

William Kentridge on politics, South Africa and Elon Musk

The artist talks about how tearing up paper inspired his new exhibition at Yorkshire Sculpture Park — and what his 102-year-old father makes of his work



William Kentridge with his sculpture, Laocoön (Plaster)
DANNY LAWSON/PA

Kirsty Lang
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The great South African artist William Kentridge is tearing up pieces of paper at his kitchen table and pushing them around. He’s showing me the process by

which he created a group of sculptures for Yorkshire Sculpture Park. “You play with these shapes and then” — he looks up to make sure I’m following — “this one starts to become like a woman leaning forward. It’s about letting yourself be guided by your eyes.”

With a pair of old-fashioned pince-nez reading glasses dangling from his white button-up shirt, Kentridge combines the reassuring patience of a school art teacher with the dazzling intellect of an eminent philosophy professor. One moment we’re tearing up paper, the next we’re discussing Plato.

The kitchen table we’re sitting at is in his small flat opposite the British Museum, but home is South Africa, in the Johannesburg house in which he grew up and still lives. His parents were lawyers and his father, Sir Sydney Woolf Kentridge, played a leading role in some of the most significant political trials of the apartheid era, including defending Nelson Mandela in the Treason Trial, and the inquest into the death of Steve Biko. Kentridge’s parents left South Africa in the 1980s but he stayed on, married and raised his three children there. Two of them now live in London and it was the birth of his first grandchild that prompted the artist and his wife, Anne, to buy the flat we’re sitting in.

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Kentridge flicks open his phone to show me a picture of him standing with a small grandson in front of a huge, twisting bronze sculpture that dwarfs them both. An invitation from Yorkshire Sculpture Park more than ten years ago pushed him into making these large works. He’s known for his drawings, animated films, theatre and opera productions but he didn’t see sculpture as part of his practice. “And then I understood that it was like the puppets I’ve made for theatre and shadow plays, made with little wire joints so you can hinge pieces together and move them until you find the attitude you want, like this woman bending forward,” he says, pointing to the shape he’s made on the table. He adds that “this is a great exercise for the children’s programme at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park because it works as well with an eight-year-old as it does with a 17-year-old or an MA student”.

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To understand Kentridge you need to know that he started in theatre before he began drawing. He is best known for his bold black-and-white charcoal works and animated films that reflect on the politics and history of South Africa. A fan of the Dadaists and Jonathan Swift, he runs a thread of absurdist humour through much of his work. In one of his short films being screened at Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Kentridge poses astride a flimsy wooden horse. Is this a satirical reference to the number of statues of men on horseback that populate European cities? “They’re all about conquest,” he explains. “And also people on horseback start taking on the attributes of the horse. They are sitting high up with straightened backs, so they feel grand.”



A still from *Self-Portrait as a Coffee-Pot*, 2022

COURTESY KENTRIDGE STUDIO, © WILLIAM KENTRIDGE

Another of his animated films on display is my favourite: *More Sweetly Play the Dance*. This procession of figures played by actors and dancers and led by a brass band is a carnival of dance, music and grief that moves slowly from left to right across seven cinema screens in a ruined, burnt-out landscape. It was created as a memorial for ebola victims but the images are timeless, recalling medieval pilgrims or the endless stream of refugees who move across our small screens fleeing conflicts in Gaza, Ukraine or Sudan.

Processions are a recurring trope in Kentridge’s work, which brings us back to the group of sculptures he referred to during

my short art lesson. *Paper Procession* was a site-specific commission made for Yorkshire Sculpture Park and born from the torn-out pages of a discarded accounting book. He started with shapes cut out of paper and then transformed them into 5m-high works made from thin sheets of aluminium and steel. Coloured in red, yellow and orange, they march determinedly past a green yew hedge. “The key was to keep the lightness of the sense of torn paper and then, using a forklift truck and all the people in my studio jumping together, bending the aluminium to give the forms the right sense of movement,” he says.

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I’m struck by the image of him and his collaborators jumping together on sheets of aluminium, as if it were some absurdist theatrical performance. As a young man, Kentridge aspired to be an actor and trained at the famous Jacques Lecoq school of mime and physical theatre in Paris; he uses the techniques he learnt there in his art. “The English tradition of theatre starts with an analysis of text and psychology,” he says. “With physical theatre it’s about movement. How does movement reveal a character’s age, whether they’re relaxed or tense? You reveal the psychology of a subject by what is happening in their body, and you can do the same when teaching someone to draw.”

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His passion for processions was inspired by works including medieval paintings of the dance against death that appeared during the plague, Goya’s *A Pilgrimage to San Isidro*, and “the shadows in Plato’s cave”. For Plato the shadows represented ignorance, but Kentridge is sceptical about the light of knowledge freeing the prisoner, pointing out that alongside the

Enlightenment came colonialism, another key theme in his work. “There’s a lot you can understand by looking at shadows,” he says.



Paper Procession (Palermo Cash Book) I, 2023

PHOTO: © THYS DULLAART, © WILLIAM KENTRIDGE

Kentridge was born in 1955 and studied politics at university in Johannesburg while taking classes in fine art and drama in the evenings. His parents had several friends who were artists “and it made me realise that they didn’t all live in Paris with a beret and palette”. His father, who is 102 and living in north London, was both encouraging and sceptical of his son’s work. “When I told him I was putting on a production of Goethe’s *Faustus* with puppets, his reaction was: ‘OK, but I’m wondering why the puppets are necessary?’”

His *Faustus in Africa!* with puppets is being revived this summer at the Edinburgh International Festival in a collaboration with the Handspring Puppet Company (of *War Horse* fame). He conceived of the idea in 1995 when the first African National Congress (ANC) government had taken power. “*Faustus* is about a pact with the Devil and I wanted to look at what concessions the ANC made to gain power and avoid civil war,” he says. “Thirty years on it still feels surprisingly relevant.”

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At 70, Kentridge is more prolific than ever: his nine-part film *Self-Portrait as a Coffee Pot* launched on the streaming platform Mubi last year, he has a chamber opera touring festivals around Europe, and he is working on a new production of Monteverdi’s *L’Orfeo* for Glyndebourne. “It’s my father’s favourite place in the world,” he says. “There have been many family outings there over the decades.”

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Right now he’s looking forward to returning to his studio in Johannesburg. “There’s a kind of a balance between work that I do entirely on my own, drawings and animation, and then projects which need many collaborators,” he says. The performance work evolves from the arts centre he founded and funds in the city’s downtown area. “We teach, do workshops and stage performances,” he says, adding that he thrives on the energy that collaboration brings. “It’s not just about giving back to other artists, it’s also very much for me and what I can discover working with them.”

As I leave, I ask if he watched the recent footage of President Trump monsterring South Africa’s president, Cyril Ramaphosa,

in the White House. “I didn’t dare watch it through. It was too painful, the boorishness of it, but I thought our president did well,” he says firmly, before adding: “Our great billionaire Elon Musk doesn’t help matters either. There are several million white South Africans who went through the same kind of schooling as Musk and haven’t ended up as awful or as rich.”

William Kentridge: the Pull of Gravity is at [Yorkshire Sculpture Park](#) to April 19, 2026; *Faustus in Africa!* is at [the Lyceum, Edinburgh](#), August 20-23

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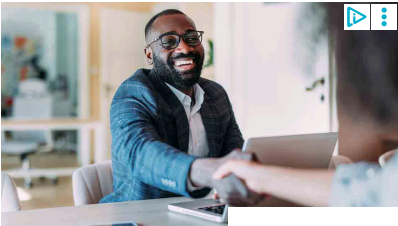
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