Kiefer as Occult Poet

A currently traveling survey of Anselm Kiefer's work re-assesses his career, downplaying political controversy in favor of transhistorical mysticism.

BY FRANCES COLPITT

From the beginning, reaction to Anselm Kiefer's work has been polarized. His remarkable early success, and enthusiastic acclaim by museums and collectors, soon produced a backlash. The critical left (Benjamin Buchloh, notably) dismissed him as a commercially motivated purveyor of a bombastic nationalistic style. For others, especially artists, his works that embrace earthy organic materials, with their dense physicality and loaded content—ranging from meditations on the Holocaust to the mysteries of creativity—presented revitalized and expanded possibilities for painting. In short, the cultural and personal expressiveness of his art appeals, or doesn't, depending on one's tolerance and taste. In a review of Kiefer's 2005 exhibition at White Cube's temporary annex in London, Adrian Searle concluded in the Guardian that "Kiefer's art is as ambitious as it is magnificently grandiose, uncomfortable and brooding. His work is as deeply troubling as it is impressive—and that is as it should be." Nearly 20 years ago, Peter Schjeldahl similarly observed the "hedgehog awes" that greeted Kiefer's work, a response he referred to as "Anselm Angst" on the occasion of the artist's only major American retrospective until now [see A.I.A., March '88]. The still unsettled opinions about Kiefer's reputation make his work a ripe subject for a second investigation by an American museum. Organized by Michael Auping, chief curator of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, "Anselm Kiefer: Heaven and Earth" offers an opportunity to revisit these controversies and assess the endurance of the work, which has remained fairly consistent in style and subject matter.

Kiefer, who was especially prominent during the heyday of Neo-Expressionism, studied law before becoming an artist in the late '60s. Although not officially a student of Joseph Beuys, Kiefer sought him out in Düsseldorf and acknowledges the spiritual influence of the older artist. Kiefer's earliest paintings were produced in a former schoolhouse in Germany's Oden Forest, where he lived until purchasing an abandoned brick factory near Buchen in the 1980s. The schoolhouse and factory inspired, and are depicted in, many of his paintings, and...
the same is true of his current 200-acre studio complex in Barjac, in southern France. On the grounds of this former silk worm nursery, the artist has erected massive architectural installations and cultivates giant sunflowers. According to Auping, the sunflower seeds used in several of his recent paintings pay homage to Vincent van Gogh’s, whose sunflower paintings were produced nearby.

"Anselm Kiefer: Heaven and Earth" includes more than 60 paintings, sculptures and books, the exact number of which will vary during the show’s tour. It begins with Kiefer’s earliest extant works, from 1969, and concludes with 10 pieces from 2005. All were aptly chosen to exemplify the show’s theme, which not only reflects one of the artist’s primary interests but avoids, in most cases, the more controversial references to the architecture of the Third Reich and the battlefields of World War II that occurred so frequently in his early work. By organizing a survey of considerable scope that eliminates Kiefer’s most antagonizing work, Auping argues for a revised assessment of his output to date. That being the case, the catalogue and didactic wall texts are crucial components of the exhibition—and they pay almost no attention to formal issues and little to material concerns.

Such a heavy emphasis on iconography tends to limit rather than expand the paintings’ possible significations. The lengthy interpreta-

View of The Heavens, 1969, showing one spread of the 79-page thread-bound book, oil, photographs and magazine pictures on paper, each page 9 1/2 by 7 1/2 inches. Private collection.
Some feel that Kiefer's embrace of organic materials, with their dense physicality and loaded content, offers new possibilities for painting.
Some feel that Kiefer's embrace of organic materials, with their dense physicality and loaded content, offers new possibilities for painting.
It is hard to see how constructing meaning through arcane stories and archaic belief systems could support the work’s credibility.

Interpretive quibbles aside, the exhibition provides a captivating overview of Kiefer’s fearless experimentation with materials and his command of scale, from the operatic to the intimate. As a foil to the high-strung nature of much of the work, “Heaven and Earth” was sparsely and harmoniously installed in the upstairs galleries of the Modern Art Museum. The first room introduced Kiefer’s career with important paintings of the 1970s, including Mann im Wald (Man in the Forest), 1971, a washy oil painting on canvas, similar in its handling to the numerous watercolors included in the show. It depicts a figure we’re told is the artist, holding a burning branch in a dense forest. Another forest, an early favorite symbol of Kiefer’s, is home to a snake in Resurrexit (1973). The snake reappears in a depiction of the interior of the artist’s famous former studio, a wooden schoolhouse attic, in Quadrinitii (Quaternities) of the same year. Labeled “Satan,” the snake is accompanied by three flames identified in handwriting on the canvas as the Trinity, a more widely legible symbolism based on art-historical as well as religious traditions. Two unusually small landscape paintings (slightly larger than 2 by 3 feet) contain crude outlines of a palette, an image that reappears in Himmel-Erde (Heaven-Earth), 1974, where it encompasses a rough
and awkwardly painted earth and sky also connected by a vertical line labeled *muden* (to paint). Though it is possible to see this work (as Apple does) as a statement about the character of the artist, Kiefer’s use of a word that is a verb rather than a noun denotes an activity rather than an identity.

