

When in Rome, see Kentridge's new masterpiece

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Monday 25 April 2016 - 5:41pm



Performers project figures on the 550-long mural by South African artist William Kentridge called 'Triumphs and Laments' on the embankment walls of the Tiber River in Rome on 21 April 2016.

ROME - South African artist William Kentridge has created an ambitious "vanishing" frieze of Rome's "heroic and shameful" history out of the dirt caking an embankment of the Tiber River.

His idiosyncratic take on the Eternal City's defining moments is a 10m-high mural that, following completion last week, now lines a 550m stretch of the famous river.

The artist told AFP he does not expect his ***Triumphs and Laments*** to last more than five years before the blackening impact of pollution results in its epic images vanishing from view.



CriticalMassPerformanceGroup
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"Triumph & Laments"-William Kentridge's Massive Mural In Roman Landscape via [@hyperallergic](#) [#glorious](#)



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"It is an ephemeral project because that is the nature of it," Kentridge, 60, said in an interview ahead of the work's official inauguration.

"It is making a drawing by erasing the dirt on the wall, not by adding anything to it.

"The wall starts off black and then you wash around the drawings and what is left is the image in the rock.

"After four or five years the rock will get dirty again from pollution and from growth. So the rock will come out and meet and swallow the image with its own darkness."

Remembered and forgotten

While providing a living example of the impact of environmental degradation, the work is also a commentary on the flawed nature of memory, both individual and collective, Kentridge said.

"There are things we should hold on to but forget. And historical memories, things that society should remember, that get forgotten.

"Every history has a mixture of the heroic and the shameful, of glory and shame, and that is what the piece is about."



The Cahiers Series

@CWTParis

Kentridge on the Tiber (with a sense of the scale)



6 9:07 AM - Apr 25, 2016

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An example of how this overarching theme is addressed is Kentridge's juxtaposition of the glories of the Renaissance, most spectacularly represented in Rome by the construction of St Peter's basilica, with the contemporaneous confinement of Jews to the city's ghetto.

The papal decree creating the ghetto was issued in 1555, half a century after work started on St Peter's.

"So this heroic history and this shameful history are right together," Kentridge said. "I always thought the ghetto was a medieval project, I had not realised the great moments of Roman art from the 16th century were at the same time as that."

The mural contains sections inspired by prehistoric times and by mythology alongside figures from recent history, including the film director Pier Paolo Pasolini and film stars Marcello Mastroianni and Anita Ekberg, symbols of the "Dolce Vita" of 1960s Rome.

It does not follow a chronological structure.

A reference to the current migrant crisis and mass drownings of asylum-seekers off Italy's southern shores is made in the form of a depiction of a Roman slave galley.

A depiction of Cicero, the famous orator of ancient Rome, is followed by one of Benito Mussolini that Kentridge revealed had been inspired by a fresco of the fascist dictator that still exists in Naples.

Neglected waterfront

Cicero appears again after Mussolini, only this time the staunch defender of the constitutional principles of the Roman republic is depicted as a shattered figure.

In similar vein, heroic military figures from the Emperor Marcus Aurelius onwards are all shown with cracks as a representation of the hubris that has marked the high points of the city's history, preceding inevitable collapse.



Performers project figures on the 550-long mural by South African artist William Kentridge called 'Triumphs and Laments' on the embankment walls of the Tiber River in Rome on 21 April 2016. CREDIT: Filippo Monteforte / AFP

Kentridge said he had worked with a team of researchers to identify historic images he could use as the basis for his drawings, whittling down a list of 500 possibles to 50.

"In the end it was an idiosyncratic, personal choice," he said.

The project, the brainchild of a non-profit organisation dedicated to the renovation of Rome's neglected waterfront, has been a long time in the making.

Kentridge first saw the site 15 years ago and completed his first sketches in 2011 before the project fell foul of Italy's notorious bureaucracy.