

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

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WILLIAM KENTRIDGE: LET US TRY FOR ONCE

March 1 - April 20, 2019

Opening Reception: Friday, March 1, 6-8 pm

Marian Goodman Gallery New York is delighted to present William Kentridge's *Let Us Try for Once* opening March 1st, an exhibition of new film, drawings and sculpture related to three major performance projects from the past two years. These include the epic *The Head & the Load*, a theatrical tour de force co-composed by Philip Miller and Thuthuka Sibisi recently shown at the New York Armory in December 2018 following its premiere at the Tate Modern London; the celebrated production of Alban Berg's opera *Wozzeck*, directed by Kentridge, which premiered in the Salzburg opera festival in 2017, is currently at the Sydney Opera House this February, and comes to The Metropolitan Opera in the 2019-2020 season; and *Ursonate*, a performance of Kurt Schwitters' 1932 sound poem of the same title, presented at *Performa Biennial* New York, in 2017.

KABOOM!, 2018 inaugurates the exhibition: a three-channel work projected onto a model scaled to the stage of *The Head & the Load*, alongside charcoal drawings used in the production. Birds, soldiers, historical figures, waterfalls, and landscapes recreate an imaginative topography in the North Gallery. "*The head and the load are the troubles of the neck*" goes the Ghanaian proverb. *The Head & the Load* tells the story of the nearly 2 million African porters and carriers used by the British, French and Germans during the First World War in Africa through music, dance, film projections, mechanised sculptures and shadow-play. Invoking war and history itself as a subject, the charcoal drawings for projection provide a backdrop to Kentridge's signature trope of procession, a pageant of "what we've chosen not to remember": porters bearing the physical load that was carried all across Africa, but also the historical legacy and paradoxes of colonialism, magnified by the war.

As Kentridge says, "*This was not its starting point of *The Head & the Load*, but it is what the work itself, the material we were dealing with, pushed us towards. By the paradox I mean the contradictory relationships towards Europe – the desire of Africans to be part of Europe, to share in the wealth and the richness of Europe, and wanting to resist Europe and its depredations.*"

If, as Kentridge says, the process of recording history is constructing from reconfigured fragments to arrive at a provisional understanding of the past, so is the act of recording, dismembering and reordering [an] essential activity of the studio: "*This dismantling is not simply a technique or strategy, but also can be a revelation of the instability of knowledge in the world, its provisionality. The collage and the ordering becomes the subject itself.*"

This theme follows in each of the groups of work on view. Kentridge arrived at a project about war as a result of having finished a production of Alban Berg's opera *Wozzeck* the year before, in 2017, at the Salzburg Festival. "*The conceit of the production was thinking of Berg's *Wozzeck* as a premonition of WWI. This is where war and ideas around it entered the project*"

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The charcoal drawings used in the design of *Wozzeck*—a bridge to subsequent projects—are on view in the North Gallery Viewing Room and continue into the South Gallery. Re-inscribing a world historically transformed by conflict, these grainy charcoal drawings “echo the music, but also the world they are depicting—of things transforming, of sounds under the earth”, and are drawn from documentary photographs of the ravaged First World War battlefields of Flanders. The composer Alban Berg brought his own experience of the Front to *Wozzeck*, written between 1914-1922 and based on Georg Büchner’s 19th-century play “Woyzeck”. Additionally, several years prior, in 1992, Kentridge had adapted the drama as *Woyzeck on the Highveld* in a collaboration with the Handspring Puppet Theater Company of Johannesburg.

In the Third Floor Project Space are drawings comprised of bold grids of color, text, truncated syllables, and figures and objects. A film diptych, *Ursonate*, 2018-2019 relates to Kentridge’s performance of Kurt Schwitters’ 1932 sound poem *Ursonate* at the Performa Biennial in the Harlem Parish Church, New York in 2017. Reiterating the idea of history as a strange relationship of written words to the world, Kentridge’s invocation of the Dadaist legacy of illogic and absurdity are brought to light in this performance.

