

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
**Wednesday, December 10, 2003**

## **The Divine Comedy** **January 24 to April 25, 2004**



Image: **William Kentridge**, *Untitled*  
(drawing for the film *Stereoscope*), (detail), 1999,  
charcoal and pastel on paper, image courtesy the Artist

**Vancouver, BC** – The Vancouver Art Gallery will launch the new year with *The Divine Comedy: Francisco Goya, Buster Keaton, William Kentridge*, an exhibition that connects three artists from dramatically different historical periods and explores the relationship between comedy and violence, laughter and tears. From 18<sup>th</sup> century etchings to contemporary videos, this exhibition provides a timely look at how black comedy, absurdity and satire are used to express our relationship to a tumultuous world.

*The Divine Comedy* looks at aesthetics, politics and humour through Goya's poignant and satirical late 18<sup>th</sup> century etchings, Keaton's deadpan silent films from the 1920's and Kentridge's political contemporary drawings, prints, sculptures and videos. The exhibition weaves together the work of three artists who lived through times of extraordinary social change, when forces of modernization obliterated old ways and the artists grappled with the loss of social and moral certainties.

"At a turbulent point in history, *The Divine Comedy* examines how artists approach conflict and use comedy and satire to deal with dramatic social change," said Kathleen Bartels, Director, Vancouver Art Gallery. "Presenting these historical and contemporary works side-by-side has created a particularly intriguing exhibition that reflects our unsettling times."

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Spanish artist **Francisco Goya** (1746-1828) is noted for work that captured the horrors of war. His work has had an enormous impact on modern consciousness in its ability to articulate humour and tragedy. The exhibition includes the entire folio of *Los Caprichos*, 1797-99, the first of his two great print cycles, as well as 24 works from the second print cycle - *The Disasters of War*, 1810-15. *Los Caprichos* is a social satire that blurs the boundaries between the real and the fantastic. Satirizing the follies of Spanish society of the day, *Los Caprichos* uses double meanings to shed light on social hierarchies, royal personalities, relationships between the sexes and a continued belief in superstition despite the rise of rational thought that dawned with the Enlightenment. Originally explored in private albums, the eighty prints that comprise the complete series do not make up a rational narrative so much as a set of images interconnected by echoing symbols or figures. Only a small number of sets were sold in Goya's lifetime, the remainder being donated, along with the copper plates, to the Royal Printworks in 1803.

American filmmaker **Buster Keaton** (1895-1966) has been described as one of the world's great comics. He viewed himself as an entertainer and had a career in show business that spanned sixty years. *The Divine Comedy* includes four Keaton films in which chaos and calamity reign - *One Week*, 1920; *Cops*, 1922; *Sherlock J.* 1924; and, *The General*, 1926. Portraying ordinary people facing impending disaster, Keaton employs physical comedy to reveal a modern world that is unstable and ruled by the rhythms of the machine age. His characters move from one disaster to the next, defying the laws of physics and somehow surviving unscathed. Twenty black and white images relating to Keaton's work (stills and promotional shots) from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences will also be shown as part of this exhibition.

South African artist **William Kentridge** (1955 - ) has earned an international reputation over the past decade as a leading artist for his exceptional animated films, prints and sculptures. Often depicting a world in chaos, his work employs subtle humour and personal gesture to reflect on the psychic landscape of post-apartheid South Africa. His animated works are based on beautifully lyrical charcoal drawings and developed through a highly detailed technique of erasing and adding to each drawing hundreds of times. *The Divine Comedy* includes six animated film's created by Kentridge between 1989 and 1999. These films centre largely on two characters: Soho Eckstein, a pinstriped businessman, and his naked antagonist Felix Teitlebaum, a sensitive artist type. Graphically, the films owe much to the German expressionist tradition and draw upon the conventions of silent filmmaking, such as the use of intertitles and iris shots. Each film, from five to eight minutes long, takes approximately three to four months to produce and reflects a world where real life becomes tragically absurd. The exhibition also incorporates several important works on paper and 26 bronze sculptures by the artist.

*The Divine Comedy* takes its title from Dante's poem of the same name which includes Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso. This exhibition is curated by Trevor Smith, formerly curator of Contemporary Art at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, and presently Curator at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. Trevor Smith will be in Vancouver on Sunday, January 25 at 1pm to deliver a lecture and tour of *The Divine Comedy*.

In conjunction with *The Divine Comedy*, the Pacific Cinémathèque will present three nights of film by legendary silent film star Buster Keaton, including some of his finest feature films and most memorable "two-reelers," from February 26 to 28, 1131 Howe Street, Vancouver.

Also relating to this exhibition, The Philosophers' Café will examine the differences between viewing the world through a tragic lens or a comic one with a series of discussions at the Gallery from January to April. Commencing on Thursday, January 22 at 7pm, curator Trevor Smith will speak about the relationship between humour and human struggle under the title *Laughter and Disaster*. The series ends on Thursday, April 22 with Roberta Kremer, from the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre, discussing how are images of conflict read differently as they move through time.

*The Divine Comedy* is a Vancouver Art Gallery exhibition in association with the Art Gallery of Western Australia. In Vancouver, the exhibition has been co-ordinated by Melanie O'Brian, Assistant Curator, Vancouver Art Gallery.

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- When:** January 24 to April 25, 2004
- Where:** Vancouver Art Gallery  
750 Hornby Street  
Vancouver BC V6Z 2H7  
[www.vanartgallery.bc.ca](http://www.vanartgallery.bc.ca)
- Hours:** **Winter hours** (cease April 20, 2004) **Summer hours** (commence April 21, 2004)  
Closed Mondays Open every day  
Tuesday to Sunday & Holidays 10am to 5.30pm Monday to Sunday & Holidays 10am to 5.30pm  
5.30pm Open Thursdays 10am to 9pm  
Open Thursdays 10am to 9pm
- Admission:** Adults \$12.50, Seniors \$9.00, Students \$8.00, Children (12 & under) Free  
Family \$30 (2 adults, 2 children, 13 years +), Thursday evening suggested donation \$5.00
- Media contact:** Julie-Ann Backhouse  
Communications Specialist  
604 662 4722
- Images:** Digital images for professional media use only are available at the Vancouver Art Gallery's FTP site <ftp://ftp.vanartgallery.bc.ca>. Contact 604 662 4722 for password access.
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