

**WILLIAM KENTRIDGE**

**Parkett 63 - 2002**

# A MESSENGER

SUSAN STEWART

One by one, across the plains and sea and hills to the palace of the Atridae, the torches are lit to bring the news from Troy. The watchman stands anxiously in the dark, pining for the moment when he can watch the night sky as an emblem of itself, without an expectation of the sudden human light that brings the obligations of history. A messenger eventually will burst on the scene and there and then will narrate the truths of suffering, murder, and treachery that have remained in every sense *ob-scene*, hidden from view and hence all the more necessary as a narrated knowledge. The messenger must urgently and patiently unfold his testimony, detailing and quoting and inferring cause. And then, at the end of his message, he must move back from his narration of horror and brutality to conclude with some aphorism, some sense-making principle as a counter to the ineffable or absurd: “Every man must learn not to be too trustful,” says the messenger of *Helen*. “The noblest thing a man can have is a humble and quiet heart that reveres the gods. I think that is also the wisest thing for a man to possess, if he will but use it,” says the messenger of *The Bacchae*.

The messenger’s speeches of classical tragedy are prototypes for an authentic documentary art. They break from the limitations of both the subjective speech of individual figures and the collective and abstract lament of the chorus; in messengers’ speeches

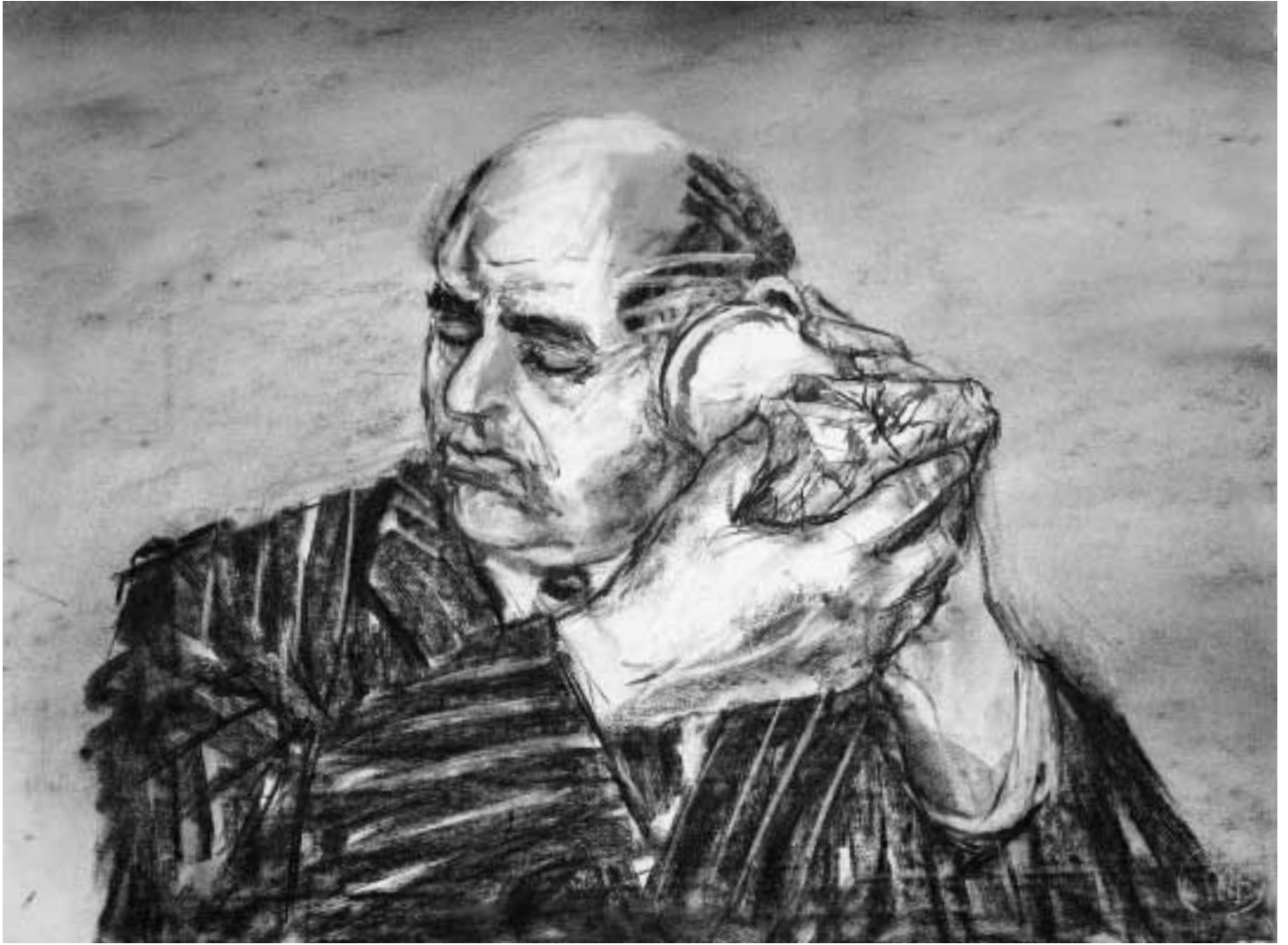
first-person perspective is harnessed to the interests of moral continuity. In form the messenger’s speech effects a great reversal of figure/ground relations; first asserting the claims of the trauma of memory against the forgetfulness of present-centered existence, then re-framing the particular facts of the trauma within a discourse of truth and virtue. The authenticity, beauty, symmetry, and skilled likenesses of the messenger’s speech only have moral authority because of this final transformation of what is individual into what is universal. Without that transformation, such facts remain objects too sensational in their detail and too cold in their indifference to be of human use.

Few living artists understand more vividly than William Kentridge the difficulties and responsibilities that accompany such relations between figure and ground. No stranger to tragedy in life and on the stage, he truly has served as a messenger of the ob-scene and has taken on the burden of drawing ethical conclusions from historical events that are often overwhelmingly evil. His is an art not only of politics, as it has often been viewed, but also an art of theodicy that considers with great deliberation the problems involved in witnessing, telling, and concluding in the face of unremitting state violence. A merely political art acquires its sanction from external sources of authority and power. Kentridge has resolutely refused to do this; every sanction of his art grows from the terms of its own creation.

What this means in actual practice emerges from a simple point that the artist himself has made over and over again: he draws. And after he draws, he animates. His task is not simply to represent, detail,

---

SUSAN STEWART is a poet and critic. Her most recent book of poems is *The Forest* and her most recent critical study, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, has just appeared—both from the University of Chicago Press.



*WILLIAM KENTRIDGE, WEIGHING... AND WANTING, 1997–98, charcoal and pastel on paper, drawing for animation film 21<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 27<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>" /  
WIEGEN... UND NICHT GENÜGEN, Kohle und Pastell auf Papier, Zeichnung für den Animationsfilm, 55 x 70 cm.*

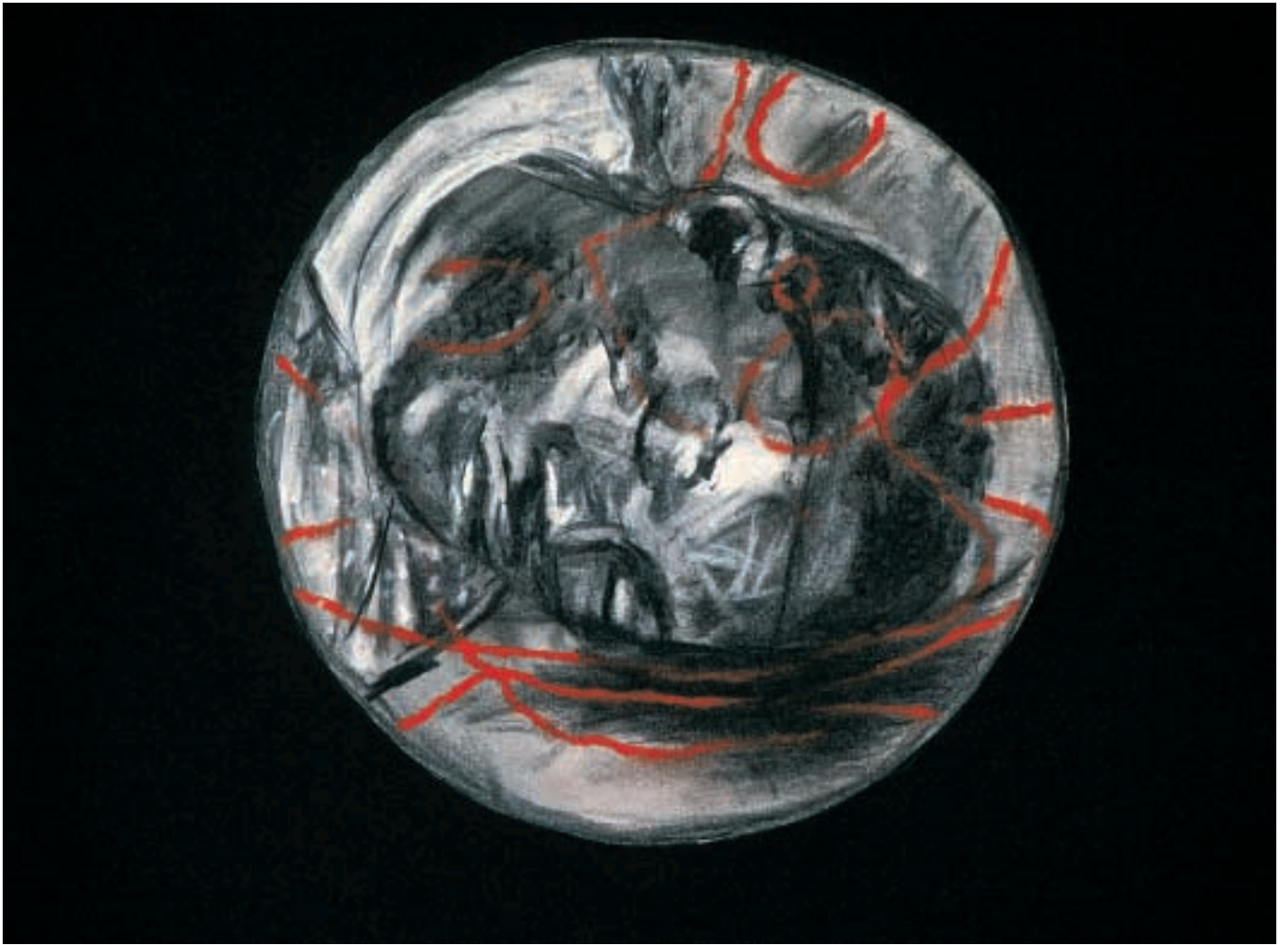


WILLIAM KENTRIDGE, *FAUSTUS IN AFRICA!*, 1995, charcoal and pastel on paper, drawing for animation film and puppet theater performance, 47 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 63" / *FAUST IN AFRIKA!*, Kohle und Pastell auf Papier, Zeichnung für Animationsfilm und Puppentheater, 120 x 160 cm.

or delineate the facts of suffering: rather he draws from such a content as surely as clear water is drawn by patience from a dark well, and as pain is drawn away from the body by healing. Kentridge draws with charcoal—the residue of fires—and his dominant palette of black and white is literally graced by occasional touches of blue that signify water and water’s ambiguous sensual fluidity and capacity to renew. His method is urgent, but it will not skip a step. Every drawing is a gesture against the ready-made, simultaneous, and quickly-consumed facility of photographic imagery. He reveals how drawing is a hermeneutic

advance upon photography’s mode of representation just as history writing is a hermeneutic advance upon the random details of mere chronicism. The most obvious fact of drawing—that it unfolds in time and records that unfolding—acquires a profound significance here as a counter-narrative, an alternative speed, another opportunity to examine experience in a context where violence has obliterated the possibilities of perspective and hence made the view of history unbearable.

When Kentridge works at the speed of his hand and eye, the drawing itself is evidence of his first-per-



WILLIAM KENTRIDGE, *FELIX IN EXILE*, 1994, charcoal, pastel, and gouache on paper, drawing for animation film, 17<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 21<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" / *FELIX IM EXIL*, Kohle, Pastell und Gouache auf Papier, Zeichnung aus dem Animationsfilm, 45 x 54 cm.

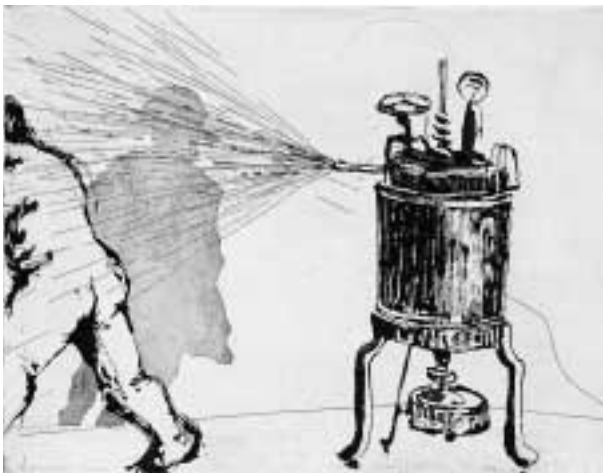
son witness, a trace of his presence and sequence of judgments. His drawings stand in relation to his world the way court-drawings stand in relation to the courtroom: as a refusal of mere publicity, as a witnessing that admits its limits from the outset and prefers the impediment to ease of execution. His dominant internal perspectives involve examinations of the very problems of figure and ground that provide the context for his work: figures gazing upon crowds, emerging from crowds, stranded by crowds; views from above, below, and, significantly, the rear-view mirror; an architecture of confinement and

repetitive institutional spaces placed amidst a denuded and desolate landscape. Within the frame, the hand is mediated by a weapon, the voice by a megaphone, the eye by a mirror or window; but without the frame an unmediated hand is what draws them. The mind and hand and eye of the artist loom over these scenes of history. The work of the hand is transparent; it retraces its steps and reveals its erasures to accumulate a history of layers and tangles and cross-references that are also cross-purposes.

