SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE WORK OF BECKMANN AND KENTRIDGE: AN ARTIST’S VIEW

By

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Abstract

This study is about how a social consciousness is made visible in the paintings and drawings of two artists who have in common an urge to examine the human condition in the context of traumatic social and political circumstances. Their prime concern is with the eternal complexities between the individual and society. Pessimism, hope, anger, frustration and guilt reside in their images. This thesis explores how their social consciousness is expressed through the unique pictorial devices that each creates. It examines their biographies and the social and political milieu influencing their work; it explores their perceptions through the examination of the particular themes and devices that they developed as visual language. These influences lead to the examination of my own artistic practice, exploring the connection between my social consciousness and my pictorial language.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank the University of Western Sydney for the generous scholarships that enabled me to research this thesis and to produce the accompanying body of work. I wish to thank my supervisors Mr Michael Keighery, Dr Marilyn Walters, Professor Jane Goodall and Dr Barry Gazzard for their insight, their patience and their gentle rigour in coaxing and guiding me over the two years of this work. Without them this would not have been possible. Thanks also to Tess, Susan and Michael for the perceptive and enjoyable sessions that we had on chapter writing. My love and thanks to Margaret my wife for her patience and understanding, because two years of research can be boring to those not involved in it. And last but not least to Jaimie my son whose incisive mind and support was invaluable. I acknowledge the debt owing to Max Beckmann and William Kentridge from whose art I have discovered so much about my own art practice.
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Note: Some of the images of my own work are marked with a date. This has been preserved intentionally as part of my record keeping processes.
Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material either in whole or in part for a degree at this or any other institution.

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(Signature)
INTRODUCTION

This study will attempt to address the connection between the artist and the art in situations of social and political tension. It attempts to understand more fully the artist as a human being who is shaped by the influences of the world and the society that the artist inhabits. It is primarily about exploring how ideas and intentions determine the technique used when creating a work, and how techniques also shape the ideas within a work.

Notions such as consciousness, memory and bad faith are used in this research to describe the artist's responses to the world. John Searle defines consciousness as consisting of states of awareness or sentience or feeling, that consciousness is intrinsically subjective, qualitative, unified and intentional.¹ Memory is the recollection of the impacts of the past on a state of conscious being. Bad Faith is an existential concept of an unknowing denial of reality, presented to the self as truth. This is a term used by Jean Paul Sartre who defines it as the individual consciousness appropriating a false notion of the self, accepting as fact a false view of reality.²

However, it must be emphasized that this paper is not a psychiatric or psychological analysis of consciousness. Nor is it a judgment of the correctness or otherwise of the actions and decisions made by the artist.

In the historical past of Western art, particularly during the Renaissance and after, it was common for the artist to be commissioned to make a work of art at the request of someone else. The artist aimed to please the patron and this determined the source and the idea for the work. Today we accept the idea that whilst, unless the artist wants to please or impress a certain section of the public, the artist makes art as a personal expression the source of the work comes from within the artist. Some artists seem driven by a need to express their personal experiences and reaction to the world and this forms their pictorial language.

In the early part of the 20th century, art historians labeled this form of art as “Expressionism”. The word was first used to imply the reverse of “Impressionism”. The term derived from the fine arts, (the French painter Herve coined it in 1901), and Worringen, the influential art historian, introduced it into Germany in 1911. It was in Germany that it became characterized by a tendency in theatre, music, literature and art to use subjects and means as a form of personal expression. Expressionist art demanded strong personal statements. However, whilst this paper is not directly about expressionism per se, the term is a useful beginning to describe

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1 W.H.Sokel (1963), *An Anthology of German Expressionist Drama*, p.iii.
the particular sensitivities of the type of artist discussed in this study. Norbert Lynton describes the values of the expressionist artist:

This is what I saw, imagined, experienced; this is how it was for me; this is how I felt about it. I the artist, offer you this experience because as artist I am sensitised to a special degree and devote my life to this thin-skinne d experiencing and to finding ways of capturing it for you, the public. I am one, unique, though a part of mankind. You are many; most of your time, your education and your work, if not your leisure too are designed to restrain your experiencing, to thicken your skin. How shall I address you? Not through the conventions of European art, worn smooth with endless use; they no longer connect with life and do not permit me to set down my personal apprehension of it. Strong colours, emphatic rather than accurate representation and especially distortion in my delineation of Figures will catch your attention but may also numb your responses by making too strong an assault. I handle these colours daily and they don’t frighten me; the drawing that strikes you as incompetent is how I want it. You can learn to read it, respond to it, especially since I have to adapt my manner continually to changes in my situation and myself? I want you to use my art, to counter with it the deadening weight of urban life. Indeed my insistence on a self-centred art is only justified if it helps you to discover your true self, but in order to reveal myself, I have had to abandon what shared visual language there was as a link between us.  

Two significant things emerge from this statement. The first is that the artist is emphasizing a consciousness toward the world: ‘I saw, imagined, experienced; this is how I feel about it’. The second is the question: ‘how shall I address you?’ This indicates that there is an especially significant connection between the experience of the artist and the pictorial techniques that the artist uses as language. It suggests that the artist creates a new language out of these feelings by using strong colors, emphatic representation and distortion to emphasize an apprehension of life.

To show how these techniques express the personal emotions and passions that the artist feels about the subject matter, I will examine particular devices of distortion in figures and objects, the manipulation of pictorial space and the use of symbols and other techniques employed in art making. The permeation

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of memory and social consciousness connects the artist to the subject matter, and the devices used are the particular language that the artist invents to make visible this consciousness. In these cases the artist is not in a state of disinterestness or disengagement in pursuit of pure aesthetic endeavor.

Chapter one examines the theoretical connection between the artist and the work and considers the views of John Dewey, Richard Wollheim and others. Chapters two and three examine the works of Max Beckmann and William Kentridge, because they are two very influential artists who are concerned with expressing their personal consciousness about the social and the political in an effective pictorial language. They will examine how Beckmann responded to the damage that the First World War inflicted on him: how it brought into clearer focus his intellectual ideals about humanity and human behavior, and how, through his art, he expressed a sense of alienation. It examines the work of Kentridge who practices his art in South Africa, a country coming to terms with the aftermath of apartheid. In this context, his art portrays/deals with the ambivalence and duality of human behavior. Chapter four will focus on my own experiences of marginality in South Africa and the cultural and social issues of living in Australia. It discusses various theoretical influences on my work including the writings of Edward Said, Franz Fanon, Nietzsche, Camus, Brink and Sartre. These influences have led me to a focus on the concept of bad faith (a central standpoint in my work) as an inescapable consequence of modern culture. Chapter five will reflect on my own painting and drawing, and the artistic devices I have developed in an attempt to achieve clearer understanding of how these devices express social consciousness.
CHAPTER 1
THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

The place of the artist in the work

The idea of the artist wrestling with the problem of presenting his or her view of the human condition in the context of their own social consciousness raises an issue about the relevance and importance of the artist in relation to the artwork. There is also the question about whether the expressive power of the work resides in the work itself, and how or where the connection of the artist in relation to the work is relevant to the power of the work.

On the one hand, there is the view that an artwork stands as an object of meaning in itself and requires the viewer to respond to the object as itself. On the other hand however, there are instances where the artist’s intentions and personal connection to the subject matter cannot be excluded from the examination because, as individuals shaped by the particular social conditions of their time and place, memory and consciousness generate their pictorial language.

In the case of pure aesthetic enjoyment of a piece of work, it is perhaps not essential that a knowledge of the identity, context, motivations, raison d'être and life of the artist should be relevant to the experience of receiving an aesthetic sensation of the object in itself. But I feel it is a matter for
consideration in respect to a fuller understanding and analyses of the work of artists wanting to express a distinct personal reflection within a specific social context. John Dewey is in agreement with the suggestion that the process of analyzing and describing certain work of this type should not be separated from the conditions in which the work is produced. He states that:

*The thing expressed is wrung from the producer by pressure exercised by objective things upon the natural impulses and tendencies. A prolonged interaction of something issuing from the self.*

Rene Huyghe also says:

*There is a language of the intelligence, which comes down to us as the language of the word. Art however is a language of the spirit, of our feeling as well as our thinking nature, our nature as a whole in all its complexity.*

In a similar vein, Eugene Delacroix has said that there are two languages. One is about ideas that words can express and the other is the language of the soul that creates a language for itself.

**Artistic Language**

The key factor here is the need to express or communicate personal or emotional ideas and concerns as artistic language: thus suggesting that the expressive power within a painting or a drawing comes out of the particular techniques and devices that the artist uses as his or her expression. The sources from which this language originates must then be examined and identified. There are differing points of view on this notion. John Dewey says that there is no split between what is done and its purpose:

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...The connection between the act and expression is intrinsic.\(^7\)

Richard Wollheim in his essay on *Art and its Objects* puts two views on this notion: first that the expressiveness of the work can be accounted for exclusively in terms of the artist's condition. One can object to this in that the expressiveness is then detached from the object and belongs to the biography of the artist.\(^8\) His contradictory view is that the expressive qualities of the work cannot be extrinsic to the work itself. Wollheim cites the example that the *Isenheim Altarpiece* cannot be a mere attribute of the experience or activities of Matthias Grunewald.\(^9\) However, returning to his first view, in *Painting as an Art*, Wollheim has presented the observation that 'Pictorial meaning rests upon the state of mind of the artist and the way in which this causes him to work.' (page no 188). In saying this however, he argues that what is represented must not be confused with particular feelings and emotions, the state of mind occurs within a pattern established by a career or a life.\(^10\) This notion is supported when he states:

*In order to see a work as expressive we must know the set of alternatives within which the artist is working, or what we might call his 'repertoire': for it is only by knowing from what point in the repertoire the work emerges that we can ascribe to it a particular significance. He continues, An artist expresses himself if and only if, his placing one element rather than another on the canvas is a selection out of a set of alternatives . . . Knowledge of the repertoire is a presupposition of the spectator's capacity to understand what the artist is expressing.*\(^11\)

Frederich Nietzsche holds an opposing view regarding the artist's place in the work when contemplating its meaning and enjoyment. Discussing the work of the composer Richard Wagner as a typical case, he says that if one is to enjoy the work itself it is best to separate the artist from the work, not to take

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\(^7\) Dewey, p. 61.
\(^8\) Wollheim (1980), *Art and its Objects* p. 23.
\(^9\) Ibid., p.24.
\(^10\) Wollheim (1980), *Painting as an art*, p. 188.
the artist as seriously as the work itself. He argues, the artist is separated from the real and has a ‘typical velleity’ (a low degree of desire), and that artists do not stand nearly independently enough in the world and against the world to deserve attention in themselves.\textsuperscript{12} When considering this we must take into account that Nietzsche said this despite (or perhaps because) of a close personal relationship he had with Wagner.

After considering these opposing arguments, it seems reasonable to come down on the side of the artist who, whether consciously or not, is responsible for the expressive qualities that reside in the work. After all, it was Grunewald and not someone else that made the Isenheim Altarpiece and it was Richard Wagner who created Parsifal.

**Devices and meaning**

Artists have always used devices in their work to express their personal intentions. Devices can range from the subtle to the extreme: a violent exaggeration of shape and form, which can result from total abstraction, down to subtle alterations of space, object, color or tone. These devices function as a way of conveying meaning in a work of art. They can include a simple but sophisticated technique of deliberately introducing elements into an image that appear out of place or inappropriate, or a juxtaposition of objects that appear incongruous in the narrative represented by the image. The manipulation of spaces, the symbolic use of color, caricature of figures, or the use of strong tonalities and textures can introduce another level into a work.

\textsuperscript{12} F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, pp. 100-102.
The introduction of disparate things into a picture is a distinct type of distortion of reality, one that is conceptual rather than perceptual. The intention is to give a new meaning or value to objects. As Dewey explains:

*The conception that objects have fixed and unalterable values, is precisely the prejudice from which art emancipates us … a particular subject matter in being removed from its practical context has entered into a new whole as an integral part of it. In its new relationship it acquires a new expression*\(^\text{13}\)

**The influence of Modernity**

It can be said that the concerns of art in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century were about the rendition of the ideals of history and classical thought; presenting history and stories in images as a means to delight and instruct. It can also be argued that modernity and the industrial revolution brought art out of the ideal into an art that became intense and personal, and introduced a new way of delivering meaning which required the viewer to respond to the artistic image in a different way to that of earlier art.

Essentially, a changing world brought a new context to art. By the middle of the 19\(^\text{th}\) century there were massive intellectual, industrial and material changes taking place in society that brought with them new utilitarian and rationalist ideologies about work, production and economics, that resulted in a collision of morals and values that deeply upset the place of the individual in society.

Within this social context it became impossible to sustain the humanist view of man as a replica of divinity, the idealized figure of the human form could not

\(^\text{13}\) Dewey, *Art as experience*, p. 95.
be sustained in the modern world. Too many things had changed including art itself. The artist had to deal with the new physical and intellectual relationship sandwiched between humanity and the modern world. Many artists were now making work as a response to their consciousness; they were abandoning the forms of the past and creating new forms from within their own psyche. These immense social changes had an effect on many artists and they began to observe the world and themselves in a different way. They found their material for their art by examining the world and themselves with a new sensitivity, As the following examples will demonstrate.
Honoré Daumier (1808 - 1879) was concerned with social impacts on the human condition in the Paris of his times and expressed these reactions through caricature to emphasize the conflict between the individual and the new rationality of the world (fig 1).

Other artists traded visual reality for an evocative language, distorting size, shape and space to portray a symbolic and mythical world.

James Ensor (1860 - 1949), using masks as a device, explored the inner life and ultimately the inevitably of death in images (fig 2).

Edvard Munch (1863-1944) painted the *Scream* (fig 3) in 1895 in response to his inner feelings. He expressed the restlessness of his soul, his inner preoccupations, and the dark state of his mind.
These artists were developing a new pictorial language, responding to the changed social forces that impacted on the society in which the artist lived and worked.

By the early 20th century, human character and perception had changed even further. Peter Conrad refers to this process as metamorphoses. He argues that modern painting began with the

*imperious refabrication of the world… a world where ‘Man and the World were enemies, God and the world were strangers.’*  

Artists like Picasso (fig 4), Egon Schiele (fig 5) and Gustave Klimpt (fig 6) changed form and space in paintings in order to convey new meanings by distorting the perceived real that was depicted in images of the past.

Within this new environment the use of devices now became a means of projecting the consciousness of the artist, transformed by the new world, as a pictorial language.

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This social consciousness that drives the repertoire of the artist, as Wollheim indicated earlier, was different for each artist and is related to the memory, the personal experience and the personal history of each, as can be discovered in the art of Chaim Soutine (fig 7) and Marc Chagall (fig 8).

Extending this theoretical concept into the practical, the following is a more detailed study of Max Beckmann and William Kentridge, whose social contexts directly impacted on their artistic standpoint. It will examine their particular social and political contexts and its impacts, and show the relationship between their repertoire of images and the particular pictorial devices they adopt.
The form and content of a work that is capable of transmitting levels of meaning beneath the surface narrative does not come easily. It is the result of the expenditure of a great deal of intellectual effort on the part of the creator. One artist who has an influence on my work, both through his passion for examining the human condition and through his techniques of the use of objects to symbolize other meanings, and the altering of space, is Max Beckmann (1884 - 1950).

For the purposes of this enquiry, I have chosen a few of Beckmann's images as ample to discuss the way that they communicate the theory proposed in this thesis. This brief segment on Beckmann is considered to be sufficient enough to support the contention that there is a connection between social consciousness formed by memory and experience and the techniques and devices used to address the political and the social. It is my belief that the work of Beckmann should be read on different levels. The literal topics in his semi-realistic art require a deeper examination of the subjects and objects that populate his pictures in order to understand his work. Religion, mythology, spirituality and metaphysical questions are apparent in his art. Beckmann’s art investigates the human’s relationship to their fellow human.
His representations of the suffering of the individual are metaphysical mirrors reflecting the individual’s mortality.\textsuperscript{15} It is my contention that, while the apparent brutality of life is often the surface matter of his work, it is the stepping off point for consideration of things on a deeper plane, which sometimes defies rational interpretation. Whilst he believed in the intrinsic weakness of both the individual and society, he had a love of humanity and he is quoted as saying:

\textit{Actually it is stupid to love mankind, nothing but a heap of Egoism (and we are a part of it too). But I love it anyway. I love its meanness, its banality, its dullness, its cheap contentment, and its oh-so-rare heroism. But in spite of this, every single person is a unique event, as if he had just fallen from a star.}\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{Biography}

Max Beckmann (the son of a prosperous flour miller) was born in 1884 in the industrial city of Leipzig in Germany. He has been labeled a German Expressionist artist and also classed with the "Neue Sachlikeit" (New Objectivity) movement of the mid 1920s. It was a short-lived movement; distinguished by the rejection of Expressionism and the revival of Realism. Often cynical in its outlook, it moved away from the subjectivity of Expressionism and chronicled the bourgeois excess of Weimar culture, such as found in the art of Otto Dix and George Grosz.

His artistic career began at the age of fifteen. After being rejected by the Dresden academy he was accepted by the Weimar academy from 1900 to

\textsuperscript{15} James, L. Fisher, ed. (1992), \textit{Max Beckmann Prints}, p.23.
\textsuperscript{16} ibid., p.13.
1903. By 1906 he had become an accomplished painter and etcher and participated in exhibitions with the highly regarded Berlin Secession. Haftmann states that this was a group of artists interested in promoting the advent of German Impressionism. These included artists such as Max Lieberman, Ferdinand Hodler and Edvard Munch. 17 Probably because of the financial circumstances of the family, Beckmann was able to travel; he went to Paris on a few occasions where he set up a studio and also to Florence. By 1913 at the age of 29 he was already celebrated as one of Germany's finest painters. His artistic development evolved from an impressionist position, but from childhood he was an admirer of Rembrandt and like him he made a large number of self-portraits, which could be likened to a pictorial autobiography. (See figs 9, 10, 11.)

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17 Werner Haftmann (1965), *Painting in the Twentieth Century*, p.49.
His artistic direction before the First World War went the way of the large dramatic compositions reminiscent of Rubens, Gericault and Delacroix.

Even at this stage he was showing evidence in his art of a concern for human anguish. In 1913 the Secession oriented magazine acclaimed him as one of the most promising young artists in Germany. He was lauded as the German Delacroix. 18 In examining the self-portraits of 1904 to 1908 Beckmann seems to appear at this period in his life as the epitome of the urbane, privileged, self

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assured bourgeois. However, it was his experiences in the First World War that caused a massive shift in Beckmann's social consciousness.

**Beckmann's Milieu**

It is my contention that an understanding of the context of the Europe of the early part of the 20th century, and German society and politics in particular, but especially the First World War and its aftermath and the rise of the Nazis, provide the key to understanding and interpreting Beckmann’s approach to his subject matter. Placing Beckmann in the Europe of the beginning of the twentieth century, we find that he lived in a dynamic period in history. Dramatic intellectual and physical impacts such as Freud, Einstein, the Eiffel Tower, H.G Wells, Oscar Wilde, Picasso, the motor car and the radio, are some examples of the period which were changing the past. The customs and the foundations of the past were rapidly crumbling as the pace of life speeded up.

The reign of Kaiser Wilhelm was a time of pomp, decadence and middle class excess. The political and social situation of Germany and Europe since 1870 had changed dramatically up to the First World War. A major reorganization of the great powers and a shift to unification of the German nations had fuelled nationalist sentiments. This evolved into a competition for political, economic and military power with other European powers. With state interventions in economic matters, massive industrialization and urbanization resulted in
plenty of surplus capital for the German bourgeoisie. Greenwood records that this wave of national success led to jingoism among the masses and the rise of a militaristic nationalism, which was exploited, by Government propaganda and the educational system. A sensationalizing press entertained the masses and influenced their ideas of national aggrandizement. This delivered a heady cocktail that inevitably led to war.\textsuperscript{19}

This new world of imperialism, consumption and veiled aggression had a significant effect on Max Beckmann who said in 1918:

\begin{quote}
The unhealthy and repulsive aspects of the prewar years, where the commercial haste and the quest for success and influence with which each of us was infected in some way. Now everyday for four years we have looked horror in the face. Perhaps this has touched some of us deeply.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

The period of nationalism and re-armament led to rivalry in industrial and investment markets. This in turn fuelled the ambitions of the governing classes and Europe divided into two camps. Unified Germany became a military and industrial giant. The other camp was the Franco/Russian alliance later joined by Britain. On the 28\textsuperscript{th} of June 1914, Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo in Bosnia. In response, Germany gave unconditional assurance of support to Hungary to invade Serbia. Soon, 1.5 million people were at war. Young men joined as if it was a game and marched to rousing songs, to their death. After four years, the casualties amounted to 32 million soldiers killed in battle and 17 million civilians died due to famine and massacres.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{20} Peter Selz, \textit{Max Beckman}, p. 18.
Beckmann with his love for humanity, wanting to avoid the business of killing, volunteered for the medical corps in 1914; by 1915 he suffered such physical and mental exhaustion from the carnage that he was discharged. This brief period in his life caused a cataclysmic change in his consciousness toward humanity. He seems to have undergone a quite dramatic change to his personality: gone is the seamless assurance for the potential of an undisturbed existence. This seems evident when comparing the self-portraits of 1915 - 1938 with the ones of a few years earlier (figs 14, 15, 16).

![Self-portraits of Beckmann](image)

Fig 14 1915  Fig 15 1917  Fig 16 1938

For the next thirty years the chaos of human society and the consideration of human nature became the focus for his art.

**Examining Beckmann’s Work**

After the war Beckmann’s art took on a new pictorial appearance. Enigmatic objects such as flutes, violins, and funnel shaped horns, candles, fish and lamps begin to pervade his pictures. Stephan Lackner identifies the musical
instruments as the enigmatic song of life and the candles and lamps as
shedding light on the human drama.\textsuperscript{22} After 1917 he found new forms for his
pictorial ideas. Anatomy and perspective were subject to deformation in the
service of heightened expression, including an extreme foreshortening of
space.\textsuperscript{23} His figures become compressed into a single foreground plane; low
ceilings press onto figures, walls lean and tilt and his figures appear to be
physically and emotionally detached. They portray human misery, altered
psyche, the individual alone, solitary in the company of others, in other words
disengaged. Germany was now a country wracked by hunger, disease,
unemployment and inflation, and violence in the streets as the soldiers
returned from the trenches. In 1918 Beckmann wrote of this period,

\textit{Just now, even more than before the war, I feel the need to be in the cities among
my fellow men. This is where our place is. We must take part in the whole misery
that is to come. We must surrender our heart and our nerves to the dreadful
screams of pain of the poor disillusioned people…. Our superfluous, self fulfilled
existence can now be motivated only by giving our fellow men a picture of their fate
and this can be done only if you love them.}\textsuperscript{24}

His art begins to reflect his inner vision of the life around him; he becomes
increasingly concerned with making art that could address the broader issues
of humanity.

