

portraits from apartheid era South Africa to interrogate practices of self-imaging, notions of gender, race, class and the nature of post-apartheid South Africa.

To commemorate and project onto a new space of value, this eleventh iteration of Dak'Art, Omar Victor Diop, created the *Studio of Vanities* in which he captured images of the participating artists and reinvigorated the practice of studio portraiture widely admired by the art world since the circulation of the portraits of Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibe. Interestingly, in 1992 during the first edition of Dak'Art, *Revue Noire* showcased the work of renowned Senegalese photographers Mama Casset and Bouna Medoune Seye (Delisse 1993). Like many of the artists showing at Dak'Art, Diop also commented on Africa and African's place in the history of the global.

As much as the artist at Dak'Art engaged with themes specific to the surroundings in which they work, they also engaged with their particular experience of the global, including new religious formations and local histories of these global religions. In his work shown in the sculpture exhibition, *Témoins de notre temps* (2013) (Fig. 5), Henri Sagna addressed the complex interplay of Muslim and Christian congregations in locations across the continent turning to painting, sculpture, and architecture. His burnt wooden containers displaying religious symbols spoke to Islam, Christianity, tolerance, and the contemporary moment.

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Notes

- 1 Nzewi personal communication, 15 May 2014.
- 2 Diop, personal communication, 16 May 2014.
- 3 Nzewi personal communication, 15 May 2014.

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exhibition review

William Kentridge: Tapestries— A Collaboration with Stephens Tapestry Studio

Wits Art Museum, Johannesburg

November 18, 2015–December 15, 2015

reviewed by Joseph Leo Koerner

During the last two months of 2014, the galleries of the Wits Art museum were hung with remarkable tapestries after William Kentridge's designs. These weavings looked custom-made for this space. Displaying twenty weavings along with preparatory and related objects—raw materials, mock-ups, cartoons, motifs cast in bronze, etc.—curator Fiona Rankin-Smith took visitors deep inside the artist's studio (Figs. 1–2). To anyone who knew Kentridge's work well, that studio was already a familiar place, because in drawings, films, flipbooks, lectures, performances, and installations, the artist has frequently portrayed himself pacing his workspace in Johannesburg.

But it is also a special property of tapestries to seem everywhere at home. Among the earliest human artifacts, weavings connect us to our nomadic past. The Bible states that Adam and Eve tied leaves together to cover them-

selves; early theorists of architecture, puzzling over Adam's house in paradise, speculated that human dwelling started with textiles hung between upright supports. Tapestries are also a portable home. Hanging them out makes any place domestic. Fittingly, in his works in this medium, Kentridge makes mobility the fundamental theme. Dark figures command the tapestries. Riders on horseback, marching compasses, forward-traveling noses, porters carrying great loads: all struggle to move from here to there. Monstrous and comical, these forms enact the human condition in accordance to physics' basic law that work equals force times distance. As the exhibition's accompanying material showed, these figures also travel backwards through the artist's oeuvre from Kentridge's 2014 collaboration on performances of Schubert's *Winterreise*, through his 2012 production of Shostakovich's *The Nose* for the Metropolitan Opera, back to *Shadow Play* of 1999.

Schubert's song cycle begins where Kentridge's weavings do: in motion from the start. With the piano sounding the wanderer-singer's footsteps in winter away as he departs from his fickle love, and with the singer locked in an shifting duet with nature, these Viennese *Lieder* proved an illuminating matrix for Kentridge's art, heightening its melancholy and embellishing with storylines its landscape of single trees, uncanny crows, windmills, and weathervanes. With each new project generally, Kentridge launches new messages and forms, expanding steadily his reach while

- 1 William Kentridge
Self Portrait as Coffee Pot III (2011)
Tapestry; 278 cm x 235 cm
Edition: 6 + 2 AP's
Photo: Anthea Pokroy





2 GPG Core Gallery, Wits Art Museum, with skeins of wool in foreground and tapestries in background. Photo: Fiona Rankin-Smith

3 William Kentridge
(l) *Chasing Your Own Tail III* (2011)
Tapestry; 240 cm x 360 cm
(r) *Diva* (2011)
Tapestry; 242 cm x 223 cm
In situ Wits Art Museum
Photo: Anthea Pokroy

remaining aesthetically and ethically consistent. Long before his tapestries, the artist cast the figure of the porter as the anti-hero of his 1991 animated film *Monument*.

Designing for tapestries places special demands on an artist. Forms have to be simple enough to look good enlarged and from far away. They must also be interesting enough to sustain attentive viewing on that scale, and to justify the labor expanded in weaving them. It's not by accident that two of Europe's great virtuosos of monumental painting, Raphael and Rubens, designed the greatest tapestry cycles of the tradition. Through his expansive installations, civic sculpture, and opera set designs, Kentridge has mastered big formats (Figs. 3–4).

And in his animated films, through drawing, erasing, and redrawing, and elsewhere in his oeuvre, through collage and the use of printed pages as supports, he achieves a density similar to weaving. In the tapestries, figures appear like moving shadows projected on lighter grounds. Those grounds reference travel, too. Consisting of old maps, they read like the world through which the shadow figures trudge.

Kentridge distinguishes figure and ground sharply, as dark to light, and elevation to plan. The black silhouettes are deliberately haphazard. The artist made them by tearing rough forms from black construction paper. To recognize the figures as porters, horses, noses, compasses, etc., takes a projective imagination

that—in the artist's words—“meets the image halfway.” By contrast, the maps consist of exact contours that took centuries of meticulous effort to achieve. The shapes of coastlines, rivers, and mountains arose from an immense cumulative labor: travelers bringing little bits of information home, mapmakers collecting and collating the bits, travelers setting forth now with maps to gather more information. The geographies on and through which the Kentridge's shadow processions move seem like indisputable facts, as something found in the world rather than made in the studio—pictorial ground figured as terra firma. But it's the contrast between the natural and the human order which Kentridge's tapestries complicate.





When woven, figure and ground become a continuum, thematically, through the artist's imagination, and materially, through knotting that entwines threads into a whole.

In one of the *Porters* series, a fabulous Tree-Man (one of Kentridge's signature motifs) marches left to right against an old French school map of Asia Minor (Fig. 5). The figure's leafy branches meld with the map's rivers and valleys, suggesting the eons of human movement through the earth's terrain (here, perhaps, out of Africa) that brought the map about. In another tapestry, a figure drags a huge compass, evoking not only the labor that brought about the cartographic ground but also, via the burden that this compass evidently is, the oppressive effect the mapmaker's knowledge and power have on the mapped. What's most remarkable about these tapestries, though, is how the thematic meshing of figure and ground is materially achieved. The conceptual epiphany, say, that what seems "found" (the world through which the figures trudge) is humanly "made," is transcended by the visual epiphany of the tapestries themselves.

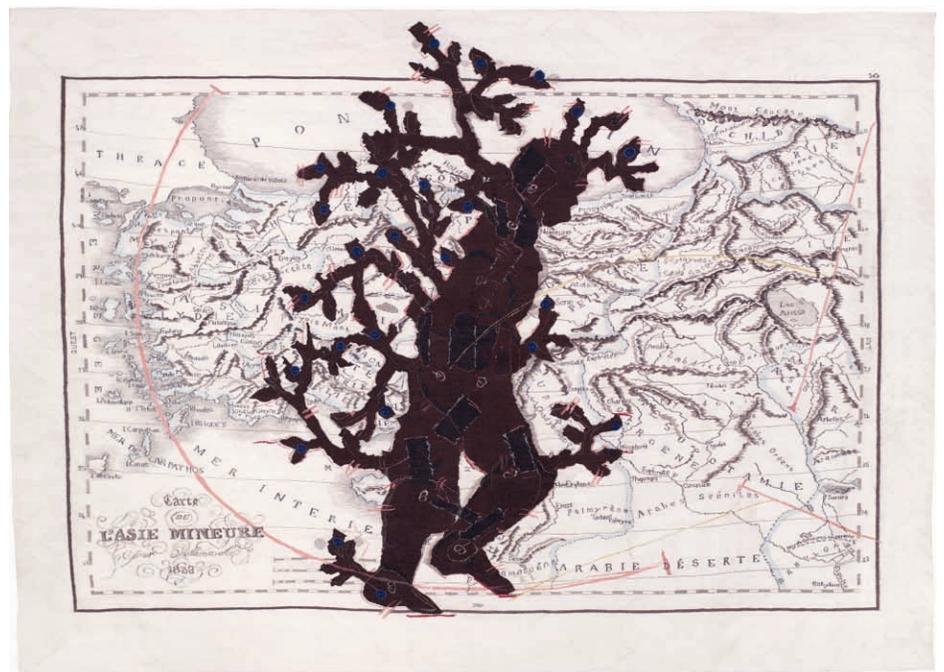
Anyone who spends time before these weavings can't but be awestruck by the uncanny patterns the weavers at Marguerite Stevens' studio have created. First there are the translations of complex prototypes (maps with inscriptions, legends, and cartouches; pins and patches of the paper shadow puppets; further pins that, in the original cartoon, hold bits of paper in place, and so forth) into woven threads. Then there are the weaver's *trompe-l'œil* additions—for example, the semblance that Stephens and her team create, of shadows cast in the original working model by paper loosely pinned to the underlying ground. Not quite of Kentridge's art, these effects are nonetheless in tune with that art in its willful display of process. Yet these

tapestries also outdo their model through the magic of weaving. Look at any section of these works, pick out any figured surface and attend to the weaving of which it was made, and wondrous new patterns come to light. What was, in the artist's model, the mark of a crimson Prismacolor pencil becomes, woven, a mesmerizing coil of red more saturated, palpable, and enigmatic than anything a pencil could make. Woven, the blacker black of the masking tape that Kentridge pastes on the black construction paper becomes an absorbing figure in and of itself.