“I make a performance of the absurd as if it is sensible, to show its obverse, to show the illogic, the nonsense that hides in the sensible and the logical.... The gaps between the world which are pauses, breaths, change of volume, of emphasis, devices outside of words and their argument, and words and gaps between words can shatter different strains of meaning: the meanings we make beyond and before the meaning of the text. All the hesitations and provisionality of truth. All the biographical and idiosyncratic events that shape not just how the world is conceived but the sense we construct of it.”

Kentridge’s re-enactment of *Ursonate*—its pauses, gestures, and sounds—exists in parallel to the gaps of language and ruptures of history in *The Head & the Load*, whose libretto comprises a mélange of forms and a collage of fragments in place of discourse: a Zulu translation of Tristan Tzara, an isiSwati translation of Aimé Césaire, extracts from the Berlin Conference of 1884 which divided up Africa, excerpts from a Swahili phrase book, and from Frantz Fanon, John Chilembwe, Sol Plaatjie, and Karl Krauss’s *The Last Days of Mankind*.

Kentridge brings the viewer full circle with *Lexicon*, a group of individual bronze sculptures which populate the exhibition, and are accompanied by *Paragraph II*. Based on a catalogue of forms both ancient and modern, from art history and from his own encyclopedic concordance of images, they range from relics of *The Head & the Load* to ubiquitous characters from a panoply of films. From carrier pigeon, pre-radar listening device, gas mask, war horse, and tank, to a cat, reclining nude, flowers, a fan, and Durer’s rhino, Kentridge proposes a universal archive of possible ideas. His interest is in the spaces of ambiguity, of provisionality, the possibility that a landscape of objects can be a rebus waiting to be read, images to be arranged and interpreted in different ways.

William Kentridge was born in 1955 in Johannesburg, where he currently lives and works. His work crosses a diverse range of artistic media such as drawing, performance, film, printmaking, sculpture, painting. Kentridge has also directed a number of acclaimed operas and theatrical productions. Most

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recently, *The Head & the Load* has been performed at the Park Avenue Armory, New York; Tate Modern, Turbine Hall, London and Ruhrtriennial, Germany (all 2018). Recent major exhibitions of his work include *Thick Time* which opened at Whitechapel Gallery, London in 2016 and travelled to subsequent venues, including the Louisiana Museum, Copenhagen, Denmark and the Museum der Moderne, Salzburg (2017). In 2016 his 500 metre frieze *Triumphs and Laments* was presented along the banks of the Tiber River in Rome. *Notes Towards a Model Opera*, shown at the Ullens Center in Beijing, China (2015) travelled as *Peripheral Thinking* to The National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul (2016). A major traveling exhibition, *Fortuna*, toured multiple venues in Latin America from 2012-2015. Kentridge has participated in Documenta (2012, 2002, 1997) as well as the Venice Biennale (2015, 2005, 1999 and 1993).

Kentridge is the recipient of honorary doctorates from several universities including Yale and the University of London. In 2012 he presented the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard University. In 2013 he served as Humanitas Visiting Professor in Contemporary Art at Oxford University, and Distinguished Visiting Humanist at the University of Rochester, New York, and in 2015 he was appointed an Honorary Academician of the Royal Academy in London. In 2017 he received the Princesa de Asturias Award for the Arts, Spain, and in 2018, the Antonio Feltrinelli International Prize, Italy. Previous awards include the Kyoto Prize, Japan (2010), the Oskar Kokoschka Award, Vienna (2008), the Kaiserring Prize (2003), and the Sharjah Biennial 6 Prize (2003), among others.

Please join us at the opening reception for the artist on Friday, March 1st, from 6-8 pm.

For further information, please visit our website: www.mariangoodman.com, or contact Linda Pellegrini, Director of Communications, at linda@mariangoodman.com, or 212 977 7160.