

Rainbow Reflections

Internationally-acclaimed South African artist William Kentridge's first show in India carries imprints of his homeland's history

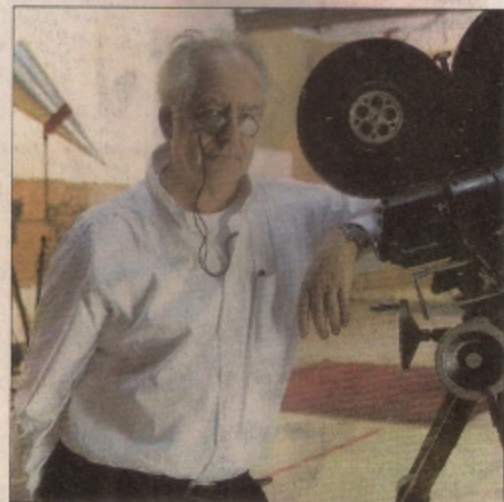
SANKHAYAN GHOSH

He is a painter, weaver, sculptor and filmmaker, who has been associated with theatre and opera, first as an actor and later as a director and designer. But a closer glimpse at William Kentridge's life might throw up possibilities of how his work might be interconnected, within mediums and themes, leading to one overarching theme—the apartheid-era South Africa, the world the artist grew up in and knows intimately.

"One has to know the basics of South Africa's sociopolitical condition and history to grasp my work fully," says Kentridge, whose work over the years and across the world have made him one of the significant artists of this generation. From Louvre, Paris, to the Museum of Modern Art, New York, his art has been shown in some of the world's most prestigious museums.

An assemblage of Kentridge's work — film installation, drawings, sculptures, prints, tapestries and flip-book films — will be on display at Mumbai's Volte Gallery. The exhibition titled "The Poems I Used to Know" will open on February 6 and is on till March 20. The most celebrated of these is the audio-visual installation *I am not Me, the Horse is not Mine*, an animation film done in Kentridge's unique way of photographing successive hand-drawn charcoal images.

"I draw them always on the same sheet of paper, contrary to the traditional animation technique in which each movement is drawn on a separate sheet. The images are constructed by filming a drawing, making erasures and changes and filming it again," he explains what has become the definitive feature of his work. As a result, instead of the stark white backgrounds of successive sheets of fresh paper, the traces



add up to create their own unclear, grey backdrops dwelling in a bit of both black and white.

"The depiction of my birthplace runs through all my work, and I do not like to portray it as the militant or oppressive place that it was for the blacks. But it does not emphasise the picturesque state of living that white people enjoyed during apartheid either. Instead, I try to represent a city in which the duality

of man is exposed," says the 58-year-old artist, whose exhibit *Five Themes* was included in the 2009 issue of *Time 100*.

The video is based on an opera by Dmitri Shostakovich, titled *The Nose* (which, in turn, is based on Nikolai Gogol's short story by the same name) where a man wakes up to find his nose missing. It shows influences of Kentridge's years in mime and theatre. "I have come to



(Clockwise from top left) Kentridge; One of his works, *World on its Hind Legs*; one of Kentridge's stop-motion animation films

understand the fluid motion of characters in theatre. It helps me create animation drawings with that much more accuracy and finesse," he says.

There are also two unique sculptures titled *World on its Hind Legs* and *Sculpture for Return* where a new coherent image appears every time it is viewed from a different angle. Like everything in Kentridge's art, this too, can perhaps draw poetic justifications from his own past where, by virtue of being of European descent, he got a ringside view of the apartheid-struck South Africa. His perspectives, as a result, have shaped up to be distant, but never lost their touch of poignancy. "My parents were lawyers, famous for their defence of victims of the apartheid, giving me the ability to remove myself somewhat from the atrocities there. The cultural boycott of South Africa made it easier for me to find my way as an artist, since I could work quietly on my own," he says.