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The
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William Kentridge Vivienne Koorland

Conversations in letters and lines

Curated by Tamar Garb

Until 19 February 2017

This exhibition brings together the work of William Kentridge and Vivienne Koorland, two major artists from South Africa who have been friends since they met while at university in the early 1970s. Curated by Tamar Garb, a third university friend, it makes manifest an ongoing conversation between the artists and their work.

It is an artist's dialogue that has as much to do with making as it has with talking. Although Kentridge is represented here by animated films while Koorland shows large paintings, there is a material density in both their work and the exhibition highlights this, while also tracking convergences and overlaps in the themes and ideas with which they work.

Both practices are profoundly political, bearing witness to historical events as lived experience. A wealth of archival references and a wide variety of source material underpins the work in the exhibition, with the artists drawing from and on pre-existing words, texts, books, maps, images, songs and sounds.

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ALBA | CHRUTHACHAIL

Vivienne Koorland's painting **PAYS INCONNU** (2016) opens the exhibition. A reworking of an eighteenth century map of South Africa made as a gift for King Louis XVI of France by the hunter/collector François Le Vaillant, the painting plays with the conventions of map making, with its stylised separation of land and sea and its collection of 'exotic' animals. Like all maps, the painting lays an idea of place over its reality, conjuring a South Africa that entices but does not really exist. Two nearby paintings testify further to this: **SA FARM MAP Settlements** and **SA FARM MAP Deportations** (both 2008) reduce the land to a list of vanished farms, scorching the earth to a bleak blankness. Between the paintings a sunbird sings 'forgive us our trespasses', perched on the signatory South African national flower, the protea.

These are paintings of place, home and exile, of the complex interrelationship between the individual and the land that both shapes and is shaped by them, in reality and in the imagination. Close by, two of Kentridge's **Drawings for Projection** mine similar territory, drawing and redrawing South African land and townscapes in complex narratives that plot personal and political dramas. The films **Other Faces** (2011) and **Felix in Exile** (1994) place the artist's surrogates in the freighted landscape of his childhood, while the contested claims for territory and occupation of the earth, by animals, people and protagonists are etched and erased in ink, charcoal and wash.

Upstairs, a vitrine contains ephemeral and small-scale works by both artists that point to their shared interest in books, maps, texts and drawings. The enormous East Rand Proprietary Mines Journal is the ground on which many of the frames in Kentridge's films are shot. Close by is a typescript by Koorland recounting the testament of a child displaced from Poland during World War II. The account accompanied a published drawing that she used as the basis for **How I Live** (2008), an enormous painting that opens out, book-like, an enlarged image of war through the eyes of a child. **VIVE MAMAN** (1987) also has its source in the Holocaust, based on a drawing made by a child for his mother's birthday before his deportation from Drancy to Auschwitz. The transposed drawing is superimposed by Koorland onto the pasted pages from an early twentieth century folio

extolling the virtues (both racial and aesthetic) of Romanesque churches. The poignant juxtaposition of the drawing of a murdered Jewish child with a document of 'civilization' speaks to the layerings, both physical and conceptual, that the work suggests.

Like **VIVE MAMAN**, Kentridge's **Notes Towards a Model Opera** (2015) uses found texts as its ground, invoking multiple historical contexts in order to create a paean to revolution and its attendant languages, sonic, verbal and visual. The film overlays multiple revolutionary moments – African, French, Russian, Chinese – to a soundtrack of 'The **Internationale**' sung in a variety of languages and against a background of archival maps, found texts and books. Individual figures dance and act out a variety of revolutionary stances, some bearing placards. 'Long Live the Motherland!' proclaims one, linking back to Koorland's **VIVE MAMAN** and the themes of mothering and the motherland that are woven into so many of the works in the exhibition.

One of the grounds on which **Notes Towards a Model Opera** is made is a map of Johannesburg, collaged and drawn by Kentridge on pages of the old mine leger. The map itself is in the nearby vitrine, and its prominence in Kentridge's work and the exhibition is a testimony to the extent to which drawing and an expanded sense of the linear (whether stitched, sketched, scrawled or scripted) is at the heart of both these artists' practices. For each, line is freighted with historical, political, conceptual and narrative self-consciousness, three-dimensional illusionistic drawing dissolving into flat, schematic inscription, as looking intersects with reading and forms collide with words.

The exhibition offers a rare insight into the work of both William Kentridge and Vivienne Koorland. The synergies between their diverse, but related, ways of thinking and working are compelling, and the selection that Tamar Garb has made allows us to look at each artist afresh so that the specificity of each becomes more visible, just as the artistic, cultural, political and historical links between them are revealed.

#KentridgeKoorland #fruitmarketgallery