



PRESS RELEASE

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William Kentridge depicts oppression and freedom through his celebrated art in 21 Icons

On Sunday November 3, photographer and filmmaker Adrian Steirn and his 21 Icons team pay tribute to William Kentridge, regarded as one of the most dynamic and exciting contemporary fine artists not only in South Africa, but also in the rest of the world.

His prints and drawings command prices in the hundreds of thousands of rands and he has exhibited in many of the top galleries and museums in the world, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels; Jeu de Paume and the Louvre, Paris; and the Moderna Museet, Stockholm. His opera and theater works, as well as his animated films, have appeared at arts festivals and other showings in South Africa, the US and many countries in Europe, among others.

"If I am asked what do I do, I suppose I say I am an artist," Kentridge tells the 21 Icons team in his characteristic self-effacing way in the episode, which will be screened on SABC3 at 6.57pm. "If they press that further, I say usually it starts with drawings and sometimes those drawings are filmed and that becomes an animated film, and sometimes those films are used as backdrops in theatre productions and then the piece exists on stage. And sometimes those drawings become three-dimensional, become sculptures, but at one point or another everything starts as a drawing."

In 2009, Time magazine included Kentridge on its list of the 100 most influential people in the world. In 2010, he was selected as the winner of the Kyoto Prize, a prestigious Japanese award that recognises visionaries in the arts and sciences; he became the first African to receive it.

"Using film, drawing, sculpture, animation, and performance, he transmutes sobering political events into powerful poetic allegories," the Kyoto Prize statement said. It was felt that his work, "full of sharp intelligence and profound poetry", continues to exert "great influence" on other artists, giving people worldwide "courage and hope that their attempts and practices may still be effective and fundamental, even amid the stagnation of our contemporary society, swirling with political and social unrest".

Kentridge, however, plays down his impact on others, telling viewers: "I have no illusions that my work has changed or affected South Africa, but I do understand that it has been important for some younger artists. And I think that has to do with taking different fragments of the world and getting those fragments to make if not a coherent sense, a possible sense, together."

Steirn admits that he was quite nervous to do a portrait of Kentridge because he is such a great artist. "He was a real challenge, but I think the complexity of what we were trying to do impressed him," says Steirn. "Watching him get just as involved as we were in shooting the portrait was an incredible feeling. He wanted the portrait to work just as much as we wanted it to, and doing it like that was really beautiful – there was really a togetherness about that portrait."

The portrait, which will be published in the Sunday Times on November 3, was shot in Kentridge's studio in Houghton, Johannesburg. A single 10-second exposure captures the artist at work in three places — paying tribute to the multimedia nature of his art.

"People who have seen the portrait really like it," says Kentridge. "All I think is, god, look at the double chin and why didn't I stand up straighter, why are my eyes ... Technically, though, I'm extremely impressed with how simply and well a triple exposure works, because it's similar to work that I'm interested in. It is very nice to see it being done at a very different technical level and with a very different skill."



Like the others in the series, the original, signed portrait will be auctioned at the end of the 21 Icons project and the proceeds donated to the artist's charity of choice.

Among many local and international prizes and acknowledgements, Kentridge received the Order of Ikhamanga in Silver in 2007 for his excellent contribution in the field of the arts and non-racial theatre in South Africa. But, he warns drily: "If somebody wanted to be the next William Kentridge, my advice would be don't. I have been there, done that, it's not a good idea."

He says he has also learnt not to trust his "own good judgment" because "I have learned from my work that the best work or the most interesting things have always happened in spite of myself. Things that I thought of as faults, as weaknesses, other people have pointed out as being the most interesting part of the work."

Programme details: Fine artist William Kentridge displays his characteristic self-effacing manner and dry sense of humour when he tells photographer and filmmaker Adrian Steirn that he wanted to be an elephant when he grew up, and why he does not trust his own judgment as far as his globally sought-after works are concerned.

Portrait details: Shot in William Kentridge's studio in Houghton, Johannesburg, photographer Adrian Steirn used a single 10-second exposure to capture the artist at work in three different places, thus paying tribute to the multimedia nature of his art.

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