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WILLIAM KENTRIDGE ANIMATIONS ON SHOW AT DUCTAC  
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Just a few seconds of animation – grey waves shifting on to an ash grey shore – is enough to confirm William Kentridge's status among South Africa's most eminent contemporary artists.

To create his stop-motion works, Kentridge walks back and forth between camera and easel constantly. He draws with charcoal, returning to his camera to take two snaps and then erases and reworks the image on the same paper. He repeats this consuming process to create every frame. There's no computer trickery, just the opening and closing of a camera shutter.

Traces of charcoal survive from frame to frame. They leave ethereal silhouettes of grey that follow his well-wrought figures as they move through a scene. It is this that makes the ghostly residue of a boy skipping from stone to stone across a foamy sea in *Tide Tables* so mesmerising, like footsteps fading in wet sand.

Nine seminal animations by Kentridge are currently on show at Dubai Community Theatre and Arts Centre (Ductac), part of *Mine – A Selection of Films by South African Artists*.

The show brings together 17 South African artists working in video. It's a varied line-up, sometimes a little uneven in calibre, but highlights stretch from Bridget Baker's examination of a miniature model of a 1930s Berlin house, in which the omnipotence of her lens interrogates each room, through to

documentation of the artist Jacques Coetzer playing drums on a busy motorway in Pretoria.

But *Mine* does offer a good education in a key cycle of Kentridge's animated works. These nine films were created between 1989 and 2003, and follow two linchpin characters in the artist's oeuvre. Soho Eckstein is Kentridge's archetypal money-grabbing industrialist - blind to human peril, shut up in a high tower and dozing with over-indulgence. We watch Eckstein's brutal mining empire collapse as crowds disgruntled with the status quo (clearly apartheid, though not mentioned explicitly) pile through the streets of Johannesburg. He ends his days alone, on a beach, watching even the tide itself turn against him.

In direct opposition is the curious character of Felix Teitlebaum, an artist at the mercy of fits of ecstasy and anxiety (inexplicably always naked), who covets the industrial magnate's wife.

This sounds straightforward in concept. But Kentridge's animated drawings lead us into a subliminal, malleable reality. Banal scenes can, with a moment's surreal inflection, dismantle into symbolic forms that unpick the tumultuous social history of South Africa around apartheid's dissolution in 1994.

Kentridge was born in Johannesburg in 1955, the son of Sydney Kentridge, a white lawyer who represented the family of Stephen Biko, the leader of the Black Consciousness Movement who died in police custody in the apartheid era.

The artist taught etching for two years after graduating art school before studying theatre and mime for a year in 1981 at the Ecole Jacques Lecoq in Paris.

Theatrical process and a sense of improvisation took root in Kentridge's style when he embarked on these stop-motion works in 1989. Charcoal is easily transformable and easy to erase, and because of that the artist often talks about his material as a "way of thinking". He works without script or storyboard, and narratives evolve on intuition from one image to the next.

"In that physical process, new images and ideas suggest themselves," Kentridge once said in interview with the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, ahead of his show there in 2009.

There's no denying that South Africa's social upheaval underpins these works, but Kentridge refuses reductive standpoints. In the cruel ascent and plummeting, cuckolded fall of Eckstein, the artist still offers pathos to this trajectory. The cycle of animations begin as strident good versus evil stories, but slowly unravel into reflections altogether more subtle and complex.

Rather than diatribes, they are attempts to situate the recent politics of post-colonialism in Africa as an unending tide of misdirection and misuse of power inherent to us all. Take the top brass generals watching the melancholic, deflated Eckstein staring out to sea in *Tide Tables* – a line-up of new, Idi

Amin-esque leaders, standing on a Romanesque balcony in a whitewashed villa, the image of brutalised regimes giving way to others.

Similarly, the artistic Teitlebaum's courtship of the industrialist's wife isn't the Hollywood-esque triumph of free-spirited love over the stuffy clutches of a tyrant. *Instead*, this relationship comes with its own complexities and agonies, beautifully played out in *Felix In Exile*, which is included in Mine.

"I am interested in a political art," Kentridge told the African contemporary art magazine *Revue Noire* in 1993. "That is to say an art of ambiguity, contradiction, uncompleted gestures and uncertain endings."

This ambiguity is what makes his work so timeless; fascinating that it would emerge from a style that demands such virtuosity.

He likes to refer to these works as "drawings for projection" or, semi-jokingly, "stone-age" animation. Yet in their continued relevance, their use of charcoal and mutability of archetypal forms, there is something akin to cave paintings about these works. They flicker from scene to scene, as if by torchlight; casting the grey shadows of a long, unfinished history.

Mine - A Selection of Films by South African Artists continues at Ductac in Mall of the Emirates, Dubai, until February 6, 2012 with several works on display in the Gallery of Light, and a separate screening area to select individual films for viewing. Entry is free