\textsuperscript{22} Stephan Lackner (1991), \textit{Beckmann}, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 9.
\textsuperscript{24} Peter Selz, \textit{Max Beckmann}, p. 28.
The following examination reveals how through the use of pictorial devices Beckmann uncovered this personal anguish. His paintings depict representations of his metropolitan society. People and faces are the abiding subject of his art. The faces in Beckmann's painting of this period are revealing and at the same time concealing.

The pictures are always crowded, and yet the people that populate his works hardly ever look directly at one another. Beckmann seemed aware of the paradox that the existential loneliness of the individual is often felt most strongly when in a crowd.  

He felt that it is by circumstance rather than by design that we are brought into contact with each other in the urban society, and that our interior lives are unable to fully connect. His images also suggest that a sort of intentional blindness to the existence of others constrains us from engaging, bringing to mind the instinctual behavior that one encounters today on a crowded bus or train or in a lift.

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In the painting *The Night!* (1919) the scene and the activity if viewed literally are obvious, but the meaning in this picture is more difficult to decipher. It is a scene of hell, despair and suffering.

Three men, who proceed to murder and torture; have invaded a family home, one is strangling the husband and another is breaking his arm. His toes are curled up with agony. His wife half stripped with legs wide apart is tied to the window. The third man holds the daughter beneath one arm. She is looking at the mother with pity and confusion. His other hand is either pulling down the blind or opening it to throw the girl out of the window. There is an enigmatic figure of a woman, partly obscured, in the background, and it is impossible to tell if she is witness or ringleader.

Nevertheless it is a silent, horrific, eerie scene. The feeling is that it has gone on for hours and will go on for hours more with no prospect of rescue or hope for the victims.

I wondered if there was a political reading to this work. But if this is so then it seems curious that the attire of two of the torturers seems somewhat strange, in that neither of them are wearing shoes yet both are wearing ties.
His dominant technique here is the compression of space, leaving no room for individual movement, the closeness of the figures is oppressive. The structure of this work is full of diagonals, triangles, slants and verticals. The rear wall presses forward on the figures, forcing them to the front. The floor tilts up rising almost to the vertical and the ceiling almost touches the heads. The symbolism of the objects is enigmatic and asks the viewer to examine their relevance. There are two candles, one has fallen over and is extinguished and the other is tilting. The one suggests death, the other a flickering of hope. The phonograph with its red center questions whether it is on or off. And the dog wailing, looking up at the roof is a suggestion of utter despair. At a deeper level Beckmann’s theme of perpetrator and victim may express his dread that there is no prospect of salvation. The painting could be an allegory that all life is suffering. It is possible that this is the expression of a social consciousness becoming aware of a humanism that turns on itself under stress. Or given the future for Germany, it was perhaps a premonition that more is to come, expressing the chaos of the world as he witnessed it. This painting and its techniques demonstrate a strong confirmation of the connection between the social consciousness and the pictorial language of the artist.

In *Family Picture* (1920) (fig 19) there are six people in this scene of Beckmann and his family. The first thing to notice is that none of them is looking at or communicating with anyone else in the group.

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26 Ibid., p. 29.
Beckmann, holding a horn, is lying on a bench smoking; his wife, in a corset and petticoat is standing, looking into a mirror. His mother in law hides her face in her hand while his sister in law stares at nothing; his son is on the floor reading, and a servant reads the newspaper, and a cat lies on the piano.

The scene is one of alienation and disconnectness. These people appear not to be connected by a mutual innerness; they do not appear to have any desire for community, they just happen to be in the same place.

In the top left corner is a mysterious little figure wearing a crown, which both Cornelia Stabenow and Peter Selz say is a figure with which Beckmann represented himself.

The enigmatic symbolism of candles in Beckmann’s work is again prevalent in this painting. There are five candles; three are lit, and two are extinguished,
yet in the center of the ceiling an electric light is on. The pressing walls, tilting floor and low ceiling giving the impression of a large wooden crate, as it does in *The Night* painting, appears again as the backdrop, compressing the figures into the foreground. This painting, made a year later than *The Night*, is in calm contrast to it. Here the social tension and the drama are in another form. The Beckmanns were living apart at the time, which suggests that this work is painted from memory. It is difficult to tell whether Beckmann felt a sense of personal disengagement from his family, or whether he was suggesting here that inherent self-interest and selfishness causes a distance from other humans, even in the closeness of the family.

*The Dream (1921)* (fig 20): In this painting, here again we see the enclosed windowless, claustrophobic space, the tilting floor and the compressed figures. We notice that the three men are all crippled, with their eyes shut. The organ grinder is blind, blowing his trumpet and winding his hand organ. A man without hands with a fish under his arm is climbing a ladder; his head nearly touches the low ceiling. A legless man in a tin hat and clown shirt, on short crutches pushes himself forward. In the lower front of the painting, a drunken woman, her eyes also shut, rolls on the floor a cello without strings between her legs and what appears to be yellow liquid trickling out from her skirt.
In the center of the painting is a blonde pale-eyed girl; seemingly just arrived from the country, she is sitting on her luggage marked with transport stickers. Is she a refugee? Or is she symbolic of displacement and lost childhood? Her eyes are open, one hand is open by her side, and she holds a doll resembling Punch the archetypical thug in the other. The doll seems to be sardonically applauding the characters in the scene. The picture with its mutilated people, the fish and the musical instruments, suggests futility and confusion. The title is also confusing. What is the dream? Whose dream is this? In my view he is suggesting the concept of hope, that hoping, whilst an absurdity is what keeps us going. This is a picture that again clearly emphasizes the anguish of the artist towards a world that has shattered the dreams and aspirations of the individual. At this time in his life his consciousness seems focused on the utter futility of life, the reduction of the individual to a life without prospects. Carla Schulz-Hoffmann suggests that it is Beckmann's metaphor for Berlin, signifying the desperation of a lost generation, robbed of life affirming principles but continues to torment itself with senseless activity.  

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Departure (1932-33), (fig 21).

This triptych is probably the most famous of all Beckmann’s works and one of the most enigmatic and perhaps the most difficult to decipher. Fortunately Beckmann has offered some glimpses about the work through statements at various times. He has said: ‘Departure from the illusions of life to the essential realities that lie hidden beyond.’

He is also reported as explaining the work to Lilly von Schnitzler that the painting is about the torture of life, trying to find one’s way in the darkness, carrying one’s past failures until the greatest treasure which is freedom transports one away. In this triptych, the side panels portray violence and

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29 Ibid., See p. 88, for the full text of Beckmann’s explanation of *Departure.*
enslavement in interior spaces, and the center panel is a background of a tranquil setting of the open sea and sky.

This work, painted ten years on from those about the physical cruelties of society that he produced in the 1920s, shows that he has moved to another level regarding the existential state of the individual. Here Beckmann is making a work about the inner person and the subjugation of the mind and the soul from within. The theme is about the existential state: the bondage and fettering represent the consciousness of the mind. In the left hand panel, there are four figures in a space with three Grecian columns. In the lower foreground is a crouching woman, perched with her arms extended over a large round object that could be a crystal ball. She is bound around the waist and wrists. At the top left is a man standing in a large garbage bin, with his back to the viewer and his face against one of the pillars; his hands bound behind his back. Next to him, a naked man with bloody stumps for hands, his mouth gagged, is tied to another column. In the center between the figures is a man wielding what at first appears to be a dangerous weapon that turns out to be small fish in a bag tied to a stick. Next to him is an over large still life of fruit in a bowl on a flat trolley. The bonds, the blindfold, the face to the pillar, the garbage can, the nakedness, and the crystal ball are all significant devices in this picture. They can be interpreted as the personal limitations and neglected opportunities that become our lives, that we create our own personal fetters. The dark man wielding the fish is perhaps a symbol of our thoughts. The oversize bowl of fruit can be interpreted as wasted opportunities; choices which we could have made.
Turning to the right hand panel, in an interior that could be interpreted as a stage setting, are five figures. In the center is a woman, one breast exposed, holding a small lamp. Roped to her is a man who is upside down, and behind her is a blindfolded man dressed in the uniform of a bellboy holding a large fish. At her knee is a tiny naked brown person, and off the stage, in the lower front of the painting is a walking figure of a man beating a large drum, dressed in the clothes of a character resembling those in a Brueghel painting. The stage setting, suggesting that the entire world’s a stage and that we are acting out a given role, and the lamp suggests we are trying to find a way through the darkness. The man tied to the woman is the symbol of the baggage of our past life; that we are doomed to carry with us our wrongs and failures. The exposed breast could be a symbol of sexuality and/or of the Mother. The little person suggests secrets, innocence and lost childhood. The blindfolded man with the fish could be seen as the messenger of fate, while the drummer is playing the song of life marching by. The two end panels could be interpreted as a description of our personal fetters in the one and life’s fetters in the other. The center panel is an idyllic seascape of an azure sea and blue sky. There are five figures, dressed in royal costume, in a boat. The central characters are a King and Queen, an infant in her arms is pointing at something. A masked boatman in a red cloak has his hand on a very large fish inside the boat. Behind the Queen is a half obscured face of a man who may be Beckmann, and a net full of fish hangs over the side. Beckmann uses the symbol of fish in many of his works. Although the fish is a potent religious symbol it is not certain that he intended it as such.
The enigma lies in deciphering the meaning of the ‘freedom’ of which he speaks. He has said that the King and Queen represent man and woman, and that the child represents freedom and that the boatman is taking them to 'another shore.' This freedom represents many things; the shore could be the attainment of a higher level of being symbolizing the new and enlightened thinking in Beckmann’s art. Or the possibility of a new start in life for him, an escape from the Nazis. It is even likely that the scene represents death as the ultimate freedom.

I place a great importance on the influence that this work has in relation to my own themes. It reflects the existential notion of bad faith; and it reflects the inescapable dilemma between choice and manipulation, and the difficult leap to a freedom of spirit.

The Beckmanns moved to New York in 1947. In 1950 he painted *The Town (City Night)* (fig 22), while he was teaching at the Brooklyn Museum School. The painting is an interior space, populated by many figures. There are rounded windows through which one can see skyscrapers, and a ladder is on the left of the picture. A voluptuous naked woman on a bed dominates the center of the composition; her hands are bound and her eyes are closed. The bedposts are large phalluses. There are five figures across the background, a blonde woman in a pink dress with her hand over one eye; next to her is an ugly man with a hard expression holding an upraised sword. Next is a figure with a bandaged head with Technicolor hair, then a dark skinned man who disgustedly points out his tongue and points upward and next to him is a
busker playing a guitar and singing. To the right is a small doorway with a
crowd of women staring into the room. In the foreground are three crouching
figures; the left is a monkey in a postman's cap holding a burning candle and
a card addressed to Mr. *M Beckmann New York USA*. In the center is a

![Image of painting](image)

**fig 22** *The Town (City Night)*

yellow skinned froglike figure with a crown on his head snatching up pieces of
gold and the third figure is a brown monkey. On the floor lie an empty
champagne bottle, apples and grapes. The letter may well signify a longing
for contact with his European past.
The work alludes to sensual pleasure, but the figures all appear joyless and accusing. There are intimations of shame, voyeurism, indifference, greed and indulgence. The picture signifies his impressions of modern city life in America, an already jaded society, yet compelled to continue an indulgence with the physical pleasures of the world. Significantly, the candle and the ladder, Beckmann’s consistent symbols of life and the desire to reach a higher plane appear in the work.

