

# ANSELM KIEFER

## SCULPTURE AND PAINTINGS FROM THE HALL COLLECTION

Early in his career and through the mid-1980s, Anselm Kiefer was predominantly concerned with the course of German history, especially during and after World War II. Kiefer's mentor, Joseph Beuys, whose work can be seen alongside Kiefer's at MASS MoCA, spoke of a "wound" that was fundamental to the soul of Germany, and his objects often assumed a damaged or deformed condition. Likewise, Kiefer seemed to commence work as if there were a tragedy—an original sin, as it were—infesting the German psyche. In some sense, the subject of war is either implicit or explicit in each of the Kiefer works on view at MASS MoCA, and in the group as a whole. War—a tragedy for innocent victims and their families, for those sent to fight, and for the subsequent populations and nations left to rebuild physical and psychological damage—is pervasive in Kiefer's art.

Landscape is another leitmotif of Kiefer's art; however, Kiefer separates himself from traditional approaches toward the depiction of nature. He seeks to penetrate the appearance of a specific landscape, so as to attain its underlying history. A landscape by Kiefer always fills the field of the canvas with the horizon line and suggestion of sky minimal. Adding to this sense of claustrophobia, