

William Kentridge

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To accompany *William Kentridge:
I Am Not Me, The Horse Is Not Mine*,
an Art Gallery of New South Wales
touring exhibition

Learning resource (7–12)

Contents

This learning resource brings together information and ideas related to the art of William Kentridge. It is designed for 7–12 Visual Arts students and incorporates strategies for looking at and making art, and critically thinking about Kentridge’s practice and its connection to the world around us. In this resource, you will find curatorial texts, videos, useful links, discussion questions, activities and a focus segment on a key work by Kentridge in the Art Gallery’s collection, *I am not me, the horse is not mine* 2008.

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About the artist

One of the most distinctive voices in contemporary art, William Kentridge (b1955) emerged as an artist during the apartheid regime in South Africa. His artworks are grounded in the socio-political conditions (past and present) of his country and draw connections between art history, ideology and memory. They also reveal the capacity for ideas and images to echo across time and between different cultures.

Kentridge is known for his films, drawings, theatre and opera productions. His unique method combines drawing, writing, film, performance, music, theatre and collaboration. Kentridge's process of making films is highly manual and reveals a strongly expressive gesture that encourages empathy between the viewer and the artist. Rather than using traditional single-cell animation (where hundreds or thousands of individual images are drawn), he documents the changes to a drawing in progress, filming each modification on a 35mm camera. He doesn't systematically plan the drawings; rather, they evolve with the process of drawing. In some ways, the subject of the film then becomes the process of drawing almost as much as the narrative it describes.

Although Kentridge often deals with weighty political subjects, his approach is anything but didactic. Instead he emphasises the ambiguity and uncertainty that is embedded in our relationship to history. And, with self-deprecating humour, he exposes his scepticism about the artist's role as an author and arbiter of meaning.



I am interested in a political art, that is to say, an art of ambiguity, contradiction, uncompleted gestures and uncertain endings. An art (and a politics) in which optimism is kept in check and nihilism at bay.

William Kentridge quoted by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *William Kentridge*, Palais des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles, Brussels, 1998

Video

In association with the exhibition *That Which We Do Not Remember* held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2018, William Kentridge spoke to the Art Gallery's director Michael Brand.

🔗 Watch the recorded conversation and discuss the ideas raised using the prompts on the opposite page.



7–12 discussion questions

- Kentridge's artworks are not pre-determined. Without a storyboard or preparatory drawings, how does he begin making an artwork? Consider his quote 'grand ideas come after the creation of the work' and discuss the different ways meaning is derived in both the making and viewing of an artwork.
- How does erasure, accidental moments or, as Kentridge says, 'stupidity in the studio' impact the process of art-making? Discuss how these might challenge or enhance the development of an artwork, both materially and conceptually. Can you see evidence of this in Kentridge's work?
- Tracey Moffatt (Australia, b1960) and Anselm Kiefer (Germany, b1945) are artists whose practices Kentridge has cited as both influential and similar to his own. Research these artists and discuss how their work resonates with Kentridge's.
- Kentridge says he makes films for museums. What makes his animated films suitable for a museum as opposed to a cinema? Who do you think Kentridge imagines his audience is?
- Kentridge says that all his artworks connect to Johannesburg, South Africa. Research the city's recent political and social history, since the latter half of the 20th century. Describe Kentridge's approach to expressing this turbulent history. What emotions do his works evoke? How might these stories be understood by different viewers?

7–12 activities

- Take inspiration from Kentridge and consider the 'undrawn'. Create a list of things you have drawn and not drawn. Build a series of drawings based on things you are yet to tackle.
- Research Kentridge's performance lectures. Observe the various elements he uses, including pre-recordings, drawings, animations, sound, music and live performance. In class groups, create a performance lecture inspired by Kentridge about a topic you are passionate about.
- Kentridge references the artist as both maker and viewer. Place a piece of paper on the wall or an easel and create a drawing. Exaggerate your role as a viewer by standing back to view your work after each modification. Walk around the room and view your work from varying distances. What are your observations? How does this physical approach affect the thinking about and making of your work?
- Create an artwork honouring both drawing and new media. How do these art mediums compliment and challenge each other? Do these materials and techniques have their own symbolic meaning? How does this impact the overall meaning of the work?
- 'The medium leads the thinking,' says Kentridge. Select one idea or subject and express it in a series of artworks, each one using a different media. How does your idea change with each iteration? Which media do you think best communicates your idea?



