

► enment liberation from outmoded orthodoxies in 2019. Those who do will find that Mr Robertson sweetens erudition with humanity, much as his subjects did.

This Enlightenment celebrates what Robert Burns, appalled by the suffering of a shot hare, called “the morality of the heart”. Science and statecraft, which are amply chronicled, yield to compassion, sympathy and a self-critical outlook that welcomes experimentation and changes of mind. Not least among its lessons for today, “The Enlightenment” shows how its sages learned “to manage even Disputes with Civility”. ■

### Contemporary art

## The room where it happens

At 65, William Kentridge is about to unveil his most mesmerising work

**E**VEN AS HE first made his name with his charcoal drawings in the 1970s and 1980s, William Kentridge resented the limitations of his craft. To the young artist he was then, working on his own in a studio in South Africa felt stifling. So he branched out, turning his drawings into filmed animations that brought them to life, then into performances with music and movement, and eventually into complex multimedia installations. He produced operas for the Salzburg Festival and the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

What he loved most was collaborating—with film-makers, theatre companies, musicians. In 2016 he took over the building next to his big industrial studio in downtown Johannesburg and created an incubator for performers called the Centre for the Less Good Idea. The name came from a Tswana proverb about the value of working things out together—and how the first, fizziest brainwave may in the end prove less productive than a humbler idea.

Most evenings, when he is in town, Mr Kentridge can be found at the centre, guiding, rehearsing and experimenting with young performers. Six months ago, though, after he, his wife and numerous colleagues caught covid-19, he was forced to retreat into making art on his own.

The role that solitary labour plays in creativity has long fascinated artists and historians. Lucio Fontana, an Italian-Argentine conceptual artist famous for his “slashed” canvases, allowed a photographer to shoot him at work, but only until the knife was poised to touch the canvas; then Fontana insisted on being completely alone. The studio, for him, was a sacred space. Such was the chaos and energy of Francis Bacon’s studio in London—with its

smeared floor, gunky paint tubes and matted brushes—that after his death the room was painstakingly reconstructed (in 7,000 pieces) in Dublin City Gallery. It was as if his environs could immerse visitors in Bacon’s thinking.

For his part, Mr Kentridge headed to a building at the bottom of his garden and began a “natural history of the studio”, a long-cherished project about the alchemy of art. “One can think of the studio as a kind of enlarged head,” he says. “Instead of ideas moving a few centimetres from one part of your memory to your active thinking, it’s the walk across the studio that has the same effect of bringing ideas together and allowing something to emerge.”

His art-loving parents were both anti-apartheid lawyers and civil-rights activists; his father defended Nelson Mandela in the “treason trials” of 1956-61. As South Africa moved from pariah state to rainbow nation and beyond, Mr Kentridge sought new ways to depict its contested history, environment, injustices and depredations. From his “Soho Chronicles” (short animated films) to his productions of Alban Berg’s early-20th-century operas, “Wozzeck” and “Lulu”, his themes have been memory, landscape, power, the study of the self and how individuals forge their fates.

The new project will comprise 12 films, each lasting 40 to 45 minutes, far longer and more imaginative than any he has made before. So far, he has completed four. Using an old 16mm Bolex on a tripod, he films himself in conversation with himself, or with two other versions of himself, unpicking the artistic process. He can be the artist-as-maker, clutching a chunk of charcoal and sketching at high speed like a conductor; or the artist-as-critic, assessing his creation from afar. “Suddenly”, he says, “you’re a very different person.”

Combined with snapshots of his own past, and of South Africa’s, this dialogue is mesmerising. The first film, which he

shared on his laptop on a flying visit to London, opens with a meditation on a 19th-century painting of hills and a stream that hung in his grandparents’ dining room. Next come memories of a picnic with his parents, involving sardines, boiled eggs and a flask of coffee. The artist argues with himself about small details of the spread, as if he were a pair of squabbling siblings. Then he takes the viewer through a new landscape: the mine dumps that rise out of the flat veldt around Johannesburg, symbols of apartheid’s political economy, and the digs of *zama-zamas*, freelance miners who scratch out overlooked crumbs of gold. Whose land is this, he seems to ask, and who determines its history?

All this is done with only charcoal and a smudging cloth, a sequence of minutely different drawings on one palimpsestic sheet of paper that, once filmed, have the immediacy of early animation. With editing by Walter Murch, an American who worked on “The Godfather” and “Apocalypse Now”, the effect is layered and theatrical. Mr Kentridge adds performance: improvised music by Kyle Shepherd, a pianist and composer from Cape Town, in which the piano strings are blocked with bits of wood or bound in foil paper to create sounds that echo the axe and the bulldozer. Then he introduces a Zulu chorale by Nhlanhla Mahlangu, a long-time collaborator, about being forced off the land. For Mr Kentridge, sound can convey memory, and the essence of South Africa’s landscape, as much as visual imagery.

In 2022 he will emulate Ai Weiwei and Anselm Kiefer and take over the Royal Academy in London for a retrospective of his career. He hopes all his new films, collectively to be called “Studio Life”, will be shown together. Even now, though, he sees himself as merely the initiator of his art. His collaborators turn it into something new and, with their own memories and connections, so do his audience. ■



The alchemy of the studio