THOUGHTS IN MOTION: A still from the film 'The Refusal of Time' (2012), made in collaboration between Kentridge, Philip Miller, Catherine Meyburgh, Dada Masilo and Peter Galison

The time traveller's life

Next month, William Kentridge blitzes Joburg with three shows and two books. **Oliver Roberts** met SA's foremost artist in his hallowed studio, where they talked about the stretchiness of time, the physicality of thought and his 'pathological' urge to work

THE thing about talking with William Kentridge is that you tend to interrupt. It's by accident of course.

You're in his studio and you're having an interesting exchange about, I don't know, language fragments of the unconscious, when he trails off into silence and gazes off to the side. You take a second to absorb, in the flesh, that extraordinary profile of his, all lit up by the perfect shadows in his studio, and in the subterranean silence that follows you assume that the topic of language fragments has been covered for now.

And just as you go, "Um, so what do you think of . . ." Kentridge, still looking to the side, goes, "Sometimes it just stays a noise. You can put phrases together and they are of no interest. Some are automatically of interest, or the fact of juxtaposing them, for me, by itself, is interesting.

"So I'm interested in work that is a play of chance. I'm interested in something that's neither chance nor program, which of course has to do with the unconscious."

This sort of blunted exchange happens another two times before you realise that Kentridge's silence, his remoteness, is not an indication of conclusion but rather a display of how unafraid the man is to just let invisible thought prevail.

Who cares about uncomfortable silences? You've got to allow time to provide you with deeper answers.

He really believes this, Kentridge. He believes in the time it takes for a thought to move inside the brain.

"Thoughts are travelling," he says, pointing to his imposing head. "Memory has to travel, say, 4cm to get from where it's stored to where it's accessed. You think that's a metaphor but it's not; it has to be a

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physical journey as well, whether it's chemistry or electrical impulses or whatever it is.

"And in the same way, you've got all these competing thoughts in your head and a sentence comes out; you've got all these possible drawings but in the end only one drawing leaves the studio and becomes your statement."

You're picturing it now: microscopic Kentridge proteins firing along a billion charcoal-smudged synapses.

You don't come to Kentridge's studio to speak about art. You come to discuss the reasons for it, the meaning of the drawn image, the complications of point of view, how the viewer and the viewed are interchangeable, the physical weight of time stored inside a roll of film.

But we are here because of the art. There generally has to be a reason to obtain access to Kentridge's studio. It's a Tuesday afternoon and the city's dry thunderclouds are percolating in the sky.

In November, Kentridge's work will be exhibited at three venues in Joburg. The Goodman Gallery will be showing a series of landscape drawings made on the pages of a 1906 ledger from East Rand Proprietary Mines (November 1 till December 6). Wits Art Museum will be displaying an astonishing collection of tapestries, painstakingly made in conjunction with Marguerite Stephen's weaving studio (November 18-December 15). And the Johannesburg Art Gallery will be hosting 'The Refusal of Time', an installation that refers to the theories of Newton, Einstein and black holes to explore the metaphors of time (November 9 -- January 1)

The latter is what we're interested in today: the linearity of time in the life of William Kentridge, and the space — the chaotic, mystical space — of his studio.

Large tables with near-complete drawings on them. Sections of white walls covered in black ink faces in various modes of recognition. A mobile stepladder (very tall). A tiny film set. Sculptures. Lots of natural light. Attractive

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young female assistants flitting about. ("There are some male employees," Kentridge says, "but I keep them locked in the cupboard.")

To one side, an alphabetically arranged CD rack. "You can think of the studio as a space for expanding and contracting time, in the most literal way. So you have an animation of a gesture, drawing a circle, which takes one second. But to draw it, to animate the hand and rub it out and redraw it and rub it out and redraw it, might take a day. So one second becomes eight hours in the studio, which you can then run backwards and examine time going backwards.

"So there's that expansion. A month's work to make a one- or two-minute film, or it can be sped up enormously. So it's working with time as a physical material. If you think of a roll of film, 2kg in my hands is in fact the embodiment of 1 500 frames, one minute of time, four minutes of time. So time becomes a number, becomes distance, it becomes . . ."

Kentridge turns his face away again. It really is a remarkable profile. That architectural nose. The massive forehead and forceful eyes. A little grumpy. It's like the death mask of someone from another century. William Blake.

By now, you've learnt not to begin speaking again for at least 20 seconds. You wait. You wait.

"... it becomes a language to think about things that are otherwise invisible, things we know but can't see."

The man's ideas have always been complex. It's what makes him one of the leading artists in the world today. Some consider Kentridge a scholar, a philosopher, as much as an artist. Kentridge though, will only see himself as an artist. The other labels, perhaps with the exception of philosopher, are irrelevant and even dangerous.

'Almost all the good ideas have come through not knowing what I was doing'

"There is no place for the intellectual in the studio," he writes in *Six Drawing Lessons*, a new book compiling the six Charles Eliot Norton lectures he gave at Harvard University in 2012.

Back in his studio, today, he says, "Reflection about the process is fine, but when you're actually drawing, when you're actually doing these funny shapes, it's not an intellectual thing, it's about seeing your hands moving. You have to put the critical, rationalising, analysing person out of the space."

But being critical, being rational and analytical are things Kentridge is so, so good at. There are a lot of artists who struggle to verbalise what they're trying to express. They either get an academic to write something for them, or bungle boringly along with the cheese and wine at their exhibition opening, leaving everyone confused and even a little put off.

