

William Kentridge; Uwe Wittwer review – exhilarating and melancholy

Marian Goodman gallery; Parafin gallery, London South Africa's William Kentridge considers a whole new world of influences, not least China, in his compelling new show

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Sunday 13 September 2015 08.00 BST

In the charcoal dusk of a **William Kentridge** animation, a pageant of living beings trudges, twirls and sways its way from one vast film screen to the next. Round and round the gallery they go, like figures from some medieval procession. Here are saints bearing palms and sinners bearing nameless burdens, church choirs sashaying to the surging music of an African brass band and demagogues gripping the microphone on platforms dragged by weary workers.

Sharp-suited plutocrats succeed the miners who labour for them, ballerinas pirouette behind limping patients laced up to hospital drips. A giant pair of scissors (artist's emblem) sidles along between these real figures and their shadowy counterparts, puppets snipped from paper, including three skittish skeletons on a barrow lugged by the lame. The anthems soar, the drums race, the dance of life or death keeps its perpetual motion. The spectacle is both wildly exhilarating and unforgettably melancholy.

More Sweetly Play the Dance is Kentridge's latest film - or filmed drawing, as he calls them. The great South African artist, born in 1955 to two liberal lawyers, one of whom acted on behalf of Steve Biko, Kentridge remains consumed by the history of his nation. But in recent years he has been working in China, and what makes this new show so compelling in all its graphic power is the exuberant welling of images and ideas from one continent to the next. The globe turns, his art quickens and expands.

Vast ink drawings of birds taking off morph into a flight of words - the blurring of text and image in Chinese calligraphy a beautiful inspiration. Enormous black and white memories of Chinese watercolours are drawn on sheets torn from newspapers and encyclopedias. You can be looking at Kentridge's delicate freehand rendering of "An Excellent Vegetable" - "Expedite the Bud!" - or his homage to one of Manet's roses and notice, between the brushstrokes, news of waltzing mice or Paris Commune firing squads.

For France is also central to this show. The lower gallery looks like a rousing call to arms with gigantic enlargements of the daily *Communard* newspaper. One front page from 1871 carries news of Russia and China as well as Paris and this is symbolic of the whole exhibition. Kentridge is meditating on the failure of apartheid, the

Maoist revolution, the Russian revolution and the Commune all at once. Everything connects, the associations crisscross like arteries through his work.

Do images have supremacy over words? Kentridge certainly pits them together and strongly mistrusts all rhetoric. His slogans are self-puncturing - Repudiate the Smell of Books, Eat Bitterness, Smash the Unhealthy Slogan - and in any case, as Andrew Solomon points out in the superb catalogue, Kentridge's "qualm-riven" art is invariably a critique of dogmatism. Images - especially his type of images, whose evolution is as freely shown in stop-frame, mark by mark, as its erasure - allow for an intense gathering of thoughts and associations that may never resolve. Circling like the movements of the mind, his films progress through time without rigidifying into a narrative.

One of the strongest works here gathers many elements of the paintings and drawings into a frenetic torrent of images called *Notes Towards a Model Opera*, in reference to Madame Mao's operas for the people. It is a spine-chilling spectacle - images of the dead and starving, briefly seen, never forgotten, whose poor bodies might be Chinese, African or Russian for all that the eye can tell. Kentridge's terrific troupe of actors performs against this backdrop of projected photographs and some of his most mordant drawings. And one woman plays many parts - a disgraced Chinese politician, a Rhodesian demagogue, a black African dancer, pirouetting en pointe across the pages of a gigantic atlas in a Chinese communist uniform, dyed in Tricolore colours.

The allusions whirl, and reach their apogee in the magnificent eight-screen *More Sweetly Play the Dance*, where Victory is no longer on the barricades but dragging along on crutches, followed by the circle of life - led by glorious brass anthems into the dance of death. All history seems to be there in these lifesize figures, which appear one after the other like figments in some stream-of-consciousness fantasy. Step towards them and you become part of the throng, another shadow in the roundelay, another figure in the mortal revolution.

Uwe Wittwer is much admired in his native Switzerland but scarcely well known here, despite a career stretching back 20 years and works in galleries all over the world, including the Metropolitan Museum, New York. His paintings are pensive, delicately made and distinctly elusive in their bewildering range of imagery, from Dutch interiors and Swiss landscapes to old-master art, their allure as mysterious as their often spectral content.

A row of ruined buildings shines white in the light, the gaping windows a series of burning black holes; each has a number written below it, as if the image was some kind of document. A cottage in a dark landscape that appears to be cracking like concrete is based on Derek Jarman's home at Dungeness, Kent, the image remarkably expressive in its low-toned quietude. The famous white garden at nearby Sissinghurst, light and dark reversed, turns into a glowering forest of black firs.

Images are slippery; painters who work from photographs, such as Gerhard Richter and Luc Tuymans, have been making this point for years. But Wittwer has something else in mind. He can take apart Poussin's *The Triumph of Pan*,

reconfiguring the elements of its composition over and over again in semi-abstract variations that seem to unleash the intensely structured violence of the original. He can take an image of a solitary card-player and make the painting itself seem lonely.

The high point of this show is a suite of 28 monochrome paintings, each image appearing to emerge from the words it partially covers - fragments of TS Eliot's *The Waste Land*. What you're looking at is both a mood and a time of war, as it seems: watchlights, slumped bodies, industrial compounds, a cottage seen through a viewfinder, blazing buildings, a sepia photograph of a grandma and child in some other long-ago summer. History spools through these images, casting shadows everywhere, as it runs through their source, Jarman's hypnotic masterpiece, *The Last of England*. The effect of Wittwer's marrying of word and picture is that each haunts the others and every painting feels lifted on some kind of breeze - funereal, but no longer static.

The Notting Hill Coronet, London W11 celebrates its reopening with William Kentridge's celebrated *Ubu* and the Truth Commission, with Handspring Puppet Company, 15 October to 7 November

. William Kentridge: *More Sweetly Play the Dance* is at the Marian Goodman gallery, London W1 until 24 October

. Uwe Wittwer: *The King's Tear* is at the Parafin gallery, London W1 until 3 October

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