Installation view of the William Kentridge: *I Am Not Me, the Horse Is Not Mine* touring exhibition at Orange Regional Gallery, 2022, photo: Orange Regional Gallery

Artwork in focus

I am not me, the horse is not mine 2008

William Kentridge's eight-channel video work *I am not me, the horse is not mine* is among his most ambitious moving-image works and arguably the most significant work by the artist in an Australian museum collection. It incorporates stop-motion animation, live action, archival video, and a soundtrack by acclaimed South African composer Philip Miller. First shown on Cockatoo Island at the 16th Biennale of Sydney in 2008, this large-scale video installation creates a deeply immersive experience.

🔗 Access the Kentridge Studio website for a compilation of excerpts from the eight film fragments which comprise the installation *I am not me, the horse is not mine*.

eight-channel digital video,
colour, sound; 6 min
Video editing: Catherine Meyburgh
Music: Philip Miller
Art Gallery of New South Wales,
donated through the Australian
Government's Cultural Gifts Program
by Anita Belgiorno-Nettis AM and
Luca Belgiorno-Nettis AM 2017
© William Kentridge



I have named these scenes 'the passionate absurd' – and I mean, not 'absurd' in the sense of a joke, a folly, or the ridiculous, but rather to invoke a logic that has gone awry, where the rules of logic cease to apply.

Kentridge in *William Kentridge: that which we do not remember*, exh cat, Naomi Milgrom Foundation, Melbourne, 2018

Essay

Drawn to performance

In the 1980s, long before he became one of South Africa's most celebrated artists, William Kentridge had ambitions to become an actor. After obtaining degrees in politics and fine arts in Johannesburg, he travelled to Paris, enrolling at the Ecole Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq, where he studied mime and theatre. That early interest in performance helped shape the development of Kentridge's art practice and informed his handling of a diverse range of media.

Most well-known are the artist's performative drawings. These exquisite, somewhat old-fashioned-looking works begin as intimate performances in the studio, where thought and hand collude to direct the movement of charcoal across sheets of paper. In certain instances, the artist sets up a camera to document the additions, erasures and revisions, before reassembling them as animations. Kentridge also employs this process in other media, variously creating hybrids of film and drawing, film and collage, film and sculpture.

But performance isn't just a methodology the artist deploys within the realm of the visual arts. He also produces actual performances, most famously operas, where the logic of drawing, collage, film and sculpture infiltrate theatrical environments. Kentridge's first operatic foray was in 1998 when he collaborated with the Johannesburg-based Handspring Puppet Company on a production of Monteverdi's *The return of Ulysses*. He has since directed productions of Mozart's *The magic flute* (Théâtre de la Monnaie, Brussels, 2005), Dmitri Shostakovich's *The nose* (Metropolitan Opera, New York, 2013), Alban Berg's *Lulu* (Metropolitan Opera,

New York, 2015) and Berg's *Wozzeck* (Salzburg Festival, 2017).

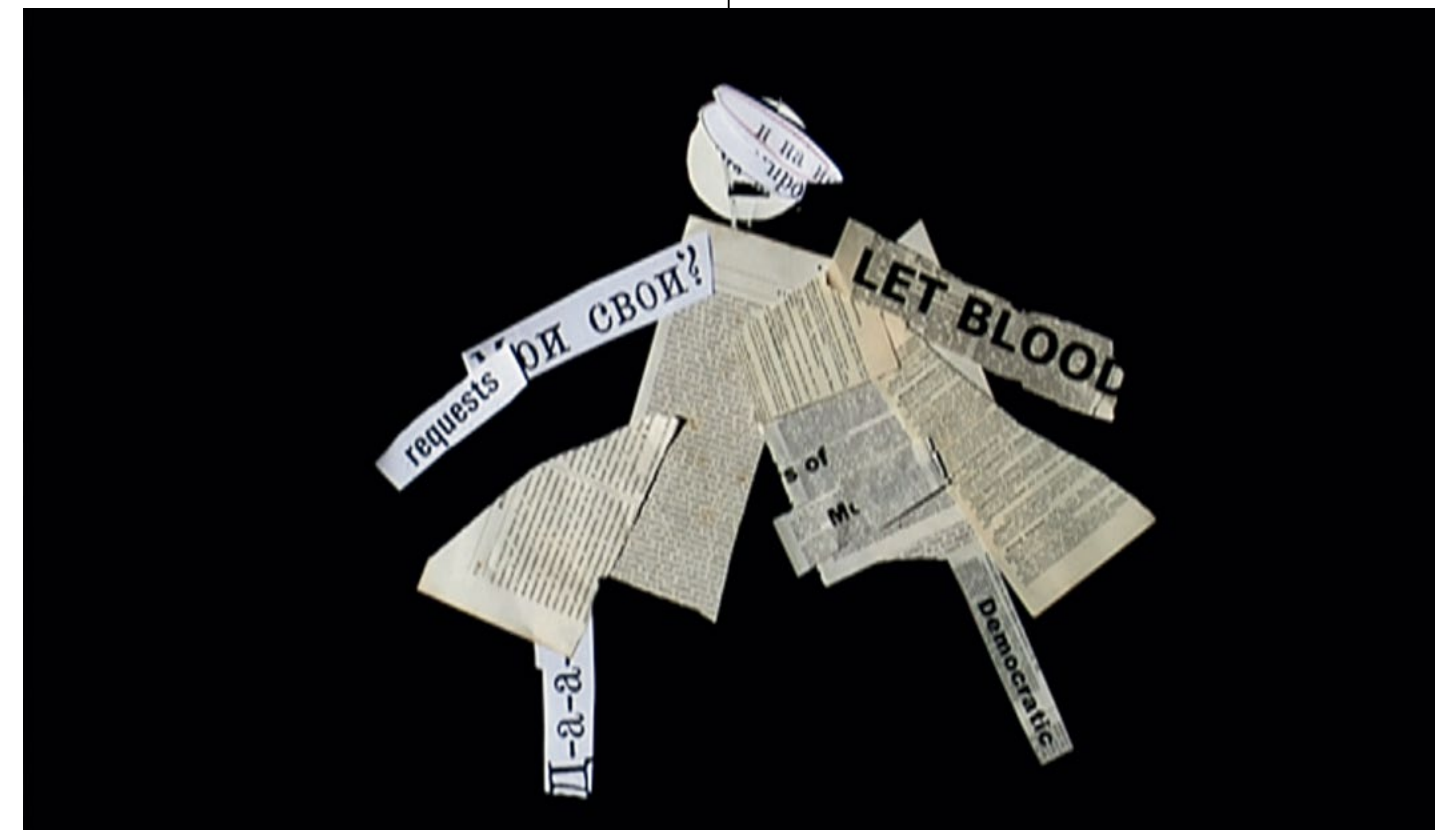
In each instance, as part of his research and preparation, Kentridge produced artworks that trace threads between the thematic and political underpinnings of the operas and his own interests as an artist. He establishes a symbiotic relationship between the plastic and performing arts, where the two disciplines nourish and provoke each other into surprising new forms.

Arguably, Kentridge's most elaborate and ambitious operatic artwork is the epic eight-screen video installation, *I am not me, the horse is not mine* 2008, which premiered at the 16th Biennale of Sydney (2008) and which was gifted to the Art Gallery of New South Wales by Anita and Luca Belgiorno-Nettis. Produced in the lead-up to Kentridge's production of *The nose*, it brings together a dizzying range of imagery, including archival film excerpts, drawing, collage, and footage of actor workshops.

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Nicholas Chambers
Art Gallery of New South Wales,
senior curator of modern and
contemporary international art

Adapted from an article originally
published in *Look*, Art Gallery
Society of New South Wales, Sydney,
Sep–Oct 2018



Captivating and complex, the installation's eight films run simultaneously and plunge the viewer into an ever-changing visual environment.

Like Shostakovich's 1928 opera, *I am not me, the horse is not mine* takes its point of departure from Nikolai Gogol's *The nose* (1836), an absurdist short story in which a mid-level Russian official awakes to discover his nose missing, later finding it gallivanting around St Petersburg wearing the uniform of a higher rank than that of its owner. Almost a century after it was written, the young Shostakovich saw this story as a metaphor for the violent absurdity of Russian political and cultural life at the beginning of the 20th century. These turbulent decades in Russian history, when art and politics traded in grand utopian visions, have long fascinated Kentridge and his video installation functions as an elegy for the promise of social and artistic transformation that was so brutally crushed under Stalin.

