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Art Now LA

William Kentridge: 'In Praise of Shadows'  
*Exploring Past and Present Injustices*  
The Broad  
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by Jody Zellen



The first work I saw by the South African-based artist William Kentridge was in Germany at Documenta X in 1997. On view was the mesmerizing, just under nine-minute animation *Felix in Exile* (1994), a narrative about the horrors that occurred during apartheid in South Africa. The story was created through a stop-motion process that captures a succession of ever changing gestural, charcoal drawings. It chronicles the relationship between the fictional characters Felix Teitelbaum and Soho Eckstein as they navigate the terrain and politics of 1990s South Africa.

To make this and his later animations, Kentridge executes a scene or a figure in charcoal, erases parts and adds to it, documenting the steps along the way with a camera. The drawings, as well as the finished video are sometimes exhibited together. Over the years, Kentridge has expanded his practice to include multi-channel projections, stage sets for theatre and even opera. I have had the great fortune of encountering many of Kentridge's stop motion animations and installations in museums and galleries in the United States and abroad since my first encounter with his work, and was pleased to see some of his iconic pieces: *The Refusal of Time* (first shown at Documenta 13 in 2012) as well as *Seven Fragments for Georges Méliès* (at MOCA Pacific Design Center in 2005), which are also included in the survey exhibition at The Broad.

*In Praise of Shadows* spans thirty-five years and gives museum goers the opportunity to view his sculpture, stage sets, animations and works on paper at the same time. The underlying subject matter of much of his work documents the history of apartheid and the fight against it in South Africa. Kentridge is an astute and thoughtful reader of history, as well as an informed observer of current events who skillfully integrates political messages into his art without overwhelming it.

Whether through a single channel video, a multi-screen projection, or a miniature stage set, Kentridge takes his viewers on a journey. Sometimes the journey is metaphysical, sometimes it is actual, and often it is both as in *7 Fragments for Georges Méliès*, *Journey to the Moon* and *Day for Night*. Projected together in a large room at The Broad, these films take viewers from the earth into space through a series of ad hoc scenarios. Kentridge cleverly uses props in his studio to create the surface of the moon and the rocket ship needed to travel there.

These pieces are breathtaking, delightful and even humorous at times. In addition to these films, other highlights of the exhibition include the spectacular *The Refusal of Time* (2012). Set within a darkened room filled with crates, chairs and sculptures, *The Refusal of Time* is accompanied

by a cacophony of sounds, as well as five separate video projections in which Kentridge and other actors appear. This bombastic and frenetic piece explores the nature of time and topics relating to both colonialism and industry.

While it is impossible to describe each of the more than 130 works in the jam-packed exhibition, the takeaway is that for more than thirty-five years, Kentridge has surprised and amazed audiences, whether through drawing, sculpture, video or installation. He has the uncanny ability to create politically and socially engaged works that are never didactic. While the pieces are beautiful, extremely well-executed and emotionally riveting, they more importantly explore past and present injustices in the world and are inspirations for both their candor and exquisite execution.

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