

HYPERALLERGIC

William Kentridge Plans Massive, Vanishing Mural in Rome

Julia Friedman | August 31, 2015



William Kentridge, "Triumphs and Laments" (proposal), Piazza Tevere, Rome; rendering: Andrea Biagioni, Pippo Marino (2014) (all images courtesy Tevereterno) (click to enlarge)

In April 2016, South African artist William Kentridge [will unveil](#) "Triumphs and Laments," a 550-meter (~1,804 feet) frieze along the embankment of Rome's Tiber River. The project, [first conceived 14 years ago](#), is sponsored by Tevereterno, an organization working to revitalize Rome's riverfront both physically and artistically (previous works include a series of [projections by Jenny Holzer](#)). Kentridge's frieze will be shaped using a technique called "[reverse graffiti](#)," in which large, figurative stencils will be placed on the Tiber's embankment and the wall then power-washed around them. The resulting images will be fashioned from dirt and accumulated pollution, and will disappear as the surrounding stone slowly becomes soiled again.

In Rome, commanding themes of human history appear in massive dimensions: religion in Vatican City, empire and hubris in the Colosseum, and the intersection of art and patronage in the Sistine Chapel, among many other examples. It's a natural location for monumental works of art, a place where the colossal is the norm. Kentridge's work often touches on similarly big, overarching human subjects, including oppression, joy, and resilience; his style seems a natural fit with Rome's milieu.

Based on charcoal drawings of the frieze's figures, which [are on view](#) in the Italian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, and [videos](#) on the Tevereterno website, "Triumphs and Laments" tackles Roman history and culture in all its brutality and glamour. Kentridge's drawings, which will appear in more boldly outlined, simplified forms when converted to stencils, include scenes of war, kings, victory, mythology, and devastation. Even Anita Ekberg and Marcello Mastroianni make an appearance. Kentridge [explains](#): "It's about taking fragments and constructing what could be a possible history."

Although the work's themes seem eternal, the nature of its creation ensures ephemerality — a subtle way to comment on the current crisis of environmental degradation. The limited lifespan of "Triumphs and Laments" is in direct contrast to Rome's many monuments created by failed empires in times of hubris. It suggests that the permanence of the manmade is increasingly an impossibility. As Kentridge [says](#): "It gets much more complicated as one gets to a more contemporary era as to what is the triumph and what is the lament."



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