Beckmann used the particular to represent the universal, and although he was locked into his time, reacting to his specific contexts and consciousness his work still resonates in the present. He responded through a pictorial language, initially to a hostile world responsible for inflicting damage upon humanity, and later to an understanding of humanity itself. Beckmann's focus on the issues of the human impulses is an aspect that I passionately connect to in my own practice. I have also found that his distortion of space and the symbolic introduction of objects to reveal underlying meaning provide answers to inspirational problems in my own work. His introduction of enigmatic objects has inspired me to introduce some of my own to form my own meaning in my own contexts. Of great interest is that the distortions and objects in his work, initially related to the social and the political in cataclysmic times, remained as constant symbols in his work as it evolved into a more metaphysical nature.

Beckmann confronted contemporary life; in it he sought serious themes about the human condition, the individual in mass society. In his work he strove to express through a visual narrative all the loss, despair, fear and confusion that he saw in the world.
Chapter 3
WILLIAM KENTRIDGE

Another artist who, like Beckmann explores the darkness of the human condition, is William Kentridge who works from the point of view of the individual struggling to come to terms with the conflict between personal self-interest and society, in a more contemporary way.

Biography

William Kentridge is an internationally known white South African artist, whose works on paper, animated films, theatre and puppetry have been exhibited in many of the major centres of art around the world, including the Museums of Modern Art in New York and Chicago, the Venice and other Biennials, Documenta X and the Palais des Beaux Arts. His work first gained international prominence in 1997. Kentridge was born in 1955 in Johannesburg in South Africa, where he still lives. His grand parents came from Lithuania and Germany as Jewish immigrants. His parents were both distinguished lawyers who represented black South Africans against the repressive Apartheid regime.

He did not study art at university; he earned a BA in politics and African studies instead. He studied the arts at the Johannesburg art foundation, a private art school under Bill Ainslee from 1975-78. Mslaba Dumile Geelboi Mgxaji Feni was a black township artist who was living and working in the
Ainslee house. Mslaba's forceful and expressive drawings, focussed on the position of blacks living under apartheid\textsuperscript{30}, heavily influenced his obsession with charcoal drawing.

**Kentridge's Milieu**

The cultural social and political forces in South Africa that Kentridge grew up in cannot be underestimated as a significant compulsion behind his work. The black population has always outnumbered the white population by a huge ratio, somewhere in the region of eight or nine to one. Since Colonisation, black and colored South Africans had never been allowed to vote until 1994. British rule had set the stage for systematic maltreatment of the black people, but this was exceeded exponentially when the white supremacist based National Party took power in 1947. This government began a systematic legislative program of racial segregation and called it 'Apartheid'. The program consisted of establishing a series of 'Homelands' for the various black tribes, forcibly moving them off their traditional farms and villages. Implementing a 'Group Areas' act in the cities and towns and designating prime areas for 'Whites' only, they appropriated the homes of non-white families living in these suburbs, giving them to whites, forcing people into 'Townships' without basic services like paved roads, sewerage or street lighting on the outskirts of the cities. They created massive enclaves of poverty, despair and crime. They introduced a 'Pass' system that restricted black African males to look for work in the cities, without their families, who were left hundreds of miles away. The

\textsuperscript{30}William Kentridge (Exhibition Catalogue), Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, p. 12.
Government allowed employers to pay what amounted to slave wages and herded them into male camps with strict curfews. They segregated education, and restricted the educational system for black people to the barest minimum, and reserved decent jobs for whites only. Shops, movies, parks, buses and trains were all segregated. The racial segregation even went as far as benches on the pavement were designated for whites and non-whites. In order to maintain this regime the Nationalist government instituted a cruel, savage and repressive enforcement of control, imprisonment, raids, banning, curfews, beatings even murder over a period of almost fifty years. White and black need never socialize except in master/servant relationships. White people were taught to believe that blacks were an inferior species. Even the Church acquiesced to these iniquities by segregating their schools and staying silent. In the main, the white population, living in their segregated suburbs, unless they chose to care or even know anything about the situation, could go about their lives as if they were in a cocoon. Their privileged lives were unaffected by the sufferings of the black population. This was the world of William Kentridge. In a society that believed in white supremacy, Kentridge was automatically one of the privileged, but being Jewish he was also one of the ‘Other’ in the same sense that being ‘Jewish’ has always been perceived in other societies.
Kentridge’s standpoint

In an interview with Christov-Barkargiev, Kentridge says that he feels that the state of the world has not changed that much between the late nineteenth century and now in terms of human misery.  

Referring to Tatlin’s *Monument for the Third International*, as one of the greatest images of hope that he knows, Kentridge feels that he can only envy that hope; that hope such as this seems impossible now and that the failures of these hopes and ideals, their betrayals are too powerful and too numerous. He explains his standpoint, using Max Beckmann's painting ‘*Death*’ (1938) as a metaphor. He says:

*...Death is a beacon for endangered souls. It accepts the existence of a compromised society and yet it does not rule out all meaning or value, nor pretend these compromises should be ignored. It marks the spot where optimism is kept in check and nihilism is kept at bay. It is in this narrow gap that I see myself working, aware of and drawing sustenance from the anomaly of my position at the edge of huge social upheavals yet also removed from them.*

He also says that there is not a day or hour in which it does not present itself to him, rarely as anguish but at least as a nudge. This position is central to his work; its central characteristic is disjunction; that daily living is made up of incomplete contradictory elements, impulses and sensations. ‘The intriguing thing is the ease with which we accommodate. We are only momentarily moved by events before we turn to something else.’ He is disturbed at how passions can be so fleeting and memory so short lived.

*White guilt that is so much maligned, its most dominant feature is its rarity, it exists in small drops taken at infrequent intervals and its effects do not last for long. But the claim goes further than this, people far closer to the violence and*

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This duality of emotional response to the world that is so central to his work is very close to my consciousness and my work, as I will elaborate on later.

**Examining Kentridge’s Work**

Whilst drawing with charcoal has always been the dominant medium in Kentridge’s work, it was to the theatre that he turned, to commence his artistic career. He has worked as an actor, set designer and director of theatre productions and opera. He is best known internationally for turning his charcoal drawings into animated film. His technique is to start with a drawing and then to proceed through the process of erasure and redrawing, filming each stage of the drawing as it changes and evolves, thereby producing a narrative series of images. The drawings are not merely preparatory studies for the films, for this he could have turned to theatre or electronic media. The actual act of drawing in itself, the process, is where Kentridge derives his meaning. He calls it ‘a testing of ideas, a slow motion version of thought.’ He maintains that there are three separate themes to his work, his South African background, his family background and a self-centred reflection of whatever is around him, rather than great issues. He says that his work does not begin as a moral project, that it starts from the pleasure of putting marks on the paper. The second level arises in that the mark can be read ambiguously as

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32 Ibid., p. 103.  
33 Ibid., p. 8.
an evocation, a reflection or comment on the ‘ethical and moral questions that are already in our heads rise to the surface as a consequence of this process.’\textsuperscript{34} This comment seems to conform to the opinions of Dewey’s ‘…prolonged interaction of something issuing from the self’ and Wollheim’s ‘…pictorial meaning resting on the state of mind of the artist,’ that were discussed in an earlier chapter.

Much of the subject matter in his work during the 1990’s focuses on two central characters, Soho Eckstein, a white Jewish industrialist and mine owner and Felix Teitlebaum, artist and actor, both who have a strong physical resemblance to Kentridge himself. These are the significant devices that he invents to portray the ambivalence, the duality of human response to the social and political. In this ongoing narrative Kentridge chronicles the emotional activities of Soho’s complex character, combining economic power and feelings of social guilt and ambivalence. Conversely, Felix, Soho’s alter ego, is always contemplative and somewhat vulnerable. The settings are mainly about contemporary post apartheid South Africa. The portrayal of a decimated, depressing landscape of Johannesburg, and simple internal spaces are where his characters act out the tragedies of their existence. The underlying themes in these narratives are about memory, guilt and forgiveness, a condition not only related to apartheid but also could be interpreted in a worldview to the broader circumstance of human actions. Kentridge is a complex artist and the obliqueness of his work cannot be simply scanned for the obvious, it would not do him justice. The overall

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., p. 19.
context, seems to me to reflect on the underlying effect of the social and political, and the ambivalence and uncertainty of being human, the sheer fragility of the human conscience, and I suspect even though he was a strong opponent of apartheid, his own subconscious expatriation of white guilt. About the apparent autobiographical appearance of the work Kentridge told Dan Cameron that it was by chance that Felix looks like him, as the easiest way was to work in a mirror and that Soho is after an incarnation of his grandfather.

To understand his work is to understand something about Kentridge himself. As he has said, his work is about three things, his South African background, his family background and a reflection of what is around him. Much of what he does as an artist is the examination of life, observed in the context of the portion of the world that he inhabits. From his personal standpoint he wants to remember and remind.

In a discussion with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev regarding his realistic artistic language, being of the figure in the landscape, he felt that in the context of South Africa, the abstract and conceptual art of Europe and America was distant and incomprehensible. He found it apolitical and ideological. Kentridge learnt to relate his position as both witness and participant in South Africa to the dual histories of both sides of his family. On the one hand the impact of the Russian revolution on the Lithuanian side and the catastrophe of the Holocaust on the other heavily influence his ideas and values about humanity.

35 Dan Cameron, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (1999), William Kentridge, pp. 10-14.
Time is an important element in his work. Which he presents in different contexts. There is the version of time in the narrative nature of the animated film where the narrative has a beginning and an end with the underlying connotation of time as passage, change, yet unchanging. In another concept of time, in the work *Shadow Procession* (fig 23), it suggests a metamorphosis that the figures go through, from human to part human, taking on machine like forms. These transitions seems to suggest a transformation of the social, the past into the future with connotations of the advance of technology, the mind numbing nature of process work and the futility of hope, where individual freedom is more a word than reality. There is also the invocation of time as memory, both personal and social.

William Kentridge’s best-known works are his series of animated films. It took him almost nine years to make the first six films. The technique he uses is to begin by drawing on a sheet of paper. Using the same sheet of paper, each stage of a movement is filmed or photographed then erased, redrawn as the next stage and filmed and so on for each stage. In working this way he points
to attempting to understand the process of time and trying to make sense of it. Another theme is the notion of transition: the World is always in flux. He says that this is about what we see and what we know: this is when what we experience or when what we see is false. These ideas are the distortions that affect the subconscious perceptions when we view the work. Because what we see in the films does not appear to be startlingly abnormal at our first look at the series of animations about the saga of Soho Eckstein the wealthy mine owner. It begins with *Johannesburg the Second Greatest City after Paris* (1990), *Monument* (1990), *Mine and Sobriety Obesity and Growing Old* (1991), and continues with *Felix in Exile, History of the Main Complaint* (1996), *Weighing and Wanting* (1998), and *Stereoscope* (2000).

Central to Kentridge's construction of Soho is the dark pin-striped suit. This is his symbol of identity, power, status and authority. In the drawings, titled *Mine* (figs 24 & 25) Soho is having coffee in bed; there are three significant distortions in this image: the suit, the bed and the coffee plunger. He is wearing the ubiquitous suit in bed thus signifying that there is no disconnection between his private and business life, there are no other obvious pursuits than money and status in his life. The suit depicts the narrow one dimensional, single mindedness of his identity. For those who are, or

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36 William Kentridge, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Catalogue p. 68.
have been immersed in an executive career, this character could be
immanently recognizable among some colleagues, maybe even painfully,
one self. To Soho it signifies to him and to us who and what he is and what he
stands for. It suggests a man of personal ruthlessness. Although set in South
Africa, this character is a universal caricature of almost any member of the
power elite in the modern world in any society. The coffee plunger, a utensil
that is common to most households, becomes another object during the
animated sequence of the film. It extends beneath the flat topped tray on the
bed and twists and drills itself down into the earth like a mine shaft, where
below, the black workers employed by Soho, are at work digging out his
wealth. This has echoes of Fritz Lang’s film *Metropolis*.

In the drawing itself, the charcoal emphasises
the processes of thought and construction of
the drawing, confirming that this is an object
in transition - not complete in itself as a
picture. We know that more has gone before
and more is to come. The erasures on the
pillow attest to the movements of the head,
hand and arm that have happened an instant before. The drawing reflects
only the moment. One of the problems in deciphering, or making sense of
Kentridge’s enigmatic meanings is that they must be viewed in the full
sequence of the animated film to make sense of the film and to arrive at a
personal meaning. The major issue is that Kentridge does not begin with any
determined objective and the construction of the narrative is through the
process, which sometimes makes the incongruities and distortions unreadable, or, at least, highly enigmatic.

Soho’s alter identity is Felix Teitelbaum, the other, undisclosed and unacknowledged side of Soho’s ruthless and greedy persona. He is sensitive and downtrodden, in contrast to Soho. In the picture from the series, *Felix in Exile* (fig 26), Felix is always portrayed as naked. The suit that signifies the identity, status and power of Soho is discarded. The nakedness of Felix is more than the artists’ nude; the signification here is of the human, in all its vulnerability, without any physical protection.

There are a number of incongruities in this drawing. Firstly, the title raises the question, exile from what? Felix is not a political activist he is a struggling artist. It transpires that Felix, as Soho’s alter ego, is psychologically exiled from the landscape of South Africa, by the topography that signifies the present state of Johannesburg and its past. There have been too many deaths in this landscape from which Soho reaps his wealth and subconsciously he is thereby, exiled from his own identity. In the picture, Felix is in a room. He has a suitcase of drawings of the Johannesburg landscape. A light bulb, a basin, a Mirror, a commode and the myriad of pictures that he

![fig 26 Felix in Exile](image)
has hung on the wall surround him. As an enigmatic incongruity, water overflows from everything, the mirror, sink, toilet, bed and the stool next to the bed. It is difficult to decipher the meaning of this water.

Kentridge uses the symbol of water in many of his images. For example, in Stereoscope (fig 27), the image of Soho in his suit, standing in an empty room, obviously no longer the arrogant, sure, powerful executive, has water pouring out of all the pockets in his suit, flooding the room up to his knees. Soho begins to drown in the sea of blue, which flows from his own body. He is the sympathy-evoking image of a man whose ambivalence finally overtakes him.

Water is also in the drawing of Felix standing naked in a pool of water, outside one of Soho’s power stations (fig 28).

According to Allison Lanzilotta of new museum.org, although Kentridge does not speak of apartheid directly, the presence of blue lines and blue water in
his series’ about Soho and Felix, portray the lingering influence that apartheid has had on everyone. This may be a plausible explanation. However, Kentridge does not say this.

Kentridge produced a series of etchings, *Ubu Tells The Truth* (fig 29), based on the play *Ubu Roi* by Alfred Jarry. These are related to the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* of 1996 that was held after the end of apartheid.

The character of Ubu as a persecutor of the innocent has fascinated Kentridge for many years. He acted in an adaptation of the play in Johannesburg in the late 1970’s. The Commission was established as part of a settlement between the former White government and the African National
Congress, in an attempt to achieve a just and humane society, by examining the human rights abuses of the past 35 years. Many perpetrators were pardoned through confessing their part in the atrocities. Combining the ideogram that Barry envisaged of the villainous Ubu with the figure of a dancing, showering, naked man, Kentridge splits and combines these characters as an ironic commentary on the pardoning of the majority of the persecutors. On a black background, he has drawn the image of the obese pointy-headed monster, Ubu, then uses the naked man to symbolise the contradictory states of his inner being. He seems to be questioning the redemptive value of forgiveness, whether it was more beneficial to the forgiving than to the forgiven. Like Kentridge, I too grew up in South Africa. But my experience of Apartheid was from the other side, as victim. Although I was fortunate not to have suffered from the direct physical abuse that was inflicted on many, none of us were spared the psychological torment of a legislated, systematic assault on our rights and dignity as human beings. I understand and sympathise that Kentridge can do no other than view the world from his perspective as a white South Africa, which he does with great honesty.

Artistically, my relation to the work of William Kentridge is very similar to that which appeals in Beckmann’s work, namely the observation and reflection on the human condition. I am particularly drawn to his expression of the vulnerability of the individual’s inner impulses in reaction to environment and recurrence of memory. But more so, he is relating his own reaction to the external influences of the social and the political through his art. His
distortions are more in the mind than in the image, and his theme can be compared to that of Beckmann’s triptych *Departure*. Firstly, both artists works are about the external impacts of the social on the human impulses and how those impulses determine our approach to life, and secondly, memory and the past cannot be obliterated, we carry them with us always.

The foregoing sections have presented and discussed the problems of how particular distortions can be used as artistic devices in realist work to explore social and political issues, about how the artist can use the particular to emphasize the universal. They have made a sound connection between the artist’s consciousness and the techniques and devices of the artist’s pictorial language. I have also raised the importance of appreciating these social contexts in relation to understanding and interpreting the work. The study will now proceed with this evidence to examine the connection of memory and social consciousness to my own practice.
Chapter 4

ANALYSES OF MEMORY AND CONSCIOUSNESS

*Learning to love. We must learn to love, learn to be kind, and this from our earliest youth:
If education or chance gives us no opportunity to practice these feelings, our soul
becomes dry and unsuited even to understanding the tender inventions of loving people.*

Frederich Nietzsche

The previous sections have suggested that the conditioning factors of social consciousness are created by memory, circumstances, and physical and intellectual conditioning, and that it can be directly connected to the particular techniques and devices used by the artist. The implication of this view is that in order to understand the art it is necessary to understand the artist to see the integral relationship between expression and representation. In this sense what we do expresses our attitude toward the world. This has been suggested through the work of Beckmann and Kentridge, and like them, my themes are also concerned with the complex relationship between the individual and society.

My work, whilst influenced by social and political factors, is not a response to particular social criticism or particular events. It is about making images that reflect a subjective notion of the difficulties facing the human individual in our contemporary world. My images, reflecting the world as observed and experienced from my personal viewpoint of my time and place, are derived from an idealistic standpoint. They are also strongly connected to my

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37 Nietzsche (1940), *Human all too Human*, Aphorism 601, p. 251.
philosophy and my values about life. In my case, my work has its roots in my life experiences, and a less than optimistic view of the world. It is bound up with questions about how are we to live? And what are we to believe? It is a case of my art exploring the self and distilling the human condition into the reliance upon hope, what I perceive as the ‘bad faith’ in the modern search for happiness, and the certainty of death. It is also a focus on the exploitative and limiting relationship between the individual and the influence of power.

**A personal consciousness formed by Memory and Place**

Memory, often submerged, is critical to the work of an artist in that it permeates everything that the artist does. In this section of the thesis I will attempt to examine the basis of my own social consciousness in order to discover its connection to my pictorial language. I fully acknowledge the difficulty of this subject, and I will concentrate on that part of my consciousness and memory that I believe relates to the development of my artistic language.

I will examine certain past experiences and show how the experience of marginality has led to anger, frustration and guilt towards any form of exploitation and manipulation, and connect this sensibility to the exploitative nature of the modern ideologies of economic rationalism and mass culture. I will introduce the notion of bad faith and examine how it can be induced by accepted social influences but imply that it belongs to an unexamined existence.
South Africa – The personal and the Political

There are two periods of my life that have shaped my consciousness and my responses to the world. One is the first half of my life in South Africa and the other is my life in Australia. They are central to my concerns about the human struggle between the individual and the surrounding culture, and the unconscious pressures that it exerts on our choices. I believe that their impact on my consciousness is extremely relevant to the standpoint of my artistic practice.

I was born in 1940 and grew up as a ‘Coloured’ person in Cape Town, South Africa, under a political structure, which saw one person as having more value than another on the basis of the color of their skin. There are two parts to this period, my family childhood and the social anguish of Apartheid.

It is understood that there are unavoidable dangers in an unknowing parental manipulation of the facile temperament of the individual child that can lead to bad faith later in life. My early life, particularly my relationship with my brother and the demands that my mother placed on that relationship, is a significant component of my consciousness and attitude in the way that I respond to the world even today. I reluctantly introduce these little anecdotes of my family, because they are but minor facets of a larger story, but I believe it is

38 The term ‘Coloured’ was an official classification of the Population Registration Act (no. 30) of 1950. Under the terms of this act, which provided the basis for separating the population of South Africa into different races, all residents were to be classified as white, coloured, or native people.
necessary because their contribution is a part of my view about the potential for bad faith.

My mother was coloured, of mixed African and German descent and my father was white of Scottish descent. He abandoned us when I was one year old. My mother was a good woman and after my father had deserted us, and my sister who was only a few months old had died, she had to rear my brother, who was a year older, and myself on her own. We lived in a nice little terrace in Sea Point with my grandmother. My mother took in washing and ironing to sustain us and I had to leave school at the age of thirteen to earn money to help with the upkeep. She must have been greatly affected by my father leaving us; she must have loved him very much, because when he turned up on our doorstep eighteen years later, she took him in without a word. I think that she focused all her attention on my brother and myself, determining that she would make us all care for one another. My brother suffered early from mild epilepsy, and from the beginning she gave me the role to ‘look after your brother.’ She dressed us alike and we went everywhere together until our late teens.

I think that the core of the issue was that I was led to believe that I had to be personally responsible for someone else who manipulated that responsibility entirely for his own ends. He had a selfish nature and a nasty streak, I remember when we used to make kites, his would never fly and he would smash mine out of spite. I had an aptitude for ball games and he didn’t, once we joined a tennis club, and because he could not play the game, my mother
made me give it up. His foul temper got him into many scrapes, from which I had to rescue him, sometimes through persuasion and apology and sometimes physically. Events like these were a daily feature of our relationship. Looking back, I think that he reveled in me being responsible for him.

