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# William Kentridge's 'Greatest Drawing Ever' Unveiled Along the Banks of the River Tiber in Rome

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William [Kentridge](#) at work on *Triumphs and Laments* in his Johannesburg studio. Photo: Marc Shoul.

## William Kentridge's Triumphs and Laments Unfold Along Rome's River Tiber

On the evenings of April 21 and 22, the banks of the River Tiber in Rome will come alive with light, shadow, and music, in a free, public, site-specific performance along the Piazza Tevere. Conceived by artist William Kentridge in collaboration with composer Philip Miller, under the artistic direction of Kristin Jones, *Triumphs and Laments* is comprised of a 550 meter-long frieze along the urban waterway. During the opening, it will be activated with live shadow play, a procession of performers, voice and music.

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William Kentridge, *Triumphs and Laments*, 2016, Piazza Tevere, Rome. Photo: Sebastiano Luciano.

This part of the River Tiber—a straight stretch of the otherwise curvilinear waterway, flanked by 13-meter tall travertine embankments, and bookended by the Ponte Sisto, a 15th-century footbridge, and the Ponte Mazzini, a modern bridge completed in 1908—has attracted artistic interventions on other occasions as well. American artist Kristin Jones, who founded the non-profit arts organization TEVERETERNO to establish the Piazza Tevere as a site for public, contemporary art in Rome, [describes how](#), while on a Fulbright fellowship in Rome, she was drawn to the site, a place “so unnatural, so planned, and so full of potential.” In 2005, Jones presented a frieze of 12 she-wolves along the travertine walls of the Piazza Tevere, TEVERETERNO’s first public art installation. Over the years, artists and musicians have been invited to stage performances and projects along the embankment, including [Jenny Holzer](#), who presented a series of synchronized, scrolling projections along the length of the Piazza in 2007. The embankments also attract Rome’s graffiti writers, who regularly add their names to the stone walls in bright spray paint.



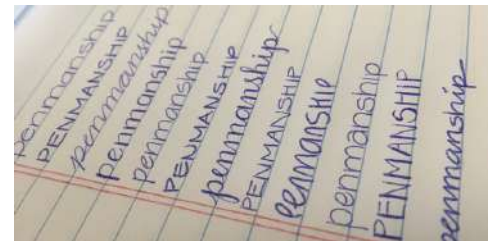
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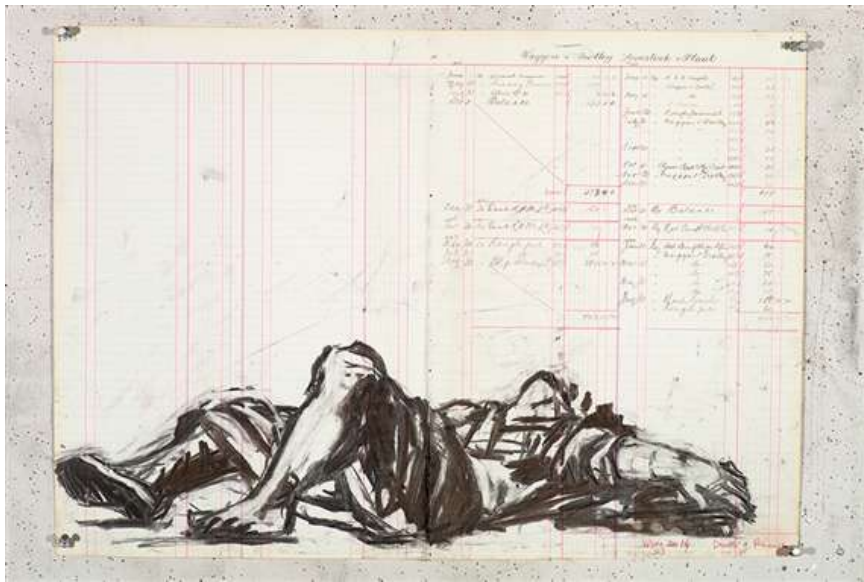
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William Kentridge, *Toro*, power wash tests for *Triumphs and Laments*, 2014, Ponte Margherita, Rome. Photo: Marcello Meis.