Kiefer’s earliest existing work takes the form of books, a medium still central to his career. This exhibition contained two paperback-size scrapbooks from 1969, both called *Drei Himmeln* (The Heavens), with spare, collaged and painted elements applied to their yellowed pages. Of the many other series of books in the exhibition, *Ausbrennung des Landkreises Buchen* (Centerization of the Rural District of Buchen), 1975, is the densest and most oppressive. The seven volumes consist of burnt burlap pages, which, a wall text says, were made from rectangular remnants of paintings previously destroyed by the artist. The black charcoal encrusted pages are thick and opaque, conveying a sense of physical weight that is also heavy with personal history. In *Elektra* (2005), the pages (like the 1975 book, they are roughly 2 feet high) are treated similarly, serving as supports for lumpish organic materials rather than printed or written words. But here, the sensibility is lighter and less steeped in obscurity. Caked with reddish clay and sand, the pages corroded surfaces support painted patches inscribed with NASA star numbers, which are in turn connected by painted lines. The ample scale allows the viewer to almost literally walk into the universe.

Several of Kiefer’s most recent paintings are seascapes, not landscapes, and seem influenced by the quality of light characteristic of a different, Gallic climate and landscape. *Aschenblume* (Ash Flower), 2004, is one of the exhibition’s standouts. Above a dark rolling sea floats an ominous black cloud stained, inkblot-like, onto the canvas. A brilliant, vaguely Impressionist light glows from between the cloud and the distant horizon line. Lowering the horizon to the center from its normally high placement in his work, Kiefer mitigates some of the tension and instability, if not the foreboding quality, that are typical of his earlier paintings. While the cloud conjures up thoughts of brewing storms or apocalyptic explosions, a lead grid, recalling a mullioned window, is placed on top of the cloud and establishes a sense of flatness in an otherwise illusionistic painting. In *Melancholia* of 2004, the windowlike element is replaced by a murky glass object in the shape of the famous polyhedron in Dürer’s *Melencolia I*. A gaseous white cloud appears behind the polyhedron, while a thick mixture of brown-, black- and gray-tinted emulsion on the lower half of the painting suggests either a parched landscape or, contradictorily, a disquieted ocean—the brooding seascapes of
Many of Kiefer's new landscapes refer to armed conflicts. Tangled masses of razor wire are strewn across *Heaven on Earth*.

Albert Pinkham Ryder writ large. These seascapes (and a third) seem intended for meditative rather than expressive purposes. They are occasions for relatively free perceptual experience rather than a guided process of narrative interpretation.

An atmospheric luminosity also characterizes Kiefer's newest seascapes—many of which, despite the curator's premise, refer explicitly to armed conflicts. The attached materials and palette of dusty terra-cotta, taupe and warm gray call to mind the war-infested deserts of the Middle East. Like vicious tumbleweeds, tangled masses of razor wire are strewn over the cracked and abraded surface of the 18-foot-wide painting *Himmel auf Erden (Heaven on Earth)*, 1998-2004. The title of this monumental landscape is more likely based on wishful thinking than on irony. *La Conversion de Saint Paul* (2005) includes a toy-size military tank, handbuilt from clay, suspended over a representation of an arid landscape. Behind the tank, a rust-colored explosion and a splash of aluminum paint erupt like the clouds above Kiefer's seascapes. Along with the references to war, Caravaggio's memorable depiction of Saul's fateful conversion to Paul—that is, to Christianity—is invoked by the upside-down position of the tank.

*Die Himmelspalast (The Heavenly Palaces)*, 2002, one of three works here with that title, is over 20 feet tall and depicts the interior
of a golden colonnade above which vaults an elliptical lead surface inscribed with a star map. Because of its size, the painting was hung on the ground floor of the Fort Worth museum and was visible from a balcony on the second floor, where the great mass of molten lead flowing into the temple could be seen as a majestic open sky. *Die Himmlischen Paläste* of 2008 is one of a series of gouaches on torn photographs, some of which depict the several sets of monumental cast concrete stairs that Kiefer has placed around his land in southern France. Obscuring much of the silvery prints' imagery with dripped and smeared gray-toned gouache, Kiefer isolates the stairs so that they seem to float above the photographed land or water. In some cases, the stairs lead upward into the sky; in others, they are stacked on their sides, their interlocked toothlike steps suggesting tank treads.

Downplaying Kiefer's explicit references to difficult passages in German history, Auping draws attention to the artist's longstanding, and often overlooked, interest in mysticism. The theme appears to have inspired Auping's well-meaning attempts to interpret the work based on the artist's complicated iconography. Issues of the intentional fallacy aside, this sweeping survey demonstrates the artist's serious devotion to life's big issues.


Author: Frances Colpitt is the Deedie Poirot Rose Chair of Art History at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth.