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William Kentridge

04.21.16



View of [William Kentridge](#)'s *Triumphs and Laments: A Project for Rome*, 2016, along the embankment of the Tiber River. Photo: Luciano Sebastiano

[William Kentridge](#) had the audacity, in 2012, to propose an 1,804-foot-long drawing along the banks of the Tiber River, the largest public art project in Europe. It has recently come to life with the help of [Kristin Jones](#), a New York-based artist who strongly believes in the notion of collaboration and acted as the artistic director of the whole project. Jones has worked with Kentridge for many years, against all manner of bureaucratic obstacle, to make *Triumphs and Laments: A Project for Rome*—an epic frieze with ninety figures, some as high as thirty-two feet—possible. This gargantuan work explores the contradictions of the Eternal City, from its myth-laden past to the present. (Preparatory sketches and other materials for the frieze can be seen at [Galleria Lia Rumma](#) in Milan for the artist's solo exhibition there, "Triumphs, Laments, and other Processions," on view through May 24, 2016.) The frieze will be inaugurated with a performance, conceived by Kentridge and the composer [Philip Miller](#), on April 21, 2016, Rome's 2,769th birthday; a second iteration of the performance will occur on April 22. This piece, a thirty-minute-long procession along the banks of the Tiber, will feature two bands with a mix of African and Italian musicians, along with two hundred volunteers. Here, Kentridge talks about this massive undertaking.

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THE PROJECT STARTED IN 2002 WHEN [KRISTIN JONES](#), who has worked in Rome for many years, took me to the site. In 2007 we considered a large-scale projection of images on the embankment, but the costs for that would've been crazy. In 2011 the first drawings were made. After that, the search for permissions began. In 2015 it became clear that we would get approval, so the final images became more solidified. The process started out with sketches, then charcoal drawings on paper, then ink drawings. And from the ink drawings, stencils were made. It was important to keep the sketchy feeling of the drawings, yet have them clear and simple enough for the cutting of the stencils. And then there's erasure, the washing of the travertine walls along the Tiber (with warm water and magnesium bicarbonate—very ecological) where decades of graffiti and pollution have accumulated. Just imagine, from that darkness, where thousands and thousands of drawings were made on top of one other, and us, erasing and cleaning the dark away, until ninety figures managed to emerge. In a few years, the images will fade, so that a new history can be drawn again. It will be sad, but poignant, to watch it dissolve over time.

At first, I was very interested in this tension between the Jewish ghetto and the Vatican, because the site for the work is right between them. We did our research, but the series of figures we came up with were terrible, so the project shifted. We dove headfirst into the histories of Rome, investigating all of its triumphs and tragedies, all throughout time. Then the art historian and professor [Lila Yawn](#) and her wonderful team of students came into the picture—they did the enormous job of researching the images I needed, which took about three years. They pulled together 150 images of Rome's triumphs and 150 images of Rome's tragedies. But then we fell into a trap: How do we choose? What do we choose? Who's writing the history here? Those questions became the heart of this project.

What we've come up with is a provisional history, of course. It's syncretic, too. It's a South African perspective on Roman history that takes into account contradiction, vainglory, utopian idealism, loss. This is not an exhibition where people are coming to see "good" pictures. It's an illustrated guidebook that shifts the viewer back and forth in time. For instance, we see an image of a boat and think of the Roman galleys full of slaves being shipped across the Mediterranean. But it's also a "contemporary" boat with migrants coming in to Lampedusa. We're spanning centuries.

I've also used iconic images from Italian cinema and conflated them with historical events. For instance, there's a picture of [Anna Magnani](#) getting shot, taken from *Roma Città Aperta* (Rome, Open City), 1945. Magnani's a stand-in for [Giorgiana Masi](#), a young woman killed during a 1977 demonstration by the bridge in Trastevere. I also thought of including the revered Italian general [Giuseppe Garibaldi](#), but instead I put in his wife, Anita—an image I took from the statue of her on the Gianicolo—so that we have a representation of woman as both hero and victim. There's also the death of Remus, culled from a Renaissance engraving, and a depiction of the death of [Pier Paolo Pasolini](#). There is a skeletal she-wolf, burdened by history and expectation. The image of [Mussolini](#) on his horse is taken from a mural I saw in Naples. The mural has bullet holes—they could've been made during the German occupation. There are images from the Fosse Ardeatine massacre in 1943; images of ousted Jews; and three figures taken from the Arch of Titus, carrying the treasure of Jerusalem.

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There's a figure depicting the collapse of history that combines [Bernini's](#) *Ecstasy of Saint Theresa*, 1647–52, with barbarian fighters from the Great Ludovisi sarcophagus, 250–60, as well as the Renault car where the corpse of [Aldo Moro](#), the secretary of the Christian Democratic Party, who was killed by the Red Brigades in 1978, was found. There are spots of ironic humor, too: King [Vittorio Emmanuel](#) II sitting on a mock horse, and [Marcello Mastroianni](#) and [Anita Ekberg](#) from *La Dolce Vita* (1960), bathing in a tub instead of the Trevi Fountain.

There will be a procession composed of two parts and led by two different bands. One band will sing of victories; the other, laments. The bands will be placed at either side of the frieze and gradually move toward each other, meeting in the center. Two hundred people will carry lights and painted figures, like saints' relics—they will be projected as shadows on the wall. The music, composed by [Philip Miller](#), is a multilayered and technically challenging piece, with canons and repetitions, based on the madrigals by [Salamone Rossi](#), a Jewish composer from Mantua—he was a contemporary of [Claudio Monteverdi's](#). The score will integrate Italian popular music, like *tammuriata* and *pizzica*, played by a multiethnic group of musicians. And, during a more meditative moment, we will hear a quote from [Rainer Maria Rilke](#), recited like a prayer: "That is the longing: to dwell amidst the waves / and have no homeland in time."

— As told to [Ida Panicelli](#)