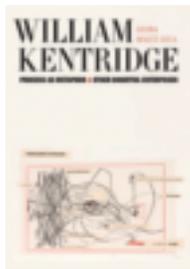


book review



William Kentridge: Process as Metaphor & Other Doubtful Enterprises
by Leora Maltz-Leca

Berkeley: University of California Press,
2018. 400 pp., 237 color ill., notes.
US\$49.95, UK£40.00, hardcover

Awakenings: The Art of Lionel Davis
edited by Mario Pissarra
Cape Town, SA: Africa South Art
Initiative, 2017. 224 pp., 169 color
ill., 12 b/w ill., selected biblio. R495,
paperback

reviewed by Robin K. Crigler

The German philosopher Günter Grass once referred to literature as “a kind of stopgap, stepping in when necessary to give people without a voice the chance to speak” (Bourdieu and Grass 2002: 69). Historians, he argued, were limited in what they could say about the past; fiction could often present truer and more multidimensional representations of history than nonfiction, which was warped by the biases and silences of the documentary record. This seeming paradox been noted with great urgency in South Africa where, since the end of apartheid in 1994, fierce debates have taken place both within and outside the academy on the role of history and the limitations of the (post)colonial archive. Art—visual and dramatic as well as literary—would seem to provide the way out of a discursive morass where, as writers like Njabulo Ndebele and Jacob Dlamini have lamented, contemporary politics served as the single yardstick against which all productions were to be judged. At its worst, this view, which was common enough in the 1970s and 1980s, tarred all but the most demonstrative and ideological works as decadent, leaving little space for the complex lives of Grass’s voiceless people.

Cultural studies that approach art through such a narrow and instrumental lens can actually do violence to the works they seek to interrogate. Paintings and novels alike contain worlds of meaning within themselves; reductive analyses inevitably reveal more about the prejudices of the writer than the subject at hand. The issue might best be understood as a problem of mapping: flattening curves and concealing distortions in an attempt to impose scholarly narrative on a painting, sculpture, or piece of music that actively defies narrative conventions.

Two recently published volumes on the work of William Kentridge and Lionel Davis respectively take on this challenge and, in doing so, contribute significantly to the historiography of art in South Africa. Though neither work is a biography, both demonstrate the value of locating individual artists’ works within a richly nuanced understanding of their contexts—the process of their production at both the micro and macro levels, both inside and outside the studio. While each book has its own idiosyncrasies, they speak powerfully to Africanist scholars concerned with history, memory, and the place of art between fact and fiction, truth and fantasy. For the authors of both volumes, art acts as far more than grist for the academic mill: it can profoundly reshape our understanding of history and its methodology. By examining art, artist, and process at a granular level, they succeed in a formidable task: producing the kind of rich and multidimensional analyses that their subjects, as two of the most celebrated artists South Africa has ever produced, plainly demand.

William Kentridge is probably the most famous South African visual artist on the world stage today, and with good reason. Since the 1970s, keen to make a name for himself independent of his parents—both prominent civil rights lawyers who defended Nelson Mandela and others from the predations of the apartheid state—Kentridge is best known for films such as *Felix in Exile* (1994) and *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (1997) that feature distinctive animations in charcoal. However, as art historian Leora Maltz-Leca attests in her ambitious study *William Kentridge: Process as Metaphor and Other Doubtful Enterprises*, Kentridge has experimented over the decades with a multitude of different techniques and media. Although Kentridge was certainly a vocal critic of apartheid—a constant theme of his work—Maltz-Leca’s text is timely and sophisticated in positioning Kentridge as both a South African artist par excellence and a global artist at the forefront of international trends and debates. Though he has been based in Johannesburg for virtually his entire career, Kentridge’s privileged position as a white South African male of considerable fame might seem to sit awkwardly at the intersection of “African” and “Western” art. For Maltz-Leca, however, herself of South African descent, this is an asset rather than an impediment, for

[i]f Kentridge’s position, squeezed in between a rock and a hard place, between Scylla and Charybdis, as he put it, conveys his equivocal relationship to the Euro-American tradition, it is equally his deep investment in the specific social and political matrix of the postcolony—of which the South African postcolony is but one configuration of a larger continental condition—that defines him as a contemporary African artist (p. 16; emphasis in original).

Hence the title of her concluding chapter, “Being Contemporary Up South.”