Through all the episodes like these, my mother said ‘He is your brother, you have to look after him.’ I accepted this role unstintingly because this was supposed to be love, as I understood it, as my mother saw it. I remember that I used to pray to God for the gift of understanding. It never came. I found solace in reading everything, drawing and making little plasticene sculptures. My mother in her sense of goodness wanted my brother and I to share equally in all things, our individuality, and our originality was to be as one. This noble ideal however meant that his selfishness had to become my unselfishness, his nastiness had to become my goodness. I had to limit my ambitions and energy to the level of his frailty. I suspect now that I was becoming the alter ego of my brother and unknowingly accepting it as a duty. Being young I accepted this role without resentment and if as Sartre contends that consciousness is historically constituted, it may be a satisfying hypothesis for my choices as an adult in later life. As a grown up my personality changed, I would be dismissive of people for their weakness, I did not suffer fools and I would abandon friends without compunction if I perceived any faults. I made myself succeed in everything that I attempted and then moved on to something else. I was aggressive and arrogant. I did not understand love. One can never be sure, but on reflection I think that this childhood did affect
me in some unconscious ways. Ways that were dominated by an instinctive defensiveness.

The impact of politics on my existence was experienced in the social reality of Apartheid. Being forced to accept that I was a second-class citizen for the first twenty-nine years of my life, I experienced the humiliations of seeing our family home, in a beautiful seaside suburb of Cape Town, classified as being in an exclusive ‘White’ area, and appropriated for a pittance. Our house was given to white people. We had to move to an area designated for coloreds. My educational opportunities were limited by legislation, and my freedom of speech and movement was severely restricted. This included the daily humiliations of being restricted from engaging in normal activities, like a seat on a bus, or to sit on a bench in a park, or to swim at a beach of my choice. Employment opportunities were limited to the lower strata of jobs, supervisory or management positions were out of the question. I was in fact the ‘Other.’ I was led to believe that I was different from white people. Because I was a coloured, I was somehow an inferior species; a human that exists on a lower level from that of white people. A further complication was that being coloured meant that I was neither Black nor White, the coloureds were in a sort of no mans land, and therefore could not lay claim to any cultural traditions or a particular Nationalism. Nevertheless the Native Africans suffered more than we did.

39 This was done under the Group Areas Act (no. 41) of 1950, which divided South Africa into separate areas for whites and blacks (including coloureds), and gave the government the power to forcibly remove people from areas not designated for their particular racial group.
This perceiving of myself as the other is still part of my consciousness today, at the age of sixty-five. For anyone who has been the victim of otherness, I believe that the damage is never erased.

Most coloured people, feeling unable to change these conditions, got on with their lives. Many fell by the wayside. The fortunate found jobs within the legislative restrictions, accepting the white ceiling that limited ambition and promotion. They created their social lives within compatible racial and social groupings. My political activism, as it was for most of us, was restricted to passionate argument and discussion within social groups. I was active in sports administration and social activities in the church, which meant that I had the potential to influence many other young people and I may have come under the notice of the authorities. At any rate, after we married, my wife and I decided that we would want our children to have a better life and decided to emigrate.

Australia

In 1969, my wife and I were accepted by Australia as migrants. On applying to leave South Africa we were given an Exit Permit, this was valid for three months within which time we had to leave South Africa and not return. On expiry of the permit we would be stateless. On appeal this was later changed to a passport valid for three months. I was twenty-nine years old, largely uneducated with no psychological understanding of the damage of my past, and no psychological understanding of my intellectual progression. In order to
live in Australia, I had to intellectualise the world as white. I tried to assimilate into the Australian culture, not understanding that one cannot put on a culture like one puts on a pair of socks.

I had come to a new country that held out the offer for a peaceful contentment, decency, prosperity and affordability for the second half of my life. I entered the world of business and commerce and built a moderately successful life for my family and myself. In this Australian society, there were none of the overt extremes of ideology and passions that inspired the fear, despair and brutality on the large scale that provided the context for myself, for Beckmann and Kentridge. Here there was a freedom of movement and choice, and except in minor cases none of the overt racism that I had to live with for the first half of my life. Prejudice seemed to be reserved for the latest batch of ethnic migrants. At that time it appeared to me that there was an inherent decency and an awareness of community inbuilt in the Australians that I met. I saw a society with a modest view of itself and a commitment to egalitarianism. Whilst there were class and social divisions of which I was blithely unaware, people seemed comfortable with their lot, a steady job, affordable food, alcohol and sport. Cultural needs for most people were simple; sporting success was paramount among them. There were however a new set of social influences that were emerging in a globalised world in the 60s and 70s that would impact on and reignite a consciousness sensitive to manipulation and exploitation.
The rise of economic rationalism, globalisation and mass manipulation became an irresistible temptation to a society that had always felt a sort of cultural cringe, that Australia was viewed as second rate by Britain, the mother country, and secondly that it would be left behind as an economic and cultural backwater through the tyranny of distance. Australia gravitated towards the glorious success that was America, embracing its capitalist ideals and the attendant social hegemonies that came with it.

**A permanent sensitivity to marginality**

The cultural problems that I inherited from South Africa have given rise to serious ambiguities in my life. Franz Fanon has examined the phenomenon of the colonized humans’ attempt to find an identity and what happens when this fails. Fanon says:

*He must seek his culture elsewhere, anywhere at all; and if he fails to find the substance of culture of the same grandeur and scope as displayed by the ruling power, the native intellectual will very often fall back upon emotional attitudes and will develop a psychology which is dominated by exceptional sensitivity and susceptibility.*

I had reinvented myself in a new country, but as I have remarked earlier, an experience of the marginality of being the other, never leaves the consciousness and one lives with a thin-skinned sensitivity to the potential misuse of power. Similar to Kentridge, I have a watchful suspicion about the permanence of goodness and honesty in human beings. My experiences of the Afrikaners suppressing and slaughtering the native Africans through a blind belief in their own destiny conferred on them by God, still leaves me

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40 Franz Fanon (1963), *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 220.
perturbed, (although no longer surprised) at the propensity of one society to exploit or damage another through invented rationalities. There appears to be no end to the inclination of the Western mind that sprang out of Empire and Imperial ideology to invent the other. The memory of the treatment of a people as nothing will always be abhorrent. All people must be recognized as equal and worthy of equal respect, otherwise this ability to create the other will eventually damage the instigator as much as the victim and isolate him/her from their own humanity.

I had developed an acute sensitivity to exploitation and know the damage that this can inflict on an individual in relationship to the world. And I have come to understand that this ability to develop an immunity to exploitation reflects back and damages the consciousness of the whole society, and that its effects may lead to an unexamined individual behavior. Edward Said gives an example of this conditioned indifference of the imperial mindset. Writing about the Consolidated vision of the European Psyche towards the Colonized, Said examines the works of the moralist and humanist writer, Albert Camus who was born in Algeria, and comments that ‘even he’ was unconsciously conditioned by colonial attitudes toward the other. Said notes that in his fictional writings, Camus’ does not name any Arabs, such as the man who Meursault kills in the Stranger. this ‘Arab’ is nameless and friendless, and is without history or family. As in the Plague, Arabs die but are not named nor mourned.41

Andre Brink, the South African writer, is an Afrikaner, and he argues that the attempts to separate the cultures of South Africa, its sport, arts, education, language, recreation, crafts and habitat, that body of patterns that distinguish one society, damages all of the people. He states:

> It would be wrong, however to think - be it sadly or smugly - that only non-whites have suffered from cultural malnutrition: white culture, both English and Afrikaans has been affected as deeply, if more subtly.\(^{42}\)

A permanent sensitivity to marginality and exploitation has meant that my view of the world is rarely comfortable, even in my altered state in Australia in very different social conditions. Like Beckmann and Kentridge I am driven to examine the individual in all circumstances and contexts. Having reinvented myself in my new country, I became disillusioned, bored and uneasy with a contented hedonism; what I had accepted as premise and basic condition did not exist. Australia had become a society flushed with materialist and economic riches and the price was amnesia. I realized that I was not content to live an unexamined life with a temperament that needed to search for meaning and a consciousness always on the lookout for exploitation. I unearthed a new regime of exploitation that has emerged to manipulate our consciousness

### The new Marginality

I said earlier that I had noticed a dramatic and disturbing change in the culture of Australia. This has exploded rapidly during the last fifteen years or so, our social underpinnings have shifted and life is now more uncertain for many. A

\(^{42}\) A. Brink (1983), *Writing in a State of Siege*, p. 75.
few examples may help to clarify this suggestion. An unthinking acceptance of manipulation and exploitation by society, as simply being one of the historically unavoidable consequence of life, has led from the exploitation of other cultures and races to a general exploitation of the individual in our own society, through what I believe is a sophisticated process of isolation and control of the individual by the power elite.

The following examples will corroborate the notion that the techniques of manipulation and exploitation are now directed through a conservative rationality of global economic ideology being passed off as individual freedoms. Many studies have shown that our modern Western democracies are now pervaded by less overt forms of exploitation, that while they are more subtle, they corrode the human spirit nonetheless as Kinchella and Mclaren’s research shows. Also as Edward Said notes, that there has been a quantum leap in the reach of cultural authority in the unprecedented growth of the media in the diffusion and control of information. He suggests that we have an international media presence that insinuates itself at a level below conscious awareness into our values and behaviour. Jean Baudrillard considers that the problem of being a mass is that we are neutralized – we are an aggregation of individual particles that, ‘the mass is without attribute,

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They question the assumption that individuals in societies like Australia are unproblematically democratic and free. Further, they suggest that we have become acculturated to feel comfortable in relations of domination and subordination, that economic determinism dictates all aspects of human existence. That power and hegemony shape and limit the use of our abilities through cultural institutions such as the media, schools church and big business. Hegemony cannot be separated from the production of ideology.

Predicate, quality or reference’. Essentially Baudrillard argues that ‘mass culture’ resists choices; it absorbs meaning and returns it as spectacle, as sign that we reject the dialectic of meaning.\(^{45}\) The problem is that in times of crises; a moral choice seems clearer. In the settled conditions of our modern mass culture, the need for agonizing personal choice becomes less vital. This is compounded by the fact that the state of our modern world has become too complex for the isolated individual to affect it by ones own actions.

In our materialist world I sense that power and hegemony have taken advantage of the limitations imposed on the individual within mass culture. I believe that these limitations are exploited by the contemporary rationalist/materialist/ economic ideologies, which manipulate our values. Dostoevsky anticipated the potential affect of these ideologies on the modern human. John Carroll explains this in his writings on Dostoevsky. Carroll says:

\begin{quote}
The Crystal Palace is Dostoevsky’s crowning symbol for the barrenness of industrial civilization. Virtually the whole world saw light, reason and progress streaming in through the glass walls; he saw but the profile of a dark satanic prison. In the Crystal Palace everything will be provided, mans every desire will be satisfied, he will be isolated from pain – but the more he becomes the automon consumer the more he will become imaginatively imbecilic. ... Doestoevsky believed that the gods of rationalism and materialist utilitarianism had joined in conspiracy against all other ethical systems. There is logic to this union. Reason finds its most effective application where a cluster of concepts is available which can be manipulated with material precision.\(^{46}\)
\end{quote}

As far back as the 1960s, C. Wright Mills, in his study of the power elites in America, demonstrated that exploitation of the Public has become more sophisticated as the means of information and power became centralized in the hands of those who occupy the strategic posts in the social structure. He noted the increasing socially conditioned nature of American society and the


continuing transformation of the Public into Masses, systematically reducing the autonomy of the people. He cites the mass media and education as the most insidious forms of manipulation. He noted that, with the media at the disposal of the elites of wealth and power, and an educational system that has become vocational:

\textit{Job advancement is not the same as self development} that \textit{“Educational practice has not made knowledge directly relevant to the human need of the troubled person of the twentieth century or to the social practices of the citizen, that educational institutions have become mere elevators of occupational and social ascent, that encourages happy acceptance of mass ways of life.”} 47

As Nietzsche has said:

\ldots Mankind unsparingly uses every individual as material to heat its great machines; but what good are the machines when all individuals (that is mankind) serve only to keep them going? Machines that are their own end- is that the Umana Commedia? (Human comedy). 48

The value of the individual is now measured as an economic unit, not on their social worth. The whole nature of the value of work has altered. The individual now seems isolated to focus on self-interest and to value him or herself on the basis of status and possessions. We are offered the paltry notion that amnesia and conspicuous consumption are the magic potions to deliver happiness.

