



William Kentridge: *Oh To Believe in Another World*

by Ann McCoy (October 2023)



William Kentridge, *Oh To Believe in Another World*, 2022. 5 channel film installation; 15 minutes.
 Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. Copyright: William Kentridge. Photo: Alex Yudzon.

In perhaps his most poignant projection installation to date, William Kentridge revisits the music of Dmitri Shostakovich. Kentridge's Metropolitan premier of Shostakovich's satirical opera *The Nose* (2010) was a celebratory kaleidoscopic panoply of Russian Constructivist artistic innovation. *Oh To Believe in Another World* (2022), an immersive five-channel projection inspired by Dmitri Shostakovich's *Symphony No.10*, takes on the revolution's shattered dreams ground down under authoritarian boot heels. This Soviet form of cancel culture could end in death or the gulag. Some of the most devastating images seen here are of terminated Politburo members whose photographs have been covered over using a thick black ink, known as "caviar." The film responds to periods in Soviet history: the twenties and Lenin, the thirties and the suicide of Vladimir Mayakovsky, the forties and Trotsky, and the fifties and Stalin. In spite of his tribulations, Shostakovich (1906–1975) and his music outlived them all. Kentridge's genius resides in his capacity for reflection—he never shies away from exploring the dark side of human nature, war, colonialism, and both capitalist and communist systems.

The life of the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky acts as a through-line: fragments extracted from his poetry appear in the projections and also in the graphics on display. Both the five-channel projection and the graphic works in the gallery are focused on a cast of characters: Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Mayakovsky, Lilya Brik (poet, lover of Mayakovsky, and Rodchenko poster girl), Shostakovich and his student Elmira Nazirova. A photo of Stalin's wife at his funeral is emblematic of the grim realities of his reign. We also see photographs of giants like Sergei Eisenstein (the filmmaker) and Vsevolod Meyerhold (the theater revolutionary), as well as full-frontal faces of ordinary Soviet citizens extracted from group photographs.



William Kentridge and Greta Goiris, *Peasant Revolt*, 2023. Trouser: 22 5/8 x 13 3/4 x 6 1/4 inches, Robe: 25 1/4 x 15 7/8 x 8 3/4 inches, Apron: 22 7/8 x 11 3/4 x 6 1/4 inches. Courtesy the artists and Marian Goodman Gallery. Copyright: William Kentridge and Greta Goiris. Photo: Alex Yudzon.

The drama is set in an imaginary Soviet-era museum originally constructed as a set-model, with the help of his long-time set designer, Sabine Theunissen. Instead of using the model to build a theater set, it has been photographed with a special GoPro camera, suggesting a Swiftian giant peering through the tiny doors. Viewers feel as though they are entering a dream world of cultural memories collaged together. The photographed set model was used for the longer, fifty-minute, single-projection theatrical version of Shostakovich's *Symphony No.10*, commissioned by the Lucerne Symphony Orchestra, that subsequently traveled to Pompeii and Johannesburg in 2022. The five-channel installation was taken from sections of the theatrical version. Elements from the symphony video as well as newly constructed material were added by the film editors: Janus Fouché, Žana Marović, Joshua Trappier, and Octavia Sonyane. Dramatic shifts in scale are an integral part of Kentridge's practice, a small drawing or model may be projected to full stage height. This museum features cardboard columns, a mishmash of photographic collage, and a tiny swimming pool with cut white tape for tiles. It has a homemade feel like an old doll house. Films, sculpture models, and costumed actors (shot against a primitive green screen) inhabit this museum of Soviet artistry and catastrophe.

Kentridge works with a collaborative team of video editors, dramaturgists, costumers, musicians, craftspeople, actors, and set designers. The genesis of this project is on display in the first rooms of the gallery. During the pandemic, Kentridge and his long-time Belgian costumer Greta Goiris exchanged images of small, costumed, paper puppets. Old tools scavenged from several sources become anthropomorphized, clad in pleated skirts and little jackets and trousers. The sculptures co-created by Kentridge and Goiris are seen in vitrines and are also featured in the five-channel projection. One vitrine contains a charming trio: *Peasant Revolt (Three Blades) Trouser, Robe, Apron* (2023). Several of the tall thin tool figures are an homage to the Giacometti brothers: *For Diego* (2023) and *For Alberto* (2023). In the five-channel projection we see the costumed tool-sculptures, and African actors dressed in similar costumes, holding masks with photographs. The pleated skirts and the movable puppets become dancing partners, engaging images of Anna Pavlova in her tutu. Goiris has a remarkable aesthetic, and here we see it up close!

A standout in the exhibition is a cast painted-bronze rocking horse, *Ladder Horse* (2021). This old critic could not help thinking of E.H. Gombrich's "Meditations on a Hobby Horse or the Roots of Artistic Form" (1951). Kentridge has taken on these steeds before in forms as varied as torn paper horses, drawings, film animation, and gargantuan Roman wall stencils. *Ladder Horse*, comprised of clamps, cardboard, wood, and cobbled-together stools and ladders, has been reproduced in cast, painted bronze to capture every detail while retaining the fresh spontaneity of the original.

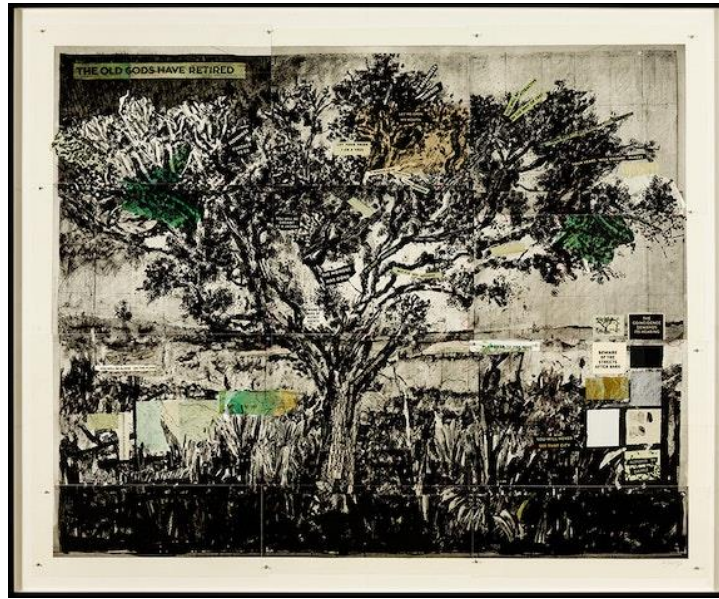


William Kentridge, *Ladder Horse*, 2023. Painted bronze, 59 x 61 x 30 3/4 inches.
Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. Copyright: William Kentridge. Photo: Alex Yudzon.

The back room of the gallery features cast bronze sculptures of all sizes, some enlarged from smaller paper and cardboard originals. A procession of small-scale figures, *Seven Figures* (2023), features a memorable faucet-headed man wearing a little cape. This charming line of figures relates to many of the artist's processions seen in his drawings, films, and projections.

The viewer is always brought back to the artist's drawings and earlier life as a printmaker. Techniques like photogravure, sugarlift aquatint, direct gravure, drypoint, hand-painted chine collé, and collage merge in works like *The Old Gods Have Retired* (2022). The upper-floor gallery features a memorable selection of photogravure works on paper such as *Studio Life: Exercise 2* (2021). This stunning selection of Kentridge drawings and graphics, and his work with South Africa's David Krut Workshop, deserve a separate review.

Our present age can feel perilous, as civilizations collide and empires and regimes crumble. Even as we read some of the darkest snippets of the suicidal Mayakovsky's poetry here, we grasp that this is not the whole story. We are deeply moved by the artists' longer, in-depth view of history. Kentridge reminds us that artistic creation can outlast the worst despots. Russian Constructivism's graphics, photography, and theatrical and architectural innovation live on—even if their creators often met tragic fates. This exhibition is one of the artist's best and is not to be missed!



William Kentridge, *The Old Gods Have Retired*, 2022. Photogravure, sugarlift aquatint, direct gravure, drypoint, handpainted chine collé and collage, Hahnemühle Natural White, 300 gsm, 73 3/4 x 89 3/4 x 2 inches.
Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. Copyright: William Kentridge. Photo: Alex Yudzon.