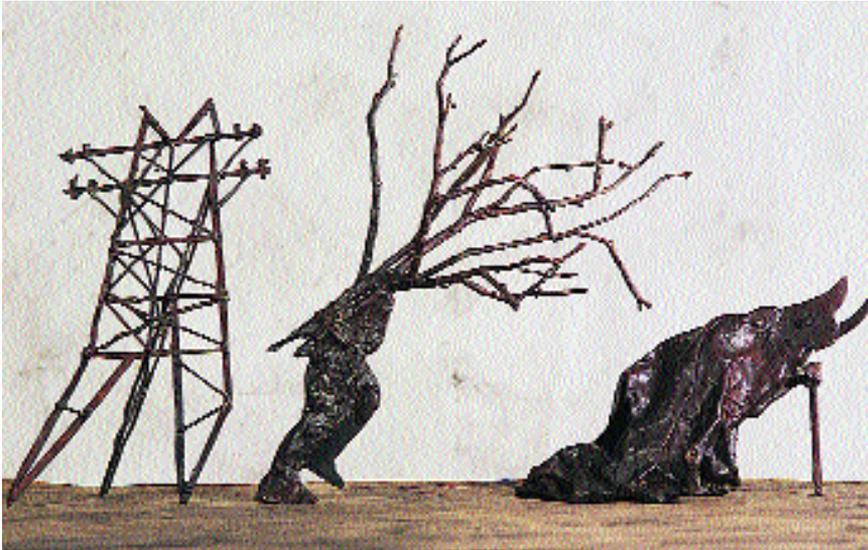


## The Human Procession: William Kentridge

by Carolee Thea



Last year, the Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea in Turin hosted a major retrospective of William Kentridge's films, drawings, and sculpture, organized by chief curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. This amazing building was originally adapted into a residence for the House of Savoy. Imposingly baroque, it was part of a huge plan devised in 1718 by Filippo Juvarra for Vittorio Amedeo II but never completed. Restored in 1984, the castle and the Manica Lunga (long hall) display a permanent collection, as well as temporary exhibitions by artists of international reputation.

Seventy of Kentridge's works, including the premier of his latest film, *Tide Table*, graced the halls. One salon housed a startling processional of 26 small bronze figures (*Procession*, 1999–2000), elevated on a boardwalk supported by iron sawhorses. These figures evolved from Kentridge's *Shadow Procession*, a nocturnal pro-

cession of characters made by filming the shadows of three-dimensional objects projected onto the façade of a museum in Barcelona.

A form of pre-cinema, the animation re-ignites the madness in Kentridge's *Ubu* films, in which Ubu leads a line of emaciated shadow figures shuffling across the screen. The music, which incorporates choral singing and parade rhythms, was taken from recordings of political rallies in South Africa in the 1990s. Another version of *Shadow Procession* premiered at the Fifth Istanbul Biennial and was later project-

ed in Times Square, New York City.

Kentridge is a multi-dimensional artist. Since 1992, he has worked in collaboration with the Handspring Puppet Company to create mixed-media pieces using puppets, live actors, and animation. Such combinations of hand-drawn and filmic images have been the basis of much of Kentridge's work. He uses simple means of animation, building familiar but monstrous characters out of common materials, torn paper, and altered found objects. What seems like an infinity of human figures surges across the plane of vision, pulling burdens, swinging crutches, or carrying cities. This array of small-scale anti-heroes and legless monsters suggests not only the political ramifications of war, but also the forward momentum of daily life. In all of his works, whether drawing, film, theater, or sculpture, we find a poetic and satirical exploration of multi-faceted identities shaped by personal histories and social issues.

Kentridge, like Goya, Hogarth, Beckmann, and Daumier, explores the possibilities of poetry in contemporary society while providing a satirical commentary on its horrors, upheavals, and follies. Rooted in Johannesburg, South Africa, where he was born in 1955, he witnessed the release of Nelson Mandela, his country's emergence in the mid-1990s as a multi-racial democracy, and later, the elections that brought an end to apartheid. Kentridge's work is stimulated by the process of remembering and forgetting. One can best understand the erasures in his drawings as a



All images in this article are details from *Procession*, 1999–2000. Bronze, 26 figures, dimensions variable.



metaphor for the loss of historical memory, its willed amnesia in response to injustice, racism, and brutality.

Kentridge's meditations on the multiplicity of the self and desire are distilled into a challenging and confrontational inquiry that suggests a split subject with contradictory desires. His use of the shadows produced by the bronze sculptures suggests that various forms of being have equivalent authenticity. Through this figuration and narrative, Kentridge relates the inner landscape (personal memory) to the outer landscape of social and political events. This duality permeates all of his work.

The procession is led by a full-figured woman assembled from found objects and modeled gestures—her bustier is an espresso maker, her head a flat silhouette. Walking behind is a pinstriped businessman, perhaps one of Kentridge's stock characters, Soho Eckstein, who wears a bowler and striped pants. Together, these two figures resemble a bourgeois couple or perhaps a matriarch and her consort. The other walking figures include a shadow man whose feet are shod in shapeless boots, created from and encumbered by a large plate of steel. A robed figure's too-long dangling arms end in clenched hands, while

his feet move in a slow burdensome shuffle. Another, constructed on two planes, is a man wearing a raincoat and homburg. When seen from a 90-degree angle, however, he appears as a showerhead and a system of plates.

Of another figure, whose back is tied with bundled branches, Kentridge says, "I lay awake unable to get these figures out of my head; for example, an old man—half tree, half man—carrying firewood. It doesn't make any sense. However, in a dream it was revealed—by the tree-man—that you can wait as long as you like, but no explanation will come." It was only when he realized that the persistence of these figures, and their refusal to make sense, could itself become the subject of the shadow-theater that he could sleep.

As in a musical composition, half-way down the procession, the mood changes from solemnity to festivity. Two dancing women carry a child, followed by a man whose head is made up of palm branches and another large-bodied small-headed man whose hands carry sticks as if he were conducting music. A woman with her arms raised walks festively in the opposite direction.

The quirky variations of this back-



ward/forward movement encapsulate Kentridge's work as a whole. At first I thought of Muybridge and then the early films of Bruce Nauman. When Kentridge was working on this processional project, a plague of ants invaded Johannesburg and he began drawing the ant movements. He discovered that by using a digital video camera as a kind of sketchbook, he could reverse time and tone. He says, "I suppose the possibility of reversing film or tape is so seductive because it immediately reveals what the world is like if time is reversed—and what it would be like if one could remember the future."

Not just a group of figures carrying burdens within their bodies, the processional evokes the nomadic flow of global migrants surging toward or away from borders. They claim freedom, a hopeful future. But at the same time, Kentridge makes us see that society has not come that far in the 200 years since the publication of Goya's *Los Caprichos* series—*Procession* reflects the same hypocrisy, vanity, greed, and ignorance.

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