Freud lined his consulting room with tapestries and rugs. Whereas the little museum of antiquities installed in that room aimed to return patients to the archaic substratum

4 William Kentridge
The Porter Series, tapestries in situ in the Mezzanine Gallery, Wits Art Museum
Photo: Anthea Pokroy

5 William Kentridge
Asia Minor (Tree Man) (2006)
Tapestry; 248 cm x 343.2 cm
Edition: 5 + 2 AP
Photo: Andrea Simon



of the human species, the “Persian” rugs that cocooned the famous couch encouraged a more abstract thought process. For in Vienna at 1900 it was believed that the ornamental art of weaving, with its arabesques, rhythms, and repetitions, and with its dizzying alteration of figure and ground, was a visual analogue to the “free association” that Freud demanded of his patients for their talking cure. Add to the power of tapestry’s patterns the mysteries of the weaver’s craft (the rapid twists, returns, and knots remain technically opaque even when observed up close in the workshop) and the result is a depth of imagery over and above—and under and in-between—the enigmatic pictures and stories that Kentridge’s designs encompass.

These are ancient metaphors. Thought is a thread. The storyteller spins yarns. And poets do something more: they weave. The great poem can be likened to a weaving or tapestry because it doesn’t simply set forth plot and characters but also conjures an entire world, a cosmos encompassing events, peoples, and places and embracing, too, ourselves as, listening, we are psychically woven into that tapestry. Later, the scribes began to write down—first in scroll, then in codex—these poetical weavings. And when they achieved on the written page a thing of similar consistency and complexity as the poem, they called what they made a text. The word comes from the Latin *textus* (“thing woven”) from *texere* (“to weave, braid, fabricate, build”), and before that from Proto-Indo-European *teks* (“to weave, to make, to make wicker or wattle”). So originally the text was a weaving, and only subsequently, by analogy and metaphor, did text become writing or Scripture.

Kentridge’s tapestries return texts to this primordial condition. The artist’s texts—the stories this poet-artist tells in imagery, in performance, and in the enigmatic narratives of his “drawings for projection,” are all about the imponderables of history, memory, and the human condition. In the tapestries, through the weaver’s craft, these become texts in that original sense of weavings. Examined closely, as this exhibition allowed us effortlessly to do, these collaborative creation do what great tapestries do plus reciting the poems that Kentridge, over the course of his career, has through his images composed.

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exhibition review

Chief S.O. Alonge: Photographer to the Royal Court of Benin, Nigeria

National Museum of African Art,
Washington, DC
September 17, 2014–
July 31, 2016

reviewed by Mark Auslander

“Chief S.O. Alonge: Photographer to the Royal Court of Benin, Nigeria” explores several overlapping historical relationships: between colonialism, postcolonialism, and photography; between the medium of photography and classic Benin Kingdom metal plaques and hip ornaments; and between photography as a mode of documenting and constituting interior domestic life and photography as a technology of royal ritual action. The exhibition emerges out of a collection of 3,000 images, including many glass plates and silver gelatin prints by Chief Solomon Osagie Alonge, the first official photographer to the royal court of Benin, now housed at the Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives at the National Museum of African Art. The photographs are juxtaposed with works drawn from the Museum’s significant collection of classic Benin art.

Lead curator and chief archivist Amy Staples, co-curator Bryna Freyer, and consulting

curator Flora Kaplan contextualize Alonge (1911–1994) in terms of an extended history of visual politics in the Benin Kingdom. The capacity to establish authoritative framings of visual experience and to organize apprehensions of dynamic exchanges between visible and invisible domains has long been central to royal ideologies of sovereignty in the kingdom (Freyer 1989, Gore 2007, Ben-Amos Girshick 2007). The adornment, painting, and scarification of the bodies of the Oba, Queen Mother, and others associated with the royal court, in stasis or in motion, dramatize and help constitute the flow of ancestral potencies into the mortal world. In many respects, power in the Benin Kingdom is a supremely visual technology, radiantly binding together royals and commoners while diminishing, even crushing, the capacity of opponents. Visual display is often used to dramatize structural oppositions, while simultaneously highlighting the sovereign’s sacral capacities to transcend all opposition (Nevadomsky 1983–84).

The exhibition cleverly deploys this aesthetic of dramatized, and transcended, opposition throughout the installation. The opening hallway displays on the left a large, blown-up reproduction of Reginald Kerr Granville’s well-known image of the sacked place courtyard following the 1897 British punitive expedition. Affixed to poles before the image are three important royal Benin bronze plaques, evocative of the great cache of bronzes looted by the British Admiralty and eventually acquired by museums and collectors around

1 “Chief S.O. Alonge: Photographer to the Royal Court of Benin, Nigeria” at the National Museum of African Art. Central gallery of exhibition, showing both the studio side and court photography.
Photo: Franko Khoury