Maltz-Leca’s central task in this hefty but beautifully illustrated volume is to examine Kentridge’s process, not his biography per se. Perhaps nothing illustrates Kentridge’s concern with process better than the image that graces its cover—erratic, almost scribbled lines tracing the artist’s physical (and emotional) movements back and forth like a caged animal, an image taken from Kentridge’s 2008 book *Everyone Their Own Projector*. This kind of explicit metacommentary, however, is only part of what Maltz-Leca is driving at. Locating Kentridge’s artistic coming-of-age amid late twentieth century debates surrounding “Greenbergian formalism” and the place of politics in modern art, she affirms Kentridge’s process as a “promiscuous metaphor” with the potential to echo and refract through multiple layers of a single work.

In the five essays that constitute the heart of *Process as Metaphor*, Maltz-Leca zeroes in on individual elements of Kentridge’s oeuvre, from the palimpsestic erasures that haunt his animations to his engagement with process itself: both the process of creating art and the phenomenon of the procession, which is revealed as a distinct concern of Kentridge’s work in the wake of South Africa’s democratic transition. Drawing on an eclectic, almost encyclopedic sample of his output, Maltz-Leca represents Kentridge as a self-aware postmodernist alive to both the power and the irony of metaphor. Just as postmodern trends in scholarship scrutinized the conditions under which knowledge is produced and affirmed, Kentridge’s art continually references and critiques its own actuating circumstances—the simultaneous power and impotence of the artist, the multilevel symbolism of the projector, the process of erasure, and the trial and error involved in the act of drawing, not to mention Kentridge’s many alter egos (Zeno, the indecisive diarist; Soho, the cruel industrialist; Felix, the homesick exile, inter alia).

While all parts of *Process as Metaphor* make valuable contributions to Kentridge scholarship, the first two chapters—“The Politics of Metaphor” and “History as Process”—have the broadest scholarly appeal. Lamenting that “modern and contemporary art history has dispensed with metaphor by aligning it with the literary, the narrative, and the illustrative,” in “The Politics of Metaphor” Maltz-Leca launches a stirring defense of visual metaphor as “obliqueness, which indexes both the restlessness of thought and the flux of the world itself” (p. 43). Awareness of this flux in all its inconsistency and contradiction is revealed everywhere in Maltz-Leca’s analysis, developed further in intricate but rewarding prose as evidence of Kentridge’s African-inflected Hegelianism, where history is “a churning process of unfolding dialectics, animated by

the movement of seeming antipodes toward each other” (p. 87). From his vantage point “up south,” Maltz-Leca insists, Kentridge’s methodologies enable him to represent profound truths about the South African experience that conventional scholars could never hope to articulate. The richness of her engagement with just one man’s oeuvre should be enough to give any nonspecialist scholar pause about invoking art as an accessory or afterthought to some other, more “serious” thesis.

Maltz-Leca’s profound familiarity with William Kentridge’s life and work is never in doubt; *Process as Metaphor* began as her dissertation project more than a decade ago. At the same time, one does develop certain suspicions about such a seamless thesis. Though Maltz-Leca clearly consulted with Kentridge himself in the course of her research, one wonders where he might part ways with her reasoning. The eloquence and comprehensiveness of her study present a kind of unified theory of William Kentridge which is, at the very least, ahistorical. At certain points, further doses of biography might help readers better understand the ways Kentridge’s philosophy of process has changed over the decades, for surely it has. At others, a more critical voice might note instances where Kentridge’s work falls short of the elaborate conceptual system Maltz-Leca describes. Her clear admiration for Kentridge should not lead one to forget just what a singular figure he is. As significant as his contributions are, Maltz-Leca’s praise perhaps freights him with too much responsibility for any single artist to bear in representing South Africa on the global artistic stage. Even so, her account of Kentridge’s adventures navigating the worlds he has built will not fail to delight those with at least a cursory understanding of South African history.

Awakenings: The Art of Lionel Davis, edited by Mario Pissarra, was published by the Africa South Art Initiative to accompany a major 2017 retrospective on Davis’s oeuvre at the Iziko South African National Gallery in Cape Town. The almost two full decades that separate Davis’s birth and Kentridge’s create striking biographical contrasts between the two artists. Davis, who was classified “Coloured” by the apartheid government, was born in the famous neighborhood of District Six in Cape Town and spent several years in the 1960s and 1970s on Robben Island for being a member of the National Liberation Front, a Maoist organization. Unlike Kentridge, who has spent almost all of his adult life in the art world, Davis’s serious art practice did not begin until 1977 when, at the age of 41, he got involved with the Community Arts Project (CAP) of Mowbray, Cape Town. Indeed, it was not until the early 1990s that he sought a BFA degree from the University of Cape Town—long after he became known as a prolific and

important artist.

