William Kentridge comes from a German-Jewish and Lithuanian family who fled from Russia in the 1880s during the anti-Jewish pogroms, after the assassination of the Tsar Alexander II. From the 1950s, Kentridge’s mother, Lady Felicia, and father, Sir Sydney, were both actively involved in supporting South Africa’s anti-apartheid activists in the political trials and in events such as the inquest into the Sharpeville massacre of 1960. Kentridge was born in 1955, and his family’s involvement in the injustices of apartheid played an important role in his development and informed his work as a gifted figurative artist. In this context, Kentridge considered abstract art and conceptual art ‘an impossible activity’ in South Africa, as he observed in the 1999 book *William Kentridge:*

Much of what was contemporary in Europe and America during the 1960s and 1970s seemed distant and incomprehensible to me. Images became familiar from exhibitions and publications but the impulses behind the work did not make the trans-continental jump to South Africa. The art that seemed most immediate and local dated from the early twentieth century, when there still seemed to be hope for political struggle rather than a world exhausted by war and failure. I remember thinking that one had to look backwards—even if quaintness was the price one paid.

Kentridge’s art, therefore, belongs to a tradition of some of the great figurative artists of the past such as William Hogarth, Francisco Goya and Honoré Daumier as well as the German Expressionists Max Beckmann and George Grosz. These artists created powerful imagery that explored the social conditions of their time. While Kentridge follows in their footsteps, he also develops imagery of subtlety and imagination in film, drawing, printmaking and tapestry design and explores three dimensions in innovative opera productions and sculptural forms. His art dismantles, transforms and fuses one art category into another.

As he matured, Kentridge addressed political subjects but not in a strident way. There is a remarkable lightness of touch, a subtlety that is enhanced by juxtaposition, metaphor, irony and a sense of the absurd or of humour. He ignores conventional artistic categories and maintaining a fluid process of making art is important to him. As he outlines in the documentary *Anything is possible*, ‘In the looseness of trying different things, images and ideas emerge … So it’s about not knowing what is happening in advance. It’s always kind of been in between the things I thought I was doing that the real work has happened’. Drawing in charcoal in particular was an ideal medium, as adding to and subtracting from compositions provided Kentridge with the ability to explore his subjects without finality. The process also facilitated his animations for which he augmented his drawings during the process of filming. In this way, Kentridge is able to remodel, dismantle or dissolve his subjects as he develops his imagery over time:

The fact that they’re going to be succeeded by the next stage of the drawing … was very good for someone who is bad at knowing when to commit something to being finished.

Kentridge has also been a consummate printmaker, his work characterised by considerable graphic skill and technical experimentation. This is evident in *The battle between yes and no* 1989, which is a remarkable screenprint revealing Kentridge’s facility in this technique, using his drawing skills to depict his subjects. The two figures are oversized and bulging within the picture plane, emphasising the combative theme of the work. They face off in an argument, with the words ‘yes’, ‘no’ and ‘noise’ spewing from their mouths, as they float in a rising sea of swirling confusion. This image of a showdown is related to the scene of a fighting couple in his early film *Vetkoek/Fête galante* 1985, which, according to Kentridge, is an ‘early and clear’ example of the ‘centrality of contradiction’. This confrontational scene also prefigures the later scenes of an altercation in Kentridge’s film *Other voices* 2011, which explores the complexity and confrontation found in a post-apartheid era.

In *Casspirs full of love*, created in 1989 but not published until 2000, Kentridge uses the power of irony when he juxtaposes horrific imagery with a mother’s message of love to shed light on the darker history of apartheid. The title is from one of the state radio greetings sent by families to their loved ones in the armed forces in which Kentridge heard a mother end her message, ‘from Mum, with Casspirs full of love’, innocently meaning, ‘with truckloads of love’. Kentridge’s use of the term, however, points to the reality that Casspirs had been the quintessential riot-control vehicle in South Africa—and that they had become both a very real
object of oppression as well as a symbol of that oppression. In *Casspirs full of love*, seven severed heads rest inside the four irregular compartments of a vertical rectangular container, which is perhaps a cross-section through a Casspir from above—the words, ‘NOT A STEP’ seem consistent with this idea. Since the strong suggestion is that these are the remains of victims of state violence, the words, ‘Casspis full of love’, handwritten down the right side of the work, add a bitter twist to the innocent but ultimately crass expression of motherly love.

In comparison, much of Kentridge’s art is one of discernment, as in his enigmatic Atlas procession no 1 2000, reminiscent of Dada theatre, where a rich parade of figures circle an architectural dome decorated with a map. The map is of Greece and is labelled ‘Turkey in Europe: Romania [word obscured, perhaps Serbia], Montenegro and Greece’, a reference to the Ottoman Empire’s expansion into the Balkans in the fourteenth century; the empire’s subsequent decline ended with its collapse in 1918. Kentridge had been interested in projecting his imagery in a three-dimensional space in the manner of a fresco. For this larger version of two, Kentridge took as his starting point Goya’s frescoes from San Antonio de la Florida, Madrid. As he notes in the book *William Kentridge prints* of 2006:

> I was thinking about projections as a way of seeing the world, a contemporary and ephemeral vision equivalent to the view of the world encoded in fresco painting in past centuries …

In this project I worked with figures moving around the ceiling, an endless procession. The figures were made from pieces of torn paper … The images were projected on top of the Baroque painting of the ceiling.

The scene is theatrical and nonsensical, with a carefree female nude dancing around the dome, mourning figures and a suited man metamorphosing into a tree. The transforming man also appears in a massive linocut, *Walking man*, also made in 2000, in which Kentridge explores his interest in working on a grand scale on one single life-sized figure. Like some of Picasso’s *Vollard Suite* intaglio prints, *Walking man* may be inspired by the Latin poet Ovid and the story of Daphne, who was chased by Apollo and transformed into a shrub. In a later linocut of a similar grand scale, *Eight figures 2010*, Kentridge continues to explore a processional composition. In it, he includes disparate elements from his repertoire: marching figures of towers, miners, a windmill, a nose and a globe. The nonsensical nature of this grand procession of figures is augmented by the artist’s inclusion of random English and Russian signage below the stage on which the figures stride. Kentridge’s cutting of linoleum is remarkable for its variety and contrast of lines, forms and rich patterning, as evident in both of these massive linocuts.

Kentridge’s skill as a consummate printmaker is also apparent in the masterful painterly print *Reeds 1996*. This grand intaglio print follows in the tradition of James McNeill Whistler, where Kentridge, like Whistler before him, has broken all the rules of etching and created a wonderful, luscious composition rich in inking and texture. Kentridge used power tools for dramatic effect, as well as more conventional methods on a huge plate. Given the problems of inking at this scale, each work in this small edition is like a monotype. For this landscape of water and reeds, Kentridge has adopted imagery found in nineteenth-century topographical engravings informed by a European sensibility. Yet, he subverts the landscape tradition of artists such as Paul Gauguin and the Pont Aven painters, who created idealised landscapes—erasing the incursions of modern life. Reeds signals Kentridge’s move to acknowledge the history of Africa: at first glance, the artist has created a lyrical view of the countryside, a rich paradise; yet, this is deceptive, as within the landscape lie references to the often dark history of Africa.

The processional form of figures marching continued in his sculptures, prints and films inspired by nineteenth-century Russian satirist Nikolai Gogol’s absurd tale ‘The nose’, set in tsarist Russia of the mid 1830s, a time of great despotism. Gogol writes of a pompous Russian bureaucrat who lives in a world of great hierarchies—which, as Kentridge notes in *Anything is possible*, ‘rings a bell with anyone from South Africa’. This public servant wakes up one morning to discover his nose missing. He searches the streets looking for his nose but is horrified when, upon finding it, the nose, who now considers its own status far higher than that of its former owner, refuses to have anything to do with him. Instead, the nose embarks on an independent journey through St Petersburg.

In 2006, William Kentridge was commissioned to design and direct the opera *The nose* by Dmitri Shostakovich: ‘For a long time, I’d been wanting to do a project that has to do with Russian modernism and the end of Russian modernism. I came across the short story of Gogol, *The nose*, which struck me astonishingly as an amazing story’.

Soon after this, Kentridge began work with the David Krut Print Workshop on a series of intaglio prints that continued his artistic investigation of a number of the themes and ideas that he had explored with the opera. The artist was interested in applying the aesthetics of early modernism and Constructivism as well as linking this to historic literary, musical and political sources. ‘The nose’ project satisfied these interests. The cycle of images depicting the nose’s journey are filled with references to Russian history, literature and art: visual quotation of Lenin addressing crowds during the October revolution, an imaginary visit to Vladimir Tatlin’s unbuilt Monument to the Third International, an encounter with Edouard Manet’s woman drinker in *Plumb brandy* c1877 and the embrace of El Lissitzky’s design aesthetic. *The nose* prints all incorporate the use of intaglio techniques such as soft-ground etching, hard-ground etching, drypoint, sugarlift and aquatint. In thirty masterly compositions, Kentridge demonstrates his finesse with each of these techniques and combines the idiotic experiences of the nose and his owner in tyrannical times, highlighting a sense of the absurd.

*William Kentridge: drawn from Africa* tours nationally in 2015 and 2016. It includes these works discussed, along with others, all drawn from the Gallery’s collection, including the film *Other voices* and related drawings. Images of these works can be found at: *www.nga.gov.au/Kentridge*

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