Jones's she-wolf frieze was achieved through a process of what has been called "reverse graffiti," by selectively cleaning the wall to reveal the white, natural limestone beneath the accumulated layers of moss and soot that have grown into its surface over the years. Kentridge's mural uses the same method—large-scale stencils of his drawings are set in place, and the walls around them are powerwashed clean, leaving behind the figure in the dark, natural dirt of the wall. Over time, the frieze itself will gradually vanish, its lines of definition fading as the pollution and organic growth become established again in the porous stone wall. The frieze will probably remain visible for about five years, before it recedes into obscurity.



William Kentridge, *Remus*, drawing for *Triumphs and Laments*. Courtesy the artist.

*Triumphs and Laments* is comprised of more than 80 figures, some up to 12 meters tall, illustrating a non-chronological history of Rome in moments of triumph and tragedy, from the heroes of antiquity, to emperors and popes. Many of the figures are drawn from art historical sources, such as the figure of Remus, slain by his brother Romulus, which Kentridge based on an 18th-century etching by Augustyn Mirys. The figures appear in dark silhouette along the wall in a procession-like arrangement, as though marching through history. Shadow processions are recurring elements in Kentridge's work, found in his work across many mediums, from early animations made using puppets of torn black paper, to recent multi-screen film installations with the shadows of live actors and dancers marching across projected digital scenes. During the opening event of *Triumphs and Laments*, the silhouettes of marching performers, cast by spotlights onto the figures, will interplay with the frieze.



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William Kentridge, *Minerva*, power wash tests for *Triumphs and Laments*, 2014, Ponte Margherita, Rome. Photo: Kristin Jones.

On equal footing with the visual elements of *Triumphs and Laments*, the accompanying musical program will invest the piece with emotion and pathos. While Kentridge is best known for his charcoal drawings, paintings, and animated films dealing with the social injustice of apartheid South Africa, his interest in music and theatre has also been a constant presence in his work. Kentridge's interest in performing arts extends beyond his own artwork; he has created the stage design for operas by Monteverdi, Mozart, and Shostakovich. For the musical complement to his own work, Kentridge has collaborated with the Cape Town-based composer Philip Miller, who has composed, scored, and performed the original music for many of [Kentridge's films](#) over the past 20 years starting with one of the artist's earliest animated films, *Felix in Exile* (1994). For the viewer, Miller's scores may define the work nearly as much as Kentridge's aesthetic.



William Kentridge, *Minerva*, drawing for *Triumphs and Laments*. Courtesy the artist.

In the opening program for *Triumphs and Laments*, Miller's composition brings together music from diverse sources. Two processional bands, featuring more than 40 musicians and vocalists, will begin at either end of the Piazza Traversa, one representing triumph, the other lament. Musical influences and diverse instrumentation from Rome's many different communities, historic and contemporary, are incorporated into the score, from the Italian folk tradition, to liturgical music, to a Mandinkan slave song, to Balkan rhythms. Taking place across such a huge expanse, and projected to an audience watching from across the river, the performance will be an epic and immersive undertaking.



William Kentridge and Kristin Jones reviewing the drawings for *Triumphs and Laments* in the artist's Johannesburg studio. Photo: Chris Waldo.

As is true of any epic undertaking, this project has been a long time in coming. The first spark for the project was lit when Jones and Kentridge met in 2002, and Jones decided “he was the right artist to address the intersection of past and present that is Rome.” Public art projects on such a large scale necessarily involve many different parts, and for many years the project slowly simmered in the minds of its creators, before going full steam over the past three years, as the project entered its final and most intense stage of planning and execution. Jones enthusiastically proclaims *Triumphs and Laments* “William Kentridge’s greatest drawing ever—an ephemeral drawing for the Eternal City.” Opening on Rome’s symbolic birthday, April 21, this massive production, 15 years in the making, promises to deliver a memorable celebration of the city and a bright gift to its public.



William Kentridge, *Triumphs and Laments*, 2016, Piazza Tevere, Rome. Photo: Giulia Carpignoli.

[Triumphs and Laments: A Project for the City of Rome](#) opens April 21, 2016, with a premiere performance at 8:30pm, and April 22, with performances at 8:30pm and 10:30pm. The performances are free and open to the public.

—Natalie Hegert

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