

ART

## Let Us Now Praise William Kentridge

The Warehouse presents a memorable show devoted to Kentridge, one of the world's greatest artists.

BY RAFAEL SALAS — JULY 29, 2022

**William Kentridge** Is one of the greatest living artists. His work combines a deeply held world view revolving around social justice combined with a neo-expressionist drawing practice, ranging expansively to include animation, film, opera and assemblage. The artist achieves a singular artistic gestalt, a vital visual language exposing inequity while simultaneously preserving joy and an infectious sense of play.

Kentridge, a native of Johannesburg, South Africa, is the son of anti-apartheid lawyers. He matured as an artist while world leaders isolated his country during the 1970's and 80's. In this relative seclusion, Kentridge developed artwork that utilizes drawing, erasure, film and other experimental forms to describe a space where "optimism is kept in check and nihilism is kept at bay," as he once put it.

"See for Yourself" is a broad survey drawn from the personal collection of **John Shannon** and **Jan Serr**, owners of *The Warehouse Art Museum and Research Center*. Comprising over 100 objects, the exhibition offers an overview of the dominant themes of Kentridge's career. It also includes early works that show his nascent inspiration.

The title describes how guests have the opportunity to interact with and discover, but also demands their own close analysis, even culpability, in what they witness. See for yourself how refugees march towards a future unknown. See for yourself how empires fall under the weight of greed and disparity. See for yourself.

Two large-scale etchings display variations on the symbol of Rome's origin, The Capitoline Wolf, a suckling mother she-wolf. Kentridge portrays the animal above a white and a black jug to catch her milk, her body hewn in broad, powerful black strokes silhouetted against the sky. Above her, the artist scrawls "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori," or "It is sweet and fitting to die for the homeland," by the Roman lyric poet Horace. The phrase was co-opted by poet **Wilfred Owen** to condemn the horrors of World War I. A mirrored image of the wolf is represented in skeletal form with the phrase "Triumphs and Laments" written above. Together they become harrowing, poetic reflections.

Immigration and the plight of "processions of the dispossessed" are a consistent theme for Kentridge. In "Portage," a parade of people are seen walking, burdens hoisted on their backs and on top of their heads. The figures are



*William Kentridge: She-Wolf and Jugs 2020. Etching on Phumani cotton and sisal handmade paper mounted on raw cotton cloth. Courtesy of the Serr and Shannon Collection/The Warehouse Art Museum.*

rendered roughly in ripped black paper. Among the group, however, we also see someone dancing and another with a fist raised defiantly in the air. This artwork echoes Kentridge's masterpiece "More Sweetly Play the Dance," the multimedia epic film displayed at the *Milwaukee Art Museum* in 2018.

As much as he works to expose injustice, folly and frailty, Kentridge also creates sweet and humorous moments invested with a deeply felt humanity. Film captures the artist in his studio acting out the role of Papageno, The Bird Catcher, from **Mozart's** opera, *The Magic Flute*. As the artist performs, we see his body merge into an animated figure and scene, birds flying in and out of the picture plane. The scene zooms out to an actual performance, with Kentridge's work projected behind the stage. It is a wonderful testament to the multifaceted depth of the artist's practice.

Viewers are also invited to experience the show interactively. Anamorphic drawings on turntables are reflected in mirrors to reveal some of the artist's signature symbolism – telephones, typewriters, megaphones. A stereoscope is available for viewers to examine scenes in three dimensional dioramas. There is also a viewing room with another film and an installation containing a desk, bookshelf and typewriter, seemingly lifted directly from one of the artist's works.

A unique and satisfying addition to the show are a number of early works which would be rare to see elsewhere. They show the thread of the artist's trajectory, and include clear inspiration drawn from **Francis Bacon** and **Francisco Goya** among others. In addition to these images that show the questing search of the artist as a younger man, the exhibition might have expanded further to include works from other institutions or collections.

"See for Yourself" demonstrates Kentridge as a prophet, a seer of the profound and terrible truths that humanity creates and endures. At the same time he is sentimental, enrapt by what is beautiful and joyful in our world. I was moved. I think you will be, too.

In addition to the exhibition at The Warehouse, **Philip Miller**, composer and collaborator with Kentridge, plans to perform along with animated short films of the artist in Windhover Hall at the Milwaukee Art Museum on November 16, along with South African singers **Ann Masina** and **Tshegofatso Moeng**, and Italian pianist **Vincenzo Pasquariello**. The artist also plans to attend the exhibition and give a presentation at the gallery in early November.

William Kentridge: See for Yourself is on view through December 16, 2022. The Warehouse Art Museum and Research Center is located at 1635 W. St. Paul Ave.

## William Kentridge: See for Yourself Gallery



*Studio Life: Blackboard, 2021 Photogravure Photographed by Robb Quinn Courtesy of The Warehouse Art Museum*



*Skeleton She-Wolf 2020 Etching on Phumani cotton and sisal handmade paper mounted on raw cotton cloth Serr and Shannon Collection| The Warehouse Art Museum*