Like the disappearing view from the rear-view mirror, history is run backwards as a way of re-attempting

William Kentridge

WILLIAM KENTRIDGE, *GIVE & TAKE*, 2001,  
4 etchings from a series of 8, 7½ x 9⅞" each /  
*GIB & NIMM*, 4 Radierungen aus einer  
8er-Serie, je 19 x 25 cm.



a path forward. As the images of the camera are superseded by hand-drawn images, so in his films are the sounds of everyday speech superseded by a recurring choral music. The history of technology is replayed and this replaying demands that we reconsider the terms of our relation to objects and to other persons. Drawing and not photography; communal song before individual speech; Bakelite phones, not cell phones; mining and manufacturing, not service industries and bureaucracy. We could speak of a “return to nature” in Kentridge’s work that implies the density and difficulty of what would have to be done to return us to a moment when human needs and technology were on the same scale. The technology represented in Kentridge’s drawings and films alludes to the years just prior to his birth, not the years of his current production; it is another aspect of the messenger’s effort to delineate a chain of causal relations and connections. The wires and cords proliferating in Kentridge’s imagery expose a nervous system that now lies concealed. A Faustian dream of flying and transcendence is shown to be the cheap trick it is: here everything binds and pulls the weight of existence groundward.

It is often said that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission effecting the transition to the new South African state is a monumental advance in the history of ethics—a democratically-sanctioned asser-

tion that truth is more important than revenge and that universal access to such truth is more important than the particular claims individuals might make with regard to one another. Yet we can see that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is as well the fruit of a long struggle toward justice, a dream of justice freed of its embedding in the grounds of injury alone. This struggle is already explored in imaginative form at the end of the *Oresteia* when the jury form is established and the Erinyes must give up their vengeful rage. Kentridge's work analogously replaces representation with deliberation; he is the most local of artists in his narration and the most universal in his sense of closure.