Kentridge, though, is a master at explaining what he does and why. And this is not an easy task, considering how layered his ideas are.

Is this precise verbalisation something he's honed over years and years — and does he actually enjoy discussing his art in a public space?

"The talking about it is easy — the hard part is making the art. All the talking happens pretty much after the event, after the work is done, and I try to talk about what went into it rather than writing an essay and then trying to do the work, which is a calamity.

"It's also about 30 years in the studio every day. You see patterns in how things work, and things that seem annoying habits of work one

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understands are part of the structure of making the work. Yes, in the last 10 years the question of what happens in the studio has become more present in the work, and so comes the talking about the work."

Here's a passage from Don DeLillo's novel *Americana*: "You can sit on your bed and become 'man sitting on bed', an abstraction to compete with infinity itself; out of such places and moments does modern chaos raise itself to the level of pure mathematics."

You read this out to Kentridge. You hear your voice echoing and dissolving into the white walls of the studio. Kentridge listens. He's in his perpetual guise of white shirt and black pants. His eyes are very blue and his hair is grey. It's like a bright day at the sea, with seagulls flying. There is a question of whether he is wearing the white shirt and black pants or whether they are wearing him.

"I'm interested in the cinematic version of that passage. If you have a drawing of a tree, and you look at that drawing, it is your time that you're giving to the drawing; the drawing is there but it's your five or 10 seconds.

"If you put the slightest movement in it — say you've got a film shooting it frame by frame, whether it's even a change in the grain, if it's old film, or if there's slight movement in a branch or the grass — the time gets transferred into the picture and the picture or piece of animation, the piece of film, holds the time that you are watching it; it has the duration, rather than your generosity giving time. And that shift of where the time sits in you, when you just become a man sitting on a bed, everything can become mathematics out from it."

Did you notice that Kentridge is so good at articulating his intricate ideas that he managed to place a four-word parenthesis inside another 29-word parenthesis inside a containing 44-word sentence?

There is synaesthesia in Kentridge's thinking. He is able to see pictures in music and words in pictures and sound as solid form. There is also a dreamlike quality to much of his work. In *Six Drawing Lessons* he writes, "The artist is at work even when he is sleeping."

This was apparently said in jest

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but it's an obvious reference to the significant role the subconscious plays in the creative process.

"I discovered at different stages that almost all the good ideas have come not through me knowing what I was doing but through not knowing what I was doing, and recognising something when it happened," he says.

"So that may be through the possibilities that a medium suggests, whether it's charcoal or Indian ink or the possibility of tearing sheets of paper and rearranging them. It's a matter of making strategies, being open to recognising, having projects that are open enough to discover what the project is as it's made rather than to know it in advance. It's an openness for things not to work, to be a mess, to be a disaster, and understanding that from it you can sometimes pull out something that you weren't expecting."

One thing Kentridge wasn't expecting was to become as famous as he is. Even after exhibiting at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Louvre, and after acclaimed international productions of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* and Shostakovich's *The Nose*, even after receiving the Kyoto Prize in 2010, he is constantly surprised by success.

"Particularly in strange contexts. Like meeting someone in Calcutta who says, 'We love your work in Katmandu.' Or being asked to come and show my animation in Lahore. There are a group of Chinese animators whose work I've been told comes out of work I did a decade ago. So, yes, I'm surprised by it."

Kentridge is only 58. There is time but not enough space. He keeps questioning himself, berating himself almost, for taking on new projects. Work, work, work. He cannot spare time for much else.

"I could have a calm, happy, quiet life, but there's something both pathological and fantastic about the need to stay busy. I love the possibility of a different project and still have a real impatience to get things going and see what happens."

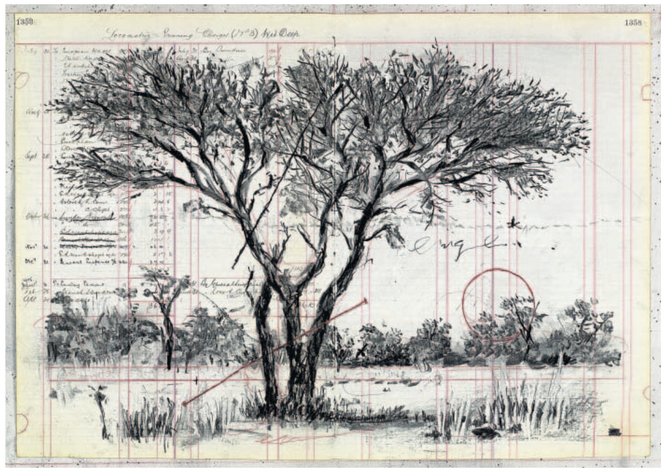
Whether you're William Kentridge or not, we all think a lot about time. Will I have enough of it to get everything done? Have I really used the amount I've had so far? What was there before time? What happens to time out in the coldest reaches of the universe?

How much time do I have left?

Is there a panic, William? All those kilometres of thoughts still to travel? All that time to manipulate? All that charcoal to be spread? All those white shirts still to be made and worn all over the world?

"No, there's no panic," he says, swinging slightly on his chair. "But there is a sense of thinking, 'What's wrong with working less intensely?' Then I think about it and realise that that kind of question feels like you're inviting death in."

Pause. Think. *Fin.* **LS**



ABOVE GROUND: Left, 'Platinum Belt', charcoal and pencil on ledger-book paper; below, Kentridge in his studio, in the garden of the Houghton house he grew up in

Picture: SIMPHIWE NKWALI