School of the Arts’ First Artist-in-Residence Using Time to Create Drawings, Film

BY KRISTIN STERLING

When entering studio X01 in Watson Hall one may expect to find a graduate visual arts student busy with a school project. Instead, a world-renowned artist is hard at work there. In fact, he is Columbia’s first artist-in-residence at the School of the Arts (SOA), and multidisciplinary South African artist William Kentridge will be creating many forms of art in his studio through January.

On this particular day, three life-sized charcoal/turpentine drawings of couples dancing are found on the walls of Kentridge’s Watson Hall studio. They depict the futile battles against entropy, Kentridge says, representing bodies aging rather than bodies triumphant. At the conclusion of his residency, Kentridge will create one of these drawings to the LeRoy Neiman Center for Print Studies in Dodge Hall.

In another corner of the studio, Kentridge has a long worktable covered with an equally large sheet of paper, where he is creating ink drawings. One is a typewriter. He often turns these ink drawings into prints or woodcuts to make yet other elements that may appear in one of his animated films.

The project he is working on this day is a film, tentatively titled “Reversals of Fortune,” which depicts things in reverse. He already experimented with filming a scene where he threw a pot of paint at the wall to see how it would look in reverse.

And these are just a few of the projects Kentridge is working on while he is in New York. During his residence at Columbia, Kentridge will invite graduate visual arts students into his studio for discussions and to preview his works in progress. Likewise, he will visit student studios and critique their work.

In addition, Kentridge offered a lecture to SOA students which included selections of his animated films and a question and answer session.

Kentridge is getting used to such interactions. In October, at New York’s Drawing Center, he participated in a discussion of the role of artists and the experimental process-medium of drawing. An exhibition of his video projections and drawings from “Zeno Writing” will be on display at the Goodman Gallery (24 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019) through Jan. 4. This exhibition is based on the production “Confessions of Zeno,” which opened in Germany, South Africa, and Japan.

“A true multi-disciplinary artist,” says Bruce Ferguson, dean of Columbia’s School of the Arts. “I cannot think of a single contemporary artist’s work that more challengingly addresses the complexities of harsh political and human realities through material aesthetics than William’s.”

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“Confessions of Zeno” is the climax of Kentridge’s exhibition in the summer of 2001. “... His scale may shift in an instant from public to intimate, but he faithfully records human folly in all its tragic and farcical dimensions, while holding out the possibility that the human race may yet prove worthy of its creation.”

Kentridge’s work attracted international attention in 1997 at Documenta X in Kassel, Germany, and at biennales, major international festivals, in his hometown of Johannesburg and in Havana. Subsequently he participated in biennales in Sao Paolo in 1998; Venice’s APERTutto and Istanbul in 1999, and Kwangju, Korea, Shanghai and Havana in 2000.


While many modern artists use multiple media in their work, few employ as wide a range as Kentridge. When he begins with an idea, he has a few starting points but no clear vision of what the end product will be, or which media he will use to get there.

“What Kentridge has brought to the studio is a video projection and an artwork that is continually revised to create changes. While the majority of animators have hundreds of pages of drawings, or computer images, to create a scene, Kentridge works from only a few.”

In addition to using the charcoal drawings in films, Kentridge is also known for taking a drawing (such as the dancing couple) and having it made into prints or lithographs. He then cuts the prints or lithographs in strategic locations—for the dancing couple, maybe the heads, arms and legs—so that he can arrange and reposition the pieces to create different scenes.

He also takes a series of objects (such as the ink drawing of the typewriter) and has multiple copies printed or woodcuts made. Depending on the project, Kentridge may use these cut outs to construct a “drawing” on paper or canvas on the wall, or he may film the arrangement and subsequent reorientations.

How did Kentridge begin with animation? “I had a theatre, film and drawing background and animation was a natural combination of all three,” he explains. “It is impossible to find money for a feature film [in South Africa]. This way I do filmmaking with a crew of one. On the first day I set out to make a film. I can have the first few seconds made. That is a priviledge in the world of film.”

Kentridge’s films may be seen in museums around the world that display his work.

“The benefit of film versus painting,” he says, “is that people sit and watch the entire film the whole way through. It is the same with novelists—either people have read your book, or they haven’t. With a painting they may look at it for five minutes, but you wonder, have they seen it or not? Did they try to give it a chance?”

As evidence that people have “truly seen” his drawings, a retrospective of Kentridge’s work, including 11 animated films, more than 60 drawings, 2 sculptural installations and video presentations of theatre and opera productions directed by Kentridge finished its five-city U.S. tour in October at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The retrospective was on display at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York in the summer of 2001, and will conclude in Capetown, South Africa, in December.