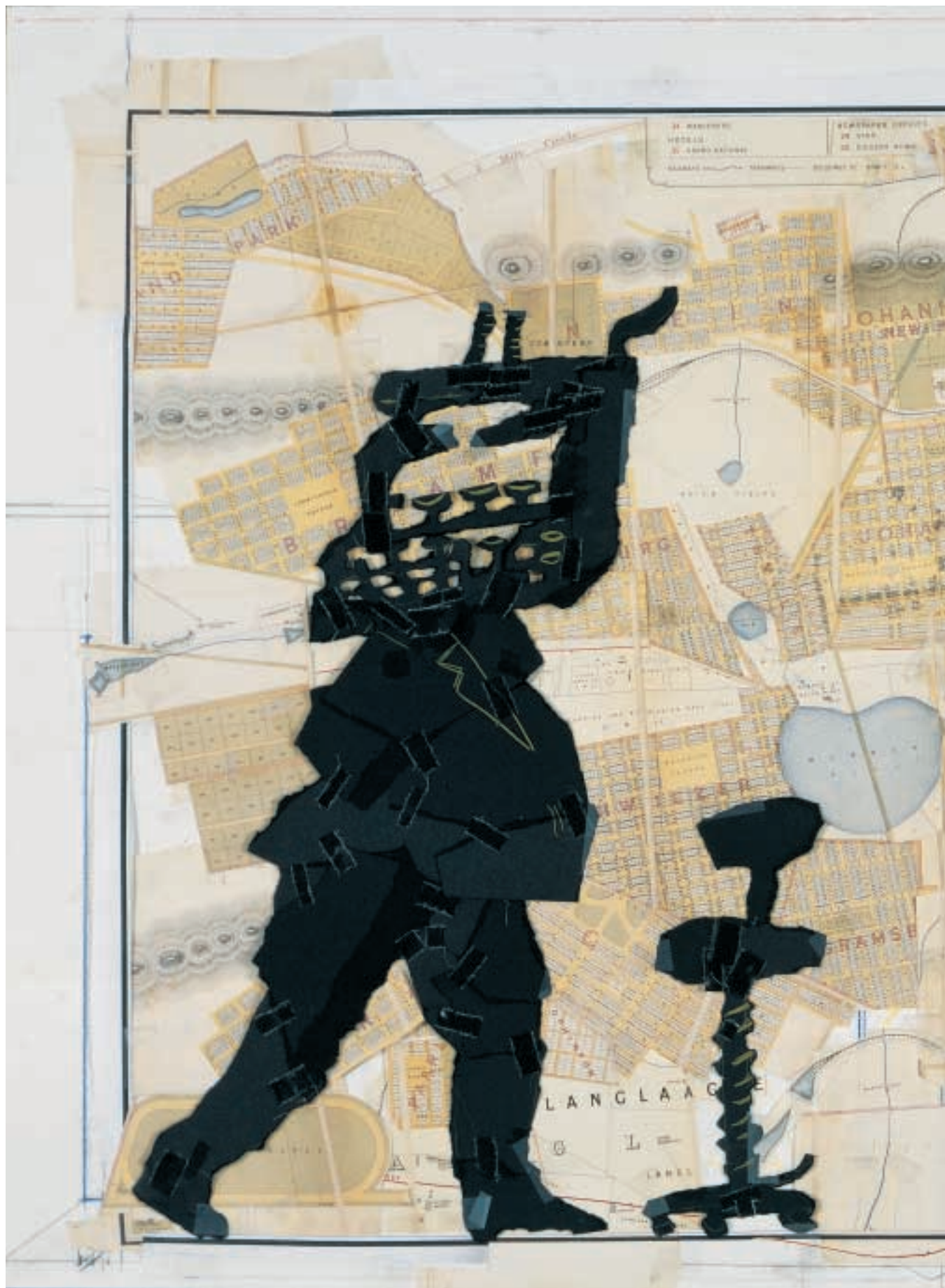
To see Kentridge's work in this context of the long path of justice is to understand why he so continually returns to the necessity of individual fantasy and desire. In his invention of his major autobiographical fictional characters—Soho Eckstein, Mrs. Eckstein, and Felix Teitelbaum—Kentridge takes the central myth of romance in the West, the adultery plot, away from the margins of history and places it at its inception just as Helen shadows the start of the Trojan war. Shaped by what René Girard has famously called “mimetic desire,” this plot reminds us of the universal persistence of fantasy even in extreme conditions, a persistence just as necessary to the continuity of the self as memory is—and just as central to the feeling of being an individual who is alive in a world of individuals. Without such an imaginative narration, Kentridge's work would lose its capacity for tragedy on the level of the individual person. It is not that we find catharsis in the consequences of the plot for the three characters so much as that we see the characters as evidence of Kentridge's inner artistic life resisting a terrible pressure to objectify and externalize.

This place for fantasy in an art of public conscience is tied, too, to the other most important formal dimension of Kentridge's work: his impulse toward animation. Kentridge's animations include a consideration of the long art historical tradition of the animated statue, as in his 1990 film *MONUMENT* where a statue of a suffering worker at the moment of its unveiling looks up and speaks, shifting the focus of attention from the donor to the referent. Yet animation is a formal problem that suffuses all of his

work, including his individual drawings and objects that are not filmed. His drawings often show flags, paper, leaves, pieces of cloth and clothing, hair, and limbs under pressure of motion and wind. His figures seem steeled against the very air itself, stooped and blown about or grasping for a handhold. Here he has invented another device for making time and change internal to the work; the theme flows from the temporal gestures of his drawing hand.

Violence disrupts our relation to the dead and not simply our relation to the living. In Kentridge's depiction of the real world the dead have become anonymous, their bodies blown to bits or experimented upon, their ordeals erased from view. The victims of violence are not buried with rites or reintegrated into the human community as bodies dedicated and commemorated. Rather, they lie face down with newspapers covering them in a terrible allegory of their ephemerality and vulnerability; they are wrapped in newspaper like any wasted thing, including the news the newspaper brings. Kentridge's response is steadfastly to show the erasure and animate the sequence so that it can be literally re-membered. He has gathered the blown pages and put them back into their proper sequence with all the solemnity of ritual and then he has filmed them, offering them again to view, so that we might ourselves begin to draw conclusions and form judgments that can withstand the winds of mere contingency—those winds that blow everywhere over all the earth.









WILLIAM KENTRIDGE, UNTITLED STUDY FOR TAPESTRY, 2001, chine collé and collage, 28 3/4 x 37 1/2" /  
WANDTEPPICH-ENTWURF OHNE TITEL, Chine collé und Collage, 73 x 96 cm.