

# William Kentridge: Quite the Opposite of Cartoons

by Philippe Moins

[Download a Quicktime movie](#) from *6 Soho Eckstein* by William Kentridge. 975 K. © William Kentridge.

Johannesburg, the end of the 20th Century.



William Kentridge. Photo courtesy of William Kentridge.

Soho Eckstein is a fat person; some kind of real-estate magnate. With his striped suits and pudgy features, you would place him somewhere between Bolshevik caricatures of capitalists and the expressionist images of the Weimar Republic.

Felix Teitelbaum we only see from the back--to begin with at least. Passive and dreamy, he's around for the rise of Soho Eckstein, and again for his downfall, which is the only time we see Soho in a more humane light. Around them,

South Africa, confiscated by the whites, breaks free. Felix only becomes active when he deceives Soho by having an affair with Sarah Eckstein, the entrepreneur's wife. Even then, only his tongue is active, as if his sacred body dedicated all of its life to this substitute for sex.

In each short animation, Felix Teitelbaum progressively resembles his creator William Kentridge more and more, like those self-portraits from the Renaissance in which the artist depicts himself in one corner of the picture. However, there is also something of Kentridge in Soho Eckstein, this privileged white man who thinks that nothing can resist him, and builds massive monuments to his own work.

In a universe of devastated landscapes, wounded bodies, and out-dated means of communication (bakelite telephones, megaphones, and stadium-style loudspeakers) and measuring instruments (theodolites and sextants) signaling unknown shores, the heroes of this animated drawing evolve--and the term animated drawings can be taken in its most literal sense.

In contrast to the first episodes in which Soho and apartheid absolutely rule, where everything is either good or bad, black and white, as judged by our western viewpoint, a more subtle, moving and sincere point of view followed, culminating with *Felix in Exile*, *History of the Main Complaint*, and *Weighing and Wanting*.

The uncertainty of the times and the relationships between people is mirrored in the landscape and figures which are rendered in black, sometimes soft, sometimes hesitant, charcoal, drawn mostly in shadows and sketches rather than with well-defined details.

### **The Impossible Innocence**

This animated fresco, patiently constructed over the years in the form of seven short animation films, unfolded from 1989 to the present. It is the work of William Kentridge. This South African artist recently came to Brussels to present two events: a production of the Monteverdi opera *The Return Of Ulysses* at the Festival of Arts, and an important exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, which will tour through the end of the year to Munich, Germany and Graz, Austria. A theme running through all of his work is his peculiar way of representing South Africa. He does not dwell on the picturesque or humanitarian elements of the country. He doesn't even take a militant stance, even though his career is that of a white progressive intellectual, with a certain iconography common to the politically engaged artist. Rather William Kentridge feels at home in this town of Johannesburg where he creates these works impregnated by the situation of his homeland, its history and its contradictions.



*Weighing and Wanting*. © William Kentridge.

Kentridge has said, "I haven't been successful in escaping from Johannesburg. The four houses that I have lived in, my school, my studio, have all been less than two miles from each other. And in the end, all my work is rooted in this rather desperate provincial city. I have never tried to make illustrations of apartheid, but the drawings and films are certainly spawned by and feed off the brutalized society left in its wake. 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." (1)

His films are often desperate, but always poetic; one can see this best when he evokes visions of a state of grace, a doorway to paradise that can make one forget the realities and horrors. Kentridge once explained, "Certain artists, from Matisse to the lyrical abstract painters, have been successful in preserving a sort of innocence or blindness and continuing to work like that in our times, without bad faith gnawing at their work. I'd love to be able to work like them, but it's not possible." (2)



*Felix in Exile.* © William Kentridge.

### **Animation as Process**

Why did this fine-artist painter, draughtsman and engraver decide to dedicate so much energy to animated film? The answer lies in *Memo*, one of his earliest attempts at film, which mixed pixillation with drawn animation. What interests Kentridge is Time; its passing, the traces it leaves, the memory that events, beings and objects leave when we close our eyes on our past. What technique besides frame-by-frame could better render an account of this phenomena?

In order to do this, Kentridge gradually refined a personal animation technique. Each of his short films is based on a series of some 20 to 40 charcoal drawings, mostly in large sizes with some enhancements in pastels. In a desire for a chromatic simplicity with symbolic values, only colors, such as blue to represent water, and red, are used, glaring against the subtlety of gray.

Each of these drawings is like a storyboard sketch, often filmed with no camera moves. Kentridge modifies his composition little by little between each frame shot by erasing certain parts and re-drawing them. The charcoal technique, ephemeral and volatile, lends itself to this treatment, particularly in that faint traces remain of the imagery that has been erased. The result on screen gives a rather fragile image, all in nuances, quite in the manner of a man obsessed by the idea of traces, of reminiscences. Unconcerned with traditional animation techniques, not even filming with a true animation stand, William Kentridge is a perfect autodidact of animation, a fact that reinforces the fragile, precarious side of his creations. It also permits him to reinvent, with all sincerity, techniques discovered by the first animators at the beginning of this century. In this sense, animation is only a process of unveiling the act of drawing, and can become a part of a greater whole. One can sometimes see his hand or his entire body appear in certain films. In his films, he acts almost like a stage manager, integrated into his films as he directs the combining of sets, giant puppets, actors and manipulators (*Faust in Africa!*, *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, and the very recent opera *The Return of Ulysses*). Rather than using the term 'animated cartoon,' with its connotations of entertainment, he prefers to use the

term 'drawings for projection' to describe his work.

By integrating these diverse processes, Kentridge's films really attain their full expression only in the theatre, or in installations like those he presented in his museum exhibit. The impact of the true scale of his large formats is perceptible here, in the company of the films and works specially created for these circumstances. The originals of his drawings for projection, these large charcoals, the last steps of an animation process before a camera, exude a different force, which gives one a fresh appreciation for the films of which these drawings are apart. Outside the world of contemporary art and the great centers of theatrical creation, William Kentridge has succeeded in both of these arenas paradoxically by being invited in the same year (1997) to the prestigious Documenta Art Exhibition in Kassel and the prestigious Theatre Festival in Avignon. His unique use of animation has certainly played a part in this double honor, which is late in coming from the world animation community itself.



*Faustus in Africa!* © William Kentridge.

The William Kentridge Exhibition will be in Germany until October 11, 1998, at Kunstverein, Munich. It will then be in Austria from November 15, 1998 to January 15, 1999, at the New Gallery Graz at the Landesmuseum Joanneum, Graz.

(1) Michael Goldby, William Kentridge, Painter, *Revue Noire* No. 11, December 1993, January/February 1994, pp. 20-23

(2) Caroline Bakargiev-Christov, *William Kentridge* (exhibition catalogue) Palais des Beaux Arts, Bruxelles, 1998

Translated from French by William Moritz.

*Philippe Moins is co-director of the [Animation Festival of Brussels](#), for which he organized one of the first retrospectives of William Kentridge at any animation festival. He is the regular animation reporter for the daily Belgian newspaper *Le Matin* (The Morning Paper).*

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