'To live in Stalin's era,' Kentridge once wrote, 'was to be condemned to a lifetime of enthusiasm.'¹ Among the cacophony of imagery in *I am not me, the horse is not mine* is the chilling juxtaposition of Stalin-era footage of May Day parades (wherein dutiful citizens can be seen making a spectacle of their enthusiasm for the state) and transcripts from the show trial of Stalin's former ally Nikolai Bukharin. Once a favourite lieutenant and respected party ideologue, Bukharin's enthusiasm was found to be less than absolute and he was forced to defend accusations brought against him by the Central Committee; much as others,

in earlier decades, had fought to save themselves from Bukharin's own ideological violence.² 'I am not me, the horse is not mine,' Bukharin stated during the trial, using a Russian peasant saying used to deny all guilt.

Shostakovich, similarly, had to contend with the mercurial opinions of the state. Following a negative official response to *The nose*, the 1934 premiere of his second opera, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, was initially regarded as a great achievement by the state and audiences alike. However, following Stalin's attendance at a 1936 performance, *Pravda* published a scathing review, widely believed to have been written by Stalin himself. Critics, who had originally praised the work, were prompted to recant their opinions. This absurd, unpredictable professional environment continued for most of Shostakovich's career.

In *I am not me, the horse is not mine*, we see Gogol's disembodied nose romping amid images of Stalinist parades and Shostakovich at the piano, and are reminded that while absurdity can be used for humorous ends, it can also invoke what Kentridge has described as 'a logic that has gone awry, where the rules of logic cease to apply'.³ The consequences are always unpredictable and sometimes mortal.

Kentridge has in the past acknowledged the line of influence running from Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1615) to Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759) to Gogol's *The nose* (1836), all texts that express doubt about the reliability of their own authors.⁴ Furthermore, as Jane Taylor has noted, Kentridge's scepticism

Captivating and complex, the installation's eight films run simultaneously and plunge the viewer into an ever-changing visual environment.

about the authorial role of the artist can be traced back to the beginning of his career and the importance of performance.⁵

It is worth noting that the artist himself appears in *I am not me, the horse is not mine*. In a brief sequence we find him walking across the studio, his figure doubled, so that we see two Kentridges, one following the other. Hands in pockets, the Kentridges walk with a purposeful, horse-like gait (front legs and back legs), calling to mind a moment in Gogol's story when the disembodied nose acquires a horse and, moreover, evoking the artwork's title. Is Kentridge questioning his relationship to the work, denying his authorial role by claiming 'I am not me, the horse is not mine'?

A parallel can be found in Gogol's story when, at its conclusion, the author addresses the reader directly, reflecting on the story he has just recounted. 'The most incomprehensible thing of all,' he writes, 'is how authors can choose such subjects for their stories. That really surpasses my understanding.'

1 William Kentridge, 'I am not me, the horse is not mine: Installation of 8 film fragments', in *William Kentridge: what we see and what we know*, National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, 2009, p 167.

2 William Kentridge, 'The passionate absurd', in William Kentridge and Jane Taylor, *William Kentridge: that which we do not remember*, Naomi Milgrom Foundation, Melbourne, 2018, p 114.

3 Kentridge, *idem*.

4 Jane Taylor, *William Kentridge: being led by the nose*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2017.

5 Taylor, *ibid*, p 84.

6 Nikolai Gogol, *The mantle and other stories*, translated by Claud Field, T. Werner Laurie Limited, London, 2011, p 106.

