing action to a time and place in which we most often stand between one reality and another. We are the medium and we are the maker.

The making “does not start with a social message. It starts with images that interest me, or provoke me.” He calls his method “stone-age animation”. Unlike a Pixar film process Kentridge uses a single charcoal drawing, altered and re-photographed again and again the shadowy leftover traces of smudged or erased lines make the resulting film a ‘palimpsest’ – a history of its own making. By denying coherence, clarity and style, Kentridge has created ‘an art of resistance to modernism and post modernism’. No label adequately captures who he is, what he does.

“I look back and think, How lucky not to know what you are doing.” Because he works in this way of “not knowing” it is difficult for him to give direction to actors, singers and others, as it “implies that he knows what he is doing in advance.” Therefore he spends hours in the studio working out the film elements; then, he hires a four-person team of experienced collaborators who assist him: a set designer, a costume designer, a video editor, and an assistant director to work on staging those who will fit into his moving picture creations which are projected behind the stage action. Sometimes the focus will be on the actors. Sometimes the actors will blend into the film being projected. His preparation is meticulous for such a multi-media enterprise. He will know the music score and the singers’ parts completely. And he will have rehearsed with his team and all the moving parts prior to beginning stage rehearsals.

The basics of South Africa’s socio-political condition and history must be known to grasp his work fully, much as in the case of such artists as Francisco Goya and Käthe Kollwitz. The process required for the viewer is that they be willing to fill in the inevitable blanks in their own knowing as a result of their seeing.

Having seen a film of the Metropolitan Opera production of “The Nose”, the same can be said of the historical background of the Russian Empire (Gogol’s story), and the advent of Soviet Russia following the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 with the rise of Stalin which permeates the life of Shostakovich composing the opera score. There is a span of time of about 100 years from Gogol’s surreal story and the opera composition plus another 100 years to the production designed by Kentridge for the Met. The one seeing, hearing, will realize there are many blanks that need to be filled in. One viewing is not going to be enough to derive/discern meaning.

The story written by Gogol is quite simple. A bureaucrat named Kovalyov wakes up one morning to discover that during the night his nose has run away from his face leaving only a flat space behind!

The story unfolds as Kovalyov tries to find his nose which appears here and there as a personage of higher rank than he himself enjoys. He desires a higher rank. And now his nose has such a rank that Kovalyov is afraid to address him. By the end of the story the nose has returned but making sure it stays where it belongs is the final challenge to overcome.

Absurdity and the power of identity confront one another. Climbing higher mattered in Tsarist Russia as much as it mattered during Soviet times as well as the Russia of today. How does the act of climbing matter to 21st Century United States? How is the climbing accomplished?

Expressionism rooted in deep reflection

Kentridge's work is expressionist in that form alludes to content and vice versa. He collaborates with a wide range of artists, writers, singer, musicians and film makers in projects he undertakes. Rather than having storyboards and possessing certainty about where a particular project will go, his process allows for the unfolding of meaning by examination and reflection throughout until the project appears to be complete. He describes his process as standing close to the paper and then stepping back for a broader perspective. Prints become a by-product of larger productions.

On first glance a Kentridge print may not appear to offer very much. One reason for this is that he does not trust certainty. Certainty leads eventually to violence in order that the one who is certain can force his certainty on others. His work will not tell you what to think. Rather, discovering your own gut reactions will be helpful to uncovering meaning in his work which reveals very little actual content. At first glance the spare, rough and expressive qualities offer the viewer something somber that illustrates a situation both vulnerable and uncomfortable. Often the artist puts himself in the frame, as the one confronted by vulnerability and contradiction. He is concerned for what happens at the edges. The strange reality is: whatever is going on at the periphery describes the truth of the situation at the center. Before beginning any project Kentridge studies, reads, draws, ponders, looks for connections, places where the line he is drawing in his imagination creates connections to a larger story with a complex situation.

Part of this tendency to allow the line to spin out may be related to the first time he saw photographs of blacks killed in the Sharpeville massacre. They were in the desk drawer of his father's study. What startled him at the time – he was 7 – was that the bullet hole looked so very small entering the back of the person lying dead on the road, but the exit wound was an explosion of blood and tissue. A bullet did something unspeakable when it left the flesh. The reflections that a bullet was necessary to enforce certainty came much later.

“My drawings don't begin with a beautiful mark.” For Kentridge the activity of printmaking in particular is about getting the hand to lead the brain rather than the brain leading the hand. This approach is what he uses in all his making. “It has to be a mark of something out there in the world. It doesn't have to be an accurate drawing, but it has to stand for an observation, not something that is abstract, like an emotion.” And yet even this mark is provisional. It will change and be changed in the action of unfolding.

Philosophical approach to the whole matter of meaning and responding

“The act of seeing is always a negotiation between that which comes towards us and that which we project upon it.” (Yale Lecture 2015) A tree is not just a tree. There is something else going on in our seeing that changes what it is we do see. We are filled with many thoughts cascading through us often without our being completely aware. But becoming aware connects us to what we are seeing.” Truth is always provisional about what is happening in the center.” The periphery migrates into the center. What does that mean for the periphery and for the center?

That Kentridge engages so deeply as an observer could make us conclude he is not connected to the issues the characters he draws are facing. Perhaps that is one reason he often puts himself into the projects he produces. He is the man who knows he is himself implicated in what is happening, but he is also the man who senses the provisional nature of any response he makes. The making of art in which the questions are allowed to surface is one way Kentridge lives in the gap between knowing and not knowing, a gap which exists between the so-called center and the so-called periphery. It is in this gap that Kentridge makes meaning.

Resources consulted for this paper

1. The New Yorker, “Lines of Resistance”, Calvin Tompkins, 10 January 2010, in the issue from 18 January 2010.
2. Kentridge, William, Six Drawing Lessons, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2014. Based upon the Norton Lectures delivered at Harvard in 2006.
3. A lecture given at Yale in 2015 available on You tube as William Kentridge: Peripheral Thinking
4. Finger, Brad and Christine Weidemann, 50 Contemporary Artists You Should Know, Prestel: Munich, London, New York, 2007
5. Wikipedia – Biographical sketch of William Kentridge

Online resources and links

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yaTnWGGhkzy> Brilliant Ideas – 25 minutes

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G11wOmXoJ6U> How we make sense of the world 30 minutes *

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nD_oW9pb3O8 4 minute film of the Met production

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tyndlMIgbnU> 4 minute intro to Six Drawing Lessons

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dnweo-LQZLU> Art must defend the uncertain 6 minutes

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SmaXqktW3A8> Ted Talk “The Invention of Africa”

*One of the best videos in which Kentridge describes his many “failures” on the way to becoming an artist as well as the interior process which shapes how he makes sense of the world. Video from 2014.