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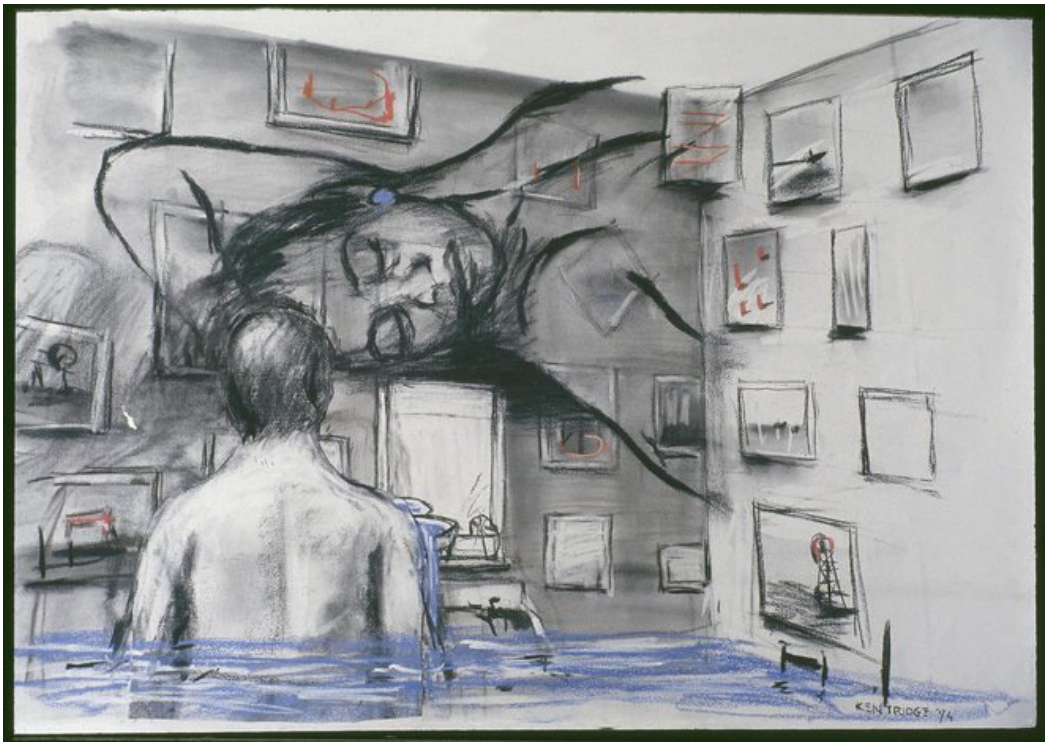
William Kentridge, beautiful and unbearable at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art



William Kentridge, Felix in Exile, 1994. Still from 35mm film transferred to video, 8 min, 43 sec loop. Collection of Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Gift of Susan and Lewis Manilow, 2001.23. Credt: Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery

By Rafael Francisco Salas

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William Kentridge has created some of the most profoundly imagined artworks of our time. Tucked away in a small gallery in a corner of the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art are two his animated films. One's impulse might be to head straight to the dramatic prints by Frank Stella also on display, but take a quick right into the Imprint Gallery. You will be rewarded.

"The Heart has its own Memory" is a quotation from Albert Camus' novel "The Fall," which holds all people accountable for the destruction of war. It is a fitting title for this exhibit. Created between 1994 and 1996, animated charcoal drawings by Kentridge examine the legacy of apartheid in South Africa, asking how he, and we, even as bystanders, must be responsible for it.

His two main characters, Soho Eckstein, a voracious, pinstriped industrialist, and Felix Teitlebaum, a sensitive and romantic artist, both resemble Kentridge and work as fictional alter egos. In "Felix in Exile" we see Teitlebaum naked in a small hotel room, contemplating the charts and maps of a black African woman who appears as a surveyor, gauging and measuring the barren South African landscape. Her drawings move and shift to display prone bodies bleeding on the ground, old newspapers blowing past, obscuring the figures as they transform into the land itself. The surveyor herself becomes a victim, or a martyr to victimization, keening in pain and falling to the ground, her blood spreading around her. The hotel room fills with water. In the final shot we see Felix standing knee deep in a pond, gazing forlornly into the distance.

“History of the Main Complaint” opens to Eckstein lying in a hospital bed. He is comatose, his body being prodded by doctors. The patient dreams of driving past the bodies of black Africans. He is a witness to several vicious beatings. We see Eckstein’s eyes in the rearview mirror. A ghostly figure emerges from the darkness and smashes into his windshield. The resultant crash wakens Eckstein from his coma. The film concludes with Eckstein surrounded by phones and ticker-tape, smoking a cigar, his dream vision all but forgotten.

“I am only an artist,” said Kentridge in the documentary “Anything is Possible.” “My job is to make drawings, not to make sense.” This statement is on the mark. The animations are not easy. Symbols become complex and the narrative indirect. Kentridge works around the edges of fact and the senses. His drawings are expressive and choppy, full of force and speed. We feel the emotional impact of the films as much as we are able to understand them overtly.

This mystery belies a deep understanding of the human condition and an empathy for it. Both of Kentridge’s parents were lawyers who represented people marginalized as a result of apartheid. He has similarly devoted his artistic practice to expose injustice and to communicate the voices that suffer under it.

To me, what is most amazing about the films are that they are so heart rendingly beautiful. At times they are almost unbearable. Kentridge draws much of the imagery for the films on single sheets of paper, creating an image in charcoal, photographing it, and then transforming the drawing for the next frame. The resultant stop-action animation contains the erasures and marks of previous drawings, creating a ghostly narration that parallels the dissolution of memory, of history itself. The image of the surveyor character twisting in pain and sorrow carries the gestures and marks of her movement in and around her. It is a potent, deeply felt human gesture, on par with the greatest achievements in art.

Artwork created as political protest can quickly lose its impact. Particular events or ideas can leave them feeling dated, like objects out of time. They can also be inhibited by too much detail, text and analysis. Still, works like Goya’s “The Third of May” or the drawings of Käthe Kollwitz have retained their universal impact. The art of William Kentridge will have significance far beyond their specific moment in history.

“William Kentridge: The Heart Has its own Memory” is on view at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, 227 State St., Madison, through April 24. For more information visit mmoca.org.

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