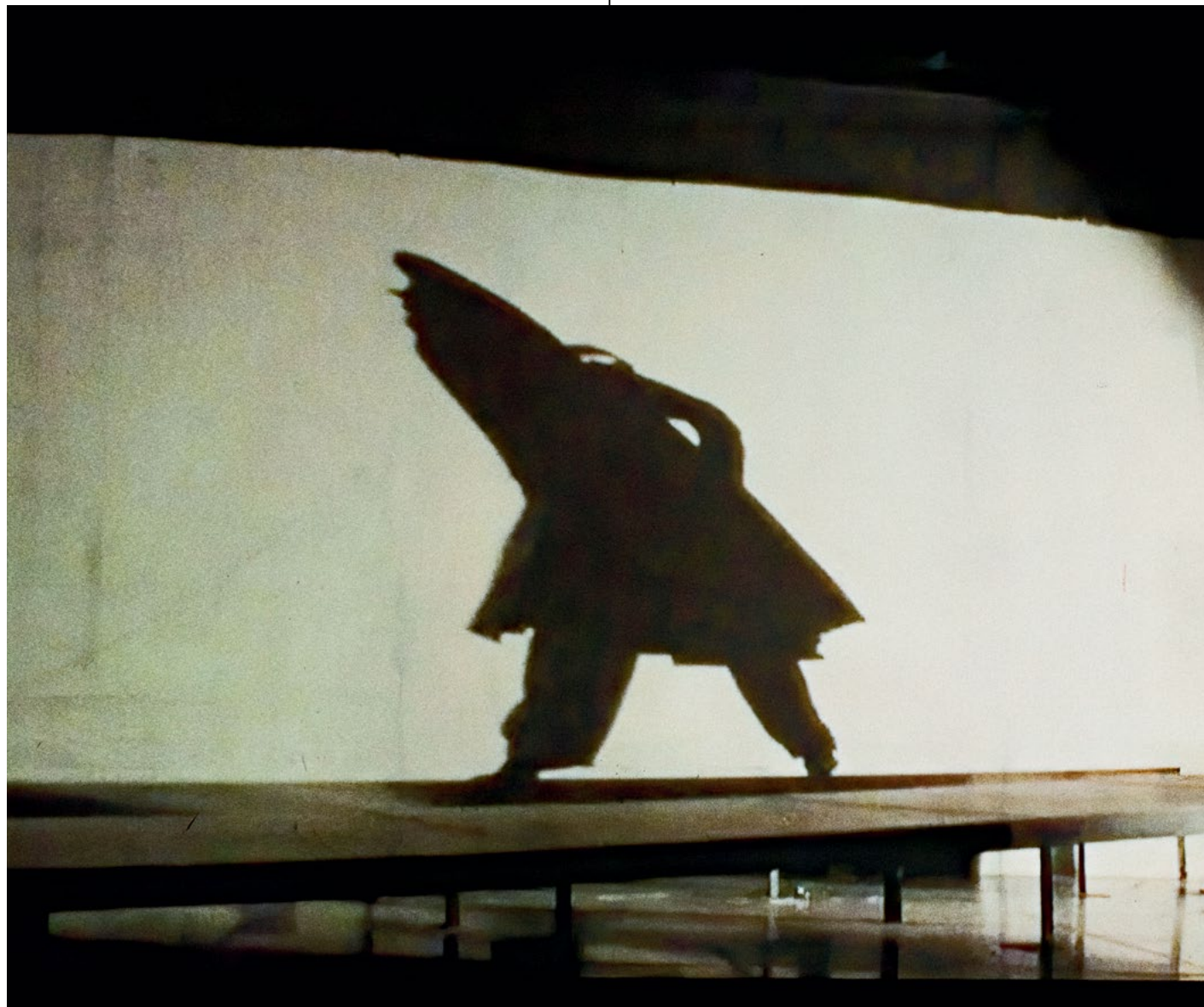
Image (previous spread): William Kentridge *I am not me, the horse is not mine* 2008 (video still, detail), Art Gallery of New South Wales, donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by Anita Belgioro-Nettis AM and Luca Belgioro-Nettis AM 2017 © William Kentridge

Body of work

The nose

Nikolai Gogol's short story *The nose* is the inspiration for a series of artworks by Kentridge. Following the production of Dmitri Shostakovich's opera and the video installation *I am not me, the horse is not mine*, Kentridge created further works including a performance lecture (2008), a cine-concert titled *Telegrams from the nose* (2020) and a series of drawings, prints, sculpture and tapestries. This body of work, also titled *The nose*, demonstrates the artist's interest in experimentation and the continued exploration of ideas.

🔗 View Kentridge's artworks and projects inspired by *The nose* on the Kentridge Studio website.



