

One of the most distinctive voices in contemporary art, William Kentridge emerged as an artist during the apartheid regime in South Africa. His artworks are grounded in the socio-political conditions (past and present) of his country and draw connections between art history, ideology and memory. They also reveal the capacity for ideas and images to echo across time and between different cultures.

Although he often deals with weighty political subjects, Kentridge's approach is anything but didactic. Instead he emphasises the ambiguity and uncertainty that is embedded in our relationship to history. And, with self-deprecating humour, he exposes his scepticism about the artist's role as author and arbiter of meaning.

*I am not me, the horse is not mine* is among the artist's most ambitious moving-image works. It premiered at the Biennale of Sydney in 2008 and was subsequently exhibited at Tate Modern, London, and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. In 2017, the work was gifted to the Art Gallery of New South Wales by Anita and Luca Belgiorno-Nettis.

*I am not me, the horse is not mine* 2008

eight-channel video installation;  
DVCAM, HD video, colour, sound  
6 min

Video editing: Catherine Meyburgh  
Music: Philip Miller

Art Gallery of New South Wales,  
gift of Anita and Luca Belgiorno-Nettis  
2017. Donated through the Australian  
Government's Cultural Gifts Program.

I have named these scenes 'the passionate absurd'  
– and I mean, not 'absurd' in the sense of a joke,  
a folly, or the ridiculous, but rather to invoke a  
logic that has gone awry, where the rules of logic  
cease to apply.

– William Kentridge

Kentridge made this artwork while developing a new production of Dimitri Shostakovich's *The nose* (1928), an opera based on an absurdist short story by Nikolai Gogol. In Gogol's story, a mid-level Russian official awakes to find his nose missing from his face, later finding it gallivanting around St Petersburg and having risen to a higher professional rank than its owner. Written in 1836, it functioned as a satire of tsarist Russia – a time marked by a despotic regime, arcane state bureaucracies and social stratification.

Almost a century later, the young Shostakovich saw the story of *The nose* as a metaphor for Russian political and cultural life at the beginning of the 20th century – turbulent decades in Russian history, when art and politics traded in grand utopian visions that were brutally crushed under Joseph Stalin.

*I am not me, the horse is not mine* prompts us to reflect on the contemporary echoes of Gogol's fable. For Kentridge it offers analogies with South Africa's recent history and, moreover, it implores us to consider the consequences of the absurd in contemporary social and political life.

## Reading room

The books gathered here for your reference introduce some of the ideas, stories and media that underpin William Kentridge's diverse art practice. Among them are several volumes that provide insights into his fascination with Nikolai Gogol's short story *The nose* 1836, which inspired the work in this exhibition.