My expectations of what life should be are disturbed by an acculturation of new and disturbing values. The notion of the moral individual whose religious values of God and the pursuit of an afterlife seems to be eroding. We are at present faced with the uncertain prospect of having to find new values that are supposed to spring from individuals living in a world governed by a rationalist

\footnotesize{47 C. Wright Mills(1959), \textit{The Power Elite}, pp. 315-319.}  
\footnotesize{48 F. Nietzsche, \textit{Human all too Human}, Aphorism 585, p. 247.}
capitalist ideology, and I find in this a substantial part of the inner conflict in our modern lives, one in which there is a genuine dilemma. Where we once held the belief that the rewards of a decent life would come after we die, where our values were defined by the word of God, we appear to be in a time of transitional shift in our values, where we now have a perfectly reasonable concept that there is nothing wrong with enjoying the fruits of life while we are alive, as long as we try not do any harm to the general rights of other humans or other sentient beings.

The problem is, as Thomas Nagel points out in his book on *Mortal Questions*, that there is a fragmentation of values because of the conflict of self-interest with the search for a theory of how to decide on what to believe. 49 This I believe is the central tension within the modern individual; the freedom to choose. We are faced with the difficulty of choosing to stand out from the masses. The anonymous mass that we as a society have become poses a problem to our individuality and our free choices.

I had become angry and disappointed with my society, profoundly dissatisfied with the new mean spiritedness and narcissism that has pervaded our culture

**Bad Faith**

A remark by a professor of psychology at my university, who was at an exhibition of my earlier work, that I should resolve my anger with Australia, led

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me to examine and attempt to understand my own prejudices or irrationality toward the world. It meant that I had to comprehend the meaning of the world and my place in it. I felt that I had to reassess myself, and my engagement with the world. This little exercise became the catalyst for the understanding and focus of my artistic repertoire, as will become evident throughout this chapter.

In this quest for clarity of my position, I came upon the existential concepts of Jean Paul Sartre and the notion of ‘Bad Faith’, and proceeded to examine whether there was any philosophical value to this notion in relation to my own consciousness and my ‘argument’ with the world.

Essentially the roots of existentialism began with Soren Kierkergaard in the first half of the 19th Century. He was concerned with the subjective experience of what it is to exist as a human being. The structure of bad faith consists of the individual consciousness appropriating a false notion of the self; a willing act of accepting a situation as fact; on what the person knows is faulty evidence; a case of lying to oneself. However the lie is not done with a full awareness that the one doing the lying is a liar, rather it is a program of self deception and self negation in which the liar believes himself or herself in full possession of a ‘truth’ regarding themselves and the world as well.

I realized that I had been unwilling to face the implications of my situation because of my own lack of certainties. I had assumed particular roles of occupational and social behavior as an actor would assume in the role of a character in a play. I had become a ‘man for others’ instead of being true to my
own freedom. I had been assuming behaviors that ‘Society’ told me that I should have; I had created a self-generated need for social acceptance.

Jean Paul Sartre in his analyses of the individual and the relationship between the individual and the world describes this unknowing reaction to the world as ‘Bad Faith’. In a psychoanalytical interpretation, the hypotheses of a censor, where instinct or original drives constituted by our individual history make up ‘reality’, we establish them unknowingly as integral parts of the truth. The subject deceives him/herself about the meaning of his/her conduct. Sartre says that this repression derives from the internal censor. The difficulty is of course in identifying the censor (which may be impossible because it is a knowledge of which one is ignorant). I find of particular significance, Sartre’s statement about being what ‘one is’. He says: ‘it is necessary that a man be for himself only what he is ….If a man is what he is, bad faith is forever impossible and candor ceases to be his ideal and becomes instead his being’. Michel D’ Montaigne in his lengthy self-examination also concluded that one could be nothing other than oneself.

The inescapability of bad faith

This important recognition of bad faith as part of my consciousness, and what I believe has pervaded the consciousness of our whole society, has become central to my art, my passion for the struggle of the modern human. It allows

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50 J. P. Sartre, Being and Nothingness, p.48.
51 Ibid., p. 49.
52 Ibid., p. 50.
53 Ibid., p. 58.
54 Donald M Frame (1965), Montaigne a Biography, London Hamish Hamilton. pp. 289-302. Montaigne came to believe that understanding oneself with total candour was the most important thing one could do.
me to recognize with sympathy the bad faith in all of us, the ennui of the modern society. It is what Nietzsche called ‘ressentiment’, that human weakness that keeps us from realizing our truest and higher self. In comparing the ‘Aristocratic soul’ to that of the man of ressentiment, Nietzsche says: ‘They did not have to establish their happiness artificially by examining their enemies or to persuade themselves that they were happy (as all men of ressentiment are in the habit of doing)’. 55

Summary

I stated at the beginning of this chapter that the exploration into self-examination is a difficult one. Nonetheless, looking at it from the point of view of understanding my artistic standpoint, I can say that I have been consistently concerned with the inspection of the state of the individual in society, and have weighed up experiences that impact directly and indirectly upon that standpoint.

The experience of marginality in South Africa that was so instrumental in forging a character sensitive to exploitation is vital to my need to make imagery about the human condition. As is the belated understanding of a childhood lived unknowingly in a set of circumstances created by misleading good intentions.

55 Nietzsche, Genealogy of morals, p.38.
I translate these into the plight of the modern human; unknowingly susceptible to the manipulative intentions of powerful influences. If I still lived in South Africa, like William Kentridge, my art would more than likely use aspects of the South African experience as the motif. The view would be different of course. However, no longer living in South Africa I find it pointless to make art about a situation that now exists only in memory.

Australia, in the beginning, alleviated many anxieties for a time but like Beckmann and Kentridge I have the need to seek the serious themes of life. I am disinclined to pretend that because the terrible state of the world is out of my control that I should resort to an unexamined state of hedonism and narcissism, tempting as it is, with my anger and passion reserved for thirty-second sound bites. Again like Beckmann, whose permanent anxieties responded to different social conditions when he went to live in America, he was still connected to his cultural baggage and, as does Kentridge, who examines the post apartheid white mans’ anxieties about past guilt in a new society, I respond to the social and political aspects of my milieu.

It is not that I am insensitive to the joy and beauty of life. To my mind it is precisely the abundance of beauty; the sun, the sea and the expanse of this country; this land of plenty, which drives me to make work that counterbalances its offerings, that if we are to deserve it, we must recognize the essentials of life. Nor am I insensitive to the difficulty of living a life; that coping with the personal joys and trials of the everyday are enough, sometimes more than enough for some, and that consideration of the wider world is too much for many. The discovery and realization that, one of the
most important things in an individual’s existence is, the understanding of
ones relationship with the world and that denial of this leads to bad faith, has
become central to my artistic language.
Chapter 5

LEFT TO MY OWN DEVICES – FINDING A REPERTOIRE

My subjective view of modern life, is an idealistic consciousness that exists between pessimism and hope for humanity. In my work, I attempt to explore the fragility of the human essence; the fragility that exists between acceptance and conformity and individual freedom. I believe that through the language of images I can express those things that cannot be conversed or discussed in normal everyday banalities, things such as hope, uncertainty, reflection, doubt, ennui and the ironies of time and death. It is not necessary for me to present the image that the problems of modern society are solely the fault of the State and the public/private elite who manipulates society for its own benefit, because the surrounding culture is always present even though its form may change. It is how the instinctive nature of the individual adapts to the prevailing cultural influences in the search for hope and happiness is where the problem lies.

The world delivers itself to our unreflective consciousness. We perceive of ourselves as good or respectable or happy, and as Sartre says we do not become good or happy or respectable as a result of contemplating moral values. These values are delivered to our consciousness by the world. Our expectations of the real are commonplace; we accept the values of the world around us. Through bad faith, we, all of us irrespective of race or color, have now become the other, seeking our happiness in materialism and status.
Using the lessons of Beckmann and Kentridge, I sought that ingredient which was central to my pictorial language: that which is most difficult for the artist: to find a repertoire within which to work. I find myself working in the area of the fragility and susceptibility of the individual to the world. This fragility is, that which I refer to as bad faith, our unreflective consciousness, our intellectual limitations, and the unshakeable burdens of our past, that Beckmann’s great work *Departure* shows us. This brief background of my point of view, which is the material for my art, is moreover the basis of my artistic problem.

**The Artistic problem**

My first position is that my art should not function in a didactic way, rather that it should communicate and engage. My second position is that my art should use social conditions, including the social realities of materialism, consumption and economic rationalism, as contextual vehicles for the symbols of bad faith. The crux of this problem is: how can the representation, in works of art about human complexities and intensities, be produced in a form wherein the pictorial construction conveys an underlying association to states of consciousness. Simply put, it is how to make a picture that conveys deeper levels of meaning about the human condition.
Examining my images

To resolve the problem, I commenced with disparate objects as symbol, and the landscape as allegory. I began by making paintings and drawings about architectural spaces, particularly, industrial and mercantile spaces as metaphor for the negation and exploitation of the individual by the power elite. My experiences in the commercial world were probably uppermost in my mind in interpreting this into visual language. I embarked on an initial series of paintings and drawings about buildings and spaces that contained memories of a time when life was different, such as the Sydney wharves and the Everleigh rail sites.

In this drawing of the abandoned Everleigh rail workshops in Redfern, I reflected on a time when the working class man, existing in a period of continuous unchanging future, was secure in a job with lifetime tenure, a humble job that, nevertheless, would support his family for life. The scene is of a stark emptiness, unpeopled. The sky is a harsh whiteness contrasting
with the dark, brooding shadows within the buildings. I wanted to create the impression of an archeological site, preserved as memory.

As in this painting that I made of one of the old Sydney wharves that no longer exist in their original state. They are all now mock replicas created by developers for expensive apartments.

I started a new series of drawings and paintings titled *Metropolis* in which I tried to develop further my visual language of symbols and devices, acknowledging my debt to Beckmann and Kentridge, and endeavoring to give voice to my cultural and personal concern. This developed into work that I felt was more representative to my emerging standpoint on bad faith

Martin Place in Sydney is my impression of a contemporary ‘Crystal Palace’ of rationalist economic ideology. The city fathers wanted it to be the seminal piazza of Sydney, the intended symbol of public happiness. The GPO was once its crowning symbol. Today, all that is left of the GPO
Is its architectural façade. Economic power has gutted its interior and it is now an international hotel, its colonnade once photographed by Cazneux, is all that is left. I made this charcoal drawing (fig 32) from the same perspective as Cazneux. I put in a solidly built man in a pinstriped suit, urinating on the wall of the GPO, as a symbol of the success of the hegemony of power over sentiment.

Eleven of the thirteen buildings in Martin Place are either banks or other financial institutions. This seems a total contradiction of a space considered to be a communal public space, although it can be ironically considered as a totally apt symbol of the modern community i.e. the creation of wealth.

*Money 1* (fig 33) is a charcoal and yellow pastel drawing of towering buildings, with a yellow liquid pouring out from them flooding the plaza, overshadowing a tiny, bemused figure, standing in this liquid and staring up at the buildings with the cenotaph in the background. In the other drawing *Money 2* (fig 34) a composite figure of a man, symbolizing ambition/power, growing in size, is gazing out at a desolate piazza. In response to the character of Soho Eckstein, I also use the pinstriped suit in my work to represent the insecurity.
of personal identity and the preoccupation with materialism that is so much a part of society.

I decided that empty or near empty architectural space was not sufficient for me as the expression of bad faith and I began to introduce the figure and other devices into the work as new ideas and sources of inspiration emerged (fig 35).

The suit became one of the symbols of representing bad faith. Like Soho, it represents an acquired status and personality, a disguise of the real self. As Honoré Daumier’s ‘Saltimbanques’, the poor of Paris during the industrial revolution, dressed up as clowns to vie with each other for attention and alms from the wealthy. I also introduced the hat to signify that now we have to pretend to ourselves to meet the expectations of others. The hat symbolizes a hope for success and the despair of failure. This figure in the pinstriped suit I depicted as somewhat alone and a little pathetic. I made him faceless to show his ubiquitousness and his briefcase is transparent, with nothing important inside it, as are the flimsy buildings surrounding him, I wanted the drawing to reflect on the absurdity of self-importance.
Recollections of my own susceptibility to ambition and the importance placed on success were reflected in the recent television series titled ‘Status Anxiety’ by Alain D’Bouton.

In this painting, there is a stationary figure of a man in a blue suit. He is wearing a red clown’s hat and is holding a lit candle. His face is indistinct. Behind him, is a high wall, obscuring all but the tops of tall city buildings. On the wall, are numerous shadows; including his shadow amongst the demon like menacing others. The devices that I use in this painting are to render the figure faceless as a signifier of universality; not any person in particular. Secondly, the shadows are signs of all the anxieties that surround him. Behind, the wall is the obstacle, separating him from the potential success that awaits him in the city beyond it. The suit and the red hat are the enhancements that he believes are sufficient for him to achieve the success that he hopes for. The candle that I borrowed from Beckmann, is burning all the while, suggesting that, when it goes out, he will have run out of time. He is in a state of anxiety that the potential for disappointment and, hence, despair, is a distinct possibility.
Freedom, Status and Success (fig 37). This work is a scene located high up in a tall skyscraper. Out of the large window can be seen the tops of other tall buildings, inside, is a large obese man (not a self portrait) with his back to the viewer, looking out of the window. Surrounding him are bowls of fruit, paintings, antiques and boxes suggesting that they represent wealth and other treasures. Exotic flowers surround him. The top of a ladder is visible at the bottom of the picture. The man is wearing a pinstriped suit and a red hat. The hat and the suit indicate that his personal and intellectual enhancements have succeeded in the goal for status and success. The ladder, the high elevation of the skyscrapers and the fruit and flowers are intended as a duality of meaning for the word ‘Freedom’.
I find evidence of our emotional predicament all around us. Journalist Jenni Russel writes, in an article for the Sydney Morning Herald:

…We live in a culture where the primacy of the self and its satisfactions is everything. …As workers and producers we are under more pressure and feel more insecure than ever before. Our private lives are increasingly unpredictable, our financial futures uncertain.  

I was reading this article on a train and I saw these three workingmen on the platform below. Their bodies tired and their boots muddy. I drew the advertising hoardings behind them and cut off the end of the platform. I was wondering what they were thinking about.

Similarly, social commentator Richard Neville in an article about the indifference of the so-called ‘Generation Xers’ to the wider horror in the World writes:

…But the gen Xers, for the most part are playing out their lives as heroes of TV ads. They gorge on the shiny stuff, and then to mask the lack of fulfilment it provides, quaff antidepressants. From then on it’s a sleepwalk all the way to their next investment property, a pet in therapy in tow. …So exactly what is it that we stand for? Booze, porn, shopping, celebrities and sport, as far as been discerned by community habits. …The overall impression is one of glazed acquiescence to the project that drives the West.  

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Keith Suter wrote an article in the Daily Telegraph about Biotechnology and Genetic engineering and remarked on the novel *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley as one of the great warnings for the future. I wondered how we would occupy ourselves if Science could ultimately prolong our lives to 150 years.

I imagined that, today, by the age of seventy-five or perhaps eighty years old, most of us would be either dead or in a nursing home. But in the brave new world, with only half of our life used up we would somehow have to find the means and the inclination to live life to the full for another seventy-five years.

This amusing but frightening little narrative inspired me to make this charcoal and white chalk drawing of a woman in a slinky fashionable dress on the catwalk of a fashion parade. I gave her the face of a very old woman and the body of a super model. I wanted to suggest that one could not expect anyone faced with the prospect of another seventy-five years to live, to spend that time in a dressing gown and slippers.

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I placed a little red clown hat on her head like those that the Saltimbanque wore in Daumiers' Paris to compete for alms. I did this because I imagined that she would have to compete for attention like everyone else. Absurd!

I had read Albert Camus' book *The Fall* the self-confessed story of Jean-Baptiste Clamence, a once successful man who sees through the deep-seated hypocrisy of his existence. It is a story about self-pretence and its exposure, not to others but ultimately to ourselves.

Camus has the ability to induce the reader into a state of self-reflection. The story set me to reflecting on my life up to now and its deceptions, the awareness of which we all face at some time in our lives. I painted this simple picture of a seated man in the pose of a traditional portrait. He is dressed in a red shirt and blue trousers. I gave him a rather ugly one-eyed face, staring out of the painting. A half painted mask at his side, and an extinguished candle on a table to his left.

The intention in the work was not to put on our best face, (as we are inclined to do), that the disfigurement in the face signifies the hidden self; with the mask signifying the obvious desire to hide this true self from the world. I painted it white to reflect on myself as a coloured man living in a white world. It is half painted and flimsy and falling off the bottom of the picture to suggest that we never really fool anybody. The extinguished, nearly burnt out candle is the symbol for time.
Occasionally, I meet with some of my ex colleagues from the business world for a little reunion, and we reminisce about the past and our new lives. Although not always truthfully because there are always the embellishments that come with friendships generated through work in the corporate world, carry certain undertones. Ego still plays its part.

The platforms on the city’s underground railway stations in the evenings, filled with office workers waiting for their train remind me of the stark images in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*.

(fig 43) I wanted this painting to show the inexorable march into the metropolis, which determines so much of our daily working lives. The column on the right signifies the hope and optimism of the newcomers and on the left are the burnt out hulks that are being replaced. The terrain is bleak, suggesting that everything usable has been devoured by this city with its power and offer of hope.
I made this drawing of myself standing in a garbage bin, reminiscent of the figure in Beckmann’s triptych *Departure*, signifying my own inescapability to bad faith.

I had gone through the difficult process of self-examination, as bluntly as I could and concluded that the complexity of attempting a truly permanent candid existence is only possible for part of the time.

*Fig 45 ‘Bad faith’*

In this painting of the empty boat and the sublime wilderness of the far shore is a version of death that I wanted to portray as something certain and inevitable. However I did not want it to be frightening or intimidating.

*Fig 46 the Styx*
CONCLUSION

Art is a continuously changing context of ideas and functions with an apparently infinite range of concerns. This study is about but one of these and was especially concerned with examining the source and content of the work of Max Beckmann and William Kentridge from a particular point of view. This view was from the standpoint of a painter who, likeminded as Beckmann and Kentridge, has the inclination to display a personal response to certain contexts of the social and political.

The purpose of this examination was firstly to understand why some artists are compelled to represent aspects of the social and the political in their paintings and drawings, and secondly to discover how these aspects can be presented successfully to convey underlying levels of the human condition. The art of Beckmann and Kentridge was chosen precisely because of these reasons. The study showed that their work could not be taken in at a glance as can much of today’s contemporary art. Their art needs to be questioned as it in turn questions and provokes. The study confirms that the making visible of a social consciousness is: ‘wrung from the producer by pressure exercised by objective things upon the natural impulses and tendencies’ as Dewey notes in chapter one. This social consciousness has a direct connection to the work of Beckmann and Kentridge and was formed by their experiences in the societies in which they lived, and the one in which Kentridge still lives.
These artists have a significant impact and influence upon my artistic ideas and practice. The examination of their milieu and the connection between that and their repertoires, enabled me to reflect on my own social consciousness created by political and personal influences in my own milieu. Some artists discover very early on that which is central to their work, the standpoint from which they can construct their images, others take a bit longer to arrive at their standpoint. I fall into the latter category.

The examination of my early experiences and their contribution to my views on life, predominantly the plight of the individual in the modern world, has somewhat clarified my focus regarding my pictorial language. However I do realise that this is an ongoing process. The central characteristic of my work is that daily living is not made up of benevolent freedoms. In my opinion, the individual must always be aware of the potential dangers of social manipulation which can lead to an unexamined existence and the resulting penalty of bad faith.
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Global gallery
Exhibition catalogue

Lionel Wishart-Bad Faith
11 to 22 May 2005.

1. The Street, oil on canvas: 83 x 68 cm.
2. Evening View, oil on canvas: 85 x 62 cm.
3. After Kossoff, oil on canvas: 85 x 61 cm.
4. Eldorado, oil on canvas: 180 x 120 cm.
5. Status Anxiety, oil on canvas: 88 x 113 cm.
6. The Crown, oil on canvas: 89 x 77 cm.
7. The Fall, oil on canvas: 92 x 62 cm.
8. Reunion, mixed media on paper: 84 x 67 cm.
9. The workers, mixed media on paper: 84 x 70 cm.
10. The Styx, oil/encaustic on canvas: 180 x 120 cm.
11. The city, oil on canvas: 85 x 64 cm.
12. Progress, oil on canvas: 90 x 70 cm.
13. The Docks, etching/aquatint: 56 x 78 cm.
14. Bad Faith 1, oil on canvas: 126 x 80 cm.
15. The Saltimbanque, charcoal on paper: 135 x 80 cm.
16. Immortality, mixed media on paper: 95 x 70 cm.
17. Bad Faith 11, charcoal on paper: 77 x 53 cm.
18. Disengaged, etching/aquatint: 50 x 38 cm.
19. Old friends, charcoal on paper: 74 x 78 cm.
20. Money and power, charcoal on paper: 69 x 74 cm.
21. Power over sentiment, charcoal on paper: 75 x 55 cm.
22. Passing Memories, charcoal on paper: 73 x 63 cm.
23. Freedom, oil on canvas: 200 x 130 cm.
24. Dancing suit, mixed media on paper: 75 x 57 cm.
25. Ennui, mixed media on paper: 73 x 63 cm.
26. The Platform, charcoal on paper: 75 x 54 cm.
27. Everleigh, charcoal on paper: 74 x 54 cm.
28. The Emperor’s clothes, oil on canvas: 92 x 65 cm.
29. The Dog’s in Therapy, oil on canvas: 107 x 97 cm.
30. Morning View, oil on canvas: 80 x 66 cm.
31. Gentrification, oil on canvas: 137 x 120 cm.