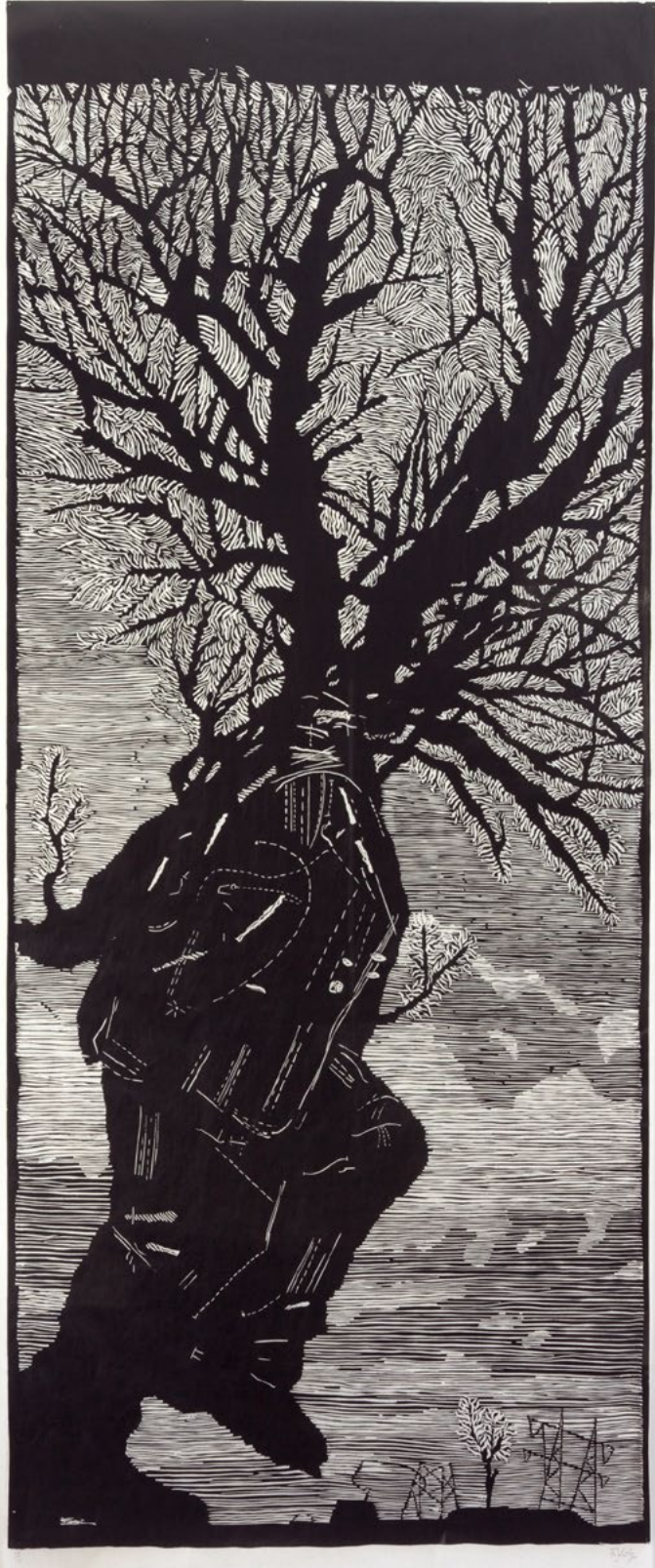
7–12 discussion questions

- This artwork was made while Kentridge was developing a production of Dmitri Shostakovich's opera *The nose*, which is based on the 1836 short story by Russian author Nikolai Gogol. Research the plot of Gogol's story. How has Kentridge depicted the events and characters in this book? What might your depiction of the story look like?
- Kentridge trained as an actor before becoming an artist and has long been involved in the theatre. Identify all the theatrical elements of this artwork, from what you see in the films to how you might experience the work as a viewer. Think about Kentridge's process. How is the making of the work itself a performative act?
- In this artwork, Kentridge references Russian constructivism. Research this art movement and some of the key artists involved. What stylistic and conceptual comparisons can you draw between *I am not me, the horse is not mine* and the Russian constructivists? Why do you think Kentridge is interested in this period of art?
- Kentridge is interested in 'the less good idea'. What does this mean? What impact does this approach have on the process of art-making?

7–12 activities

- Kentridge combines a range of imagery to create this artwork, including archival film excerpts, drawing, collage and footage of actor workshops. Select images from a range of media to create a new artwork. Think about how the experience of creating a work using a variety of media compares to using only one.
- Why does the artist describe the scenes in this work as 'the passionate absurd'? Research the philosophical theory of absurdism and its manifestations in the arts. How does this artwork draw on the absurd? Find an example of absurdist fiction or write your own and create a corresponding artwork.
- This artwork draws on Russian political and cultural history but, for Kentridge, it offers analogies with South Africa's recent history and the illogic of political decisions. How does this artwork and history resonate with you? Create an artwork that references a social or political event that is important to you.

Artworks by William Kentridge in the Art Gallery of New South Wales collection



left to right:
Walking man 2000, Art Gallery of New South Wales, gift of Ruth Faerber 2017, donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program in memory of Hans Faerber
© William Kentridge

Tide table 2003 (video still), Art Gallery of New South Wales, purchased 2005
© William Kentridge

I am not me, the horse is not mine 2008 (video still), Art Gallery of New South Wales, donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by Anita Belgiorno-Nettis AM and Luca Belgiorno-Nettis AM 2017
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