Yet there are also clear similarities in the two artists’ styles and concerns. History and memory loom large, as attested by Davis’s tributes to the hidden legacy of the Khoisan in Cape Town and their descendants in District Six, such as his collage *Footprints on Robben Island* (1993) and his 2005 print *Reclamation*, both of which powerfully mix text and image. Equally significant is Davis’s unapologetic refusal to water down his work for the benefit of prescriptivist critics with strong views on what did or did not constitute revolutionary aesthetics. As Patricia de Villiers notes in her chapter, even while working in the highly political atmosphere of the CAP Poster Workshop in the late 1980s, Davis’s work is distinguished by its naturalism and concern with everyday representations of political resistance. A striking postcard produced in 1990, for example, depicts a lone saxophonist silhouetted by Table Mountain towering above a shack settlement as figures from San rock art appear to dance beside him—a reminder of poverty, for sure, but also a vibrant expression of joy that insists on the rootedness of black people in the landscape. In a wonderful chapter called “Visualising and Narrating the Everyday,” Jacqueline Nolte notes Davis’s insistence on the complementarity of realist and abstract approaches, refusing to advocate for the superiority of one aesthetic over another and often working in both registers simultaneously. Davis’s protest art, Nolte argues, is often most effective when defying the usual aesthetics of such art, as demonstrated by his arrestingly human 1985 poster portraying Oscar Mpetla in leg irons.

As an edited volume, *Awakenings* is enriched by the multiplicity of scholars and colleagues (including the artist himself) who add their voices in appreciation of Davis’s long career. Considered collectively, perhaps its most striking point of convergence with Maltz-Leca’s book on Kentridge is *Awakening’s* treatment of the idea of process, which for Davis crystallized in a very different milieu. While Kentridge’s engagement with process, according to Maltz-Leca, mainly concerns the interiority of the individual artist, for Davis, community also functions as a crucial component. One sees this everywhere in *Awakenings*: in Davis’s representations of life in District Six and Robben Island, in his refusal to accept a narrow “Coloured” identity that obscures his connection to the rest of Africa, and in his dedication to the CAP Poster Workshop as a diverse space for anti-apartheid cultural workers across ideological lines. Indeed, as the testimonies of contributors who drew, printed, and painted alongside Davis attest again and again, his entire artistic career has been indelibly shaped by communities of both learning and teaching. Little wonder, then, that so much of his work has been in mixed media; he is, as Premesh Lalu puts it in his

foreword, a consummate “composite artist, one for whom the work of art is already an act of shared commitment” (p. 11). Given the distinct stylistic similarities between Davis and Kentridge—their mutual fascination with concealed pasts, collage, incomplete erasures, and found materials—it is tempting to wonder about Davis’s view of individual process and Kentridge’s understanding of community in the life of an artist, topics about which the two books are mostly silent. There is much that remains to explore here.

The arrival of these two volumes bodes positively for scholarship on art in South Africa. In the case of Lionel Davis, *Awakenings* is a long-overdue work that will help move the academy beyond reductively political treatments of black South African artists. In zeroing in on process and metaphor, Maltz-Leca’s book provides helpful language for grappling with the messy, complex, and ideologically freighted relationship between politics and aesthetics. Her views on Kentridge will surely not be the last word on the subject; so much the better, since she has advanced the conversation considerably. As calls to take art seriously, and as evidence of what such an approach can yield, art lovers and scholars of culture from multiple disciplines will surely benefit from taking up both books.

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References cited

Bourdieu, Pierre, and Günter Grass. 2002. “The ‘Progressive’ Restoration: A Franco-German Dialogue.” *New Left Review* 14: 63–77.

erratum

In the exhibition review of *Urban Cadence* that appeared in *African Arts* volume 52, no. 1, artist Jude Anogwih was mistakenly referred to as “her.” The third sentence of the first paragraph on p. 93 should read, “With the camera on a boat in Makoko-iwaya, Anogwih focused his lens on the water to reveal reflections of piers, docks, and passing boats.”