

## On Site

Exhibitions, installations, etc



William Kentridge, *SIBYL: Waiting For The Sibyl* (2022)

### William Kentridge/Nhlanhla Mahlangu/Kyle Shepherd *SIBYL*

Barbican, London, UK

William Kentridge is something of a magician. The South African artist, film maker, sculptor and creator of large-scale operas is present on the opening night of his latest production at the Barbican. He's seated behind me in a spotless white shirt; he appears in the projected animations in front; he's talking to an audience member at the interval; he vanishes from the stalls and reappears onstage to take the curtain; in spirit he is like the UK TV artist Tony Hart, a conjuror of dreams.

If this gives the impression of a lone maestro, it's not. *Sibyl* is a collaboration with fellow South Africans, Nhlanhla Mahlangu (choral composer and

performer) and Kyle Shepherd (composer and pianist) and all the richer for it.

In the first half's *The Moment Has Gone*, Kentridge materialises in his Johannesburg studio pulling soft charcoal drawings from his imagination to evoke scenes of a distant African landscape, cultivated and exploited. This is offset by a quartet of Greek chorus mythic men in antique-hued boilersuits led by Mahlangu. Their gentle hummings and honeyed voices in Zulu, Setswana, Sesotho and Xhosa click languages complement Kyle Shepherd on grand piano, his busy chords, trickles of randomly struck notes and sharp reprimand adding a kind of weather to the performance.

As Kentridge carves up the territory of his studio wall with a ruler, his hand arranging picket lines of pencils and

charcoal sticks on a monochrome drawing of a tree-dotted plain, the singing speeds up and the yearning turns to warning.

The second half's *Waiting For The Sibyl* is a chamber opera styled like a Bauhaus ballet. Dancers in flat circular hats and skirts become a constellation of spinning tops in a soundscape of babble. The impetus for this piece came from the mobiles of Alexander Calder, whom Kentridge calls "the master of instability, uncertainty and transformation..."

Dancing on a small dais is the Sibyl, performed by Teresa Phuti Mojela in a clay-coloured dress, who casts her frenetic semaphore shadow on to a projection of an open book. This is the oracle of Greek myth, to whom you go to ask your fate; her answer is written on a leaf and placed at the entrance to her

cave, but along comes a wind to scatter the leaves and you can't know if you've picked up your own fate or someone else's.

The fragmented world of the opera delivers memorable images. Who can forget the dark apocalyptic tree that turns into a typewriter during its slow rotation? Or the chaos of an office gone mad, where a suit types away as the chorus throw papers about the stage and a solitary figure presses a sheet to his ear, hoping to hear it speak? Or the comic scene with the moving collapsing chairs? Shepherd plays his piano as if it's a drum as a megaphone sounds out and the sense of shattering becomes implicit in the random projected texts: "*Your turn is next*"; "*Fresh graves are everywhere*"; "*The tree cries out for its leaves...*".

Deborah Nash

### TEGH & BAW *SINK\_VESSEL*

Beaconsfield Gallery, London, UK

*SINK\_VESSEL* is the remote collaborative project between Tehran based sound artist and musician TEGH (Shahin Entezami) and London based collective BAW (A David Crawforth/Naomi Siderfin), consisting of two sonic works, each with a respective sound installation in the exhibition spaces of Beaconsfield Gallery, and a 12" limited edition vinyl.

Commissioned by Beaconsfield in 2021, TEGH's *SINK* recollects a personal experience of the initial stages of Covid, lockdown and contagion before the possibility of vaccination; BAW's *VESSEL* is, in turn, a response to that initial work.

In a darkened, arched space, *SINK* hisses and fizzles like distorted fireworks. The piece is minimally transmitted through

potent speakers which deliver a punch to the stomach. The installation's remaining elements include a few chairs for visitors and a lit white candle hung on a trapeze-like structure – perhaps the suggestion of human presence, but also its absence, an indication of resilience, endurance, hope.

Entezami doesn't spare his blows. His pitch black, thick sonic washes alternate with machine gun-style percussive spits and bullets, the piece growing through quasi operatic phases into an enveloping mass of dense noise and low to high cutthroat frequencies. It's the sound of anxiety and doubt taking control over the body, the germs of an unknown illness gaining territory. Rather than individually internalising it, though, Entezami widens his work's scope by at times depicting an exterior urban landscape, almost like his

sounds are meant to illustrate a collective state of mind in the city of Tehran.

A masterful drone maker, TEGH's composition flirts with varying lengths, layers and pauses, seemingly to allow the listeners to insert their own impressions within the gaps. It's a ticking time bomb, but also a remedy, or medicine, aiming to purge physically and mentally, through impeccably produced – and reproduced – immersive sound.

In the light-flooded, altar-like space upstairs, *VESSEL* offers a brighter alternative, although this is all but deceitful. A similar candle is hung high above in the middle of some equally powerful speakers, the space bathed in natural light, although what's at play here might be just a subtler kind of horror.

BAW appear to suggest buoyancy and hope: their piece is more organic, including

instrumental sounds that might be flutes, strings, a hammered dulcimer. There is a slight concession to melody, as opposed to its almost total absence in TEGH's piece, but the dark drones creep up soon enough, possibly a reminder that not all is well. Did we have a better time, or resources, during lockdown in London? Rather than suggesting that, BAW question the difficulty of information, the uncertainties of sterile hope, marred by false optimism.

It's not necessarily a better, healthier state of affairs. BAW's response might in fact signal solidarity, empathy, shared uncertainties. It's almost like a mothering gesture towards their sonic collaborator, a warm cover like the one offered by the blankets adorning the chairs in each space, a protection from a particularly cold British spring.

Seb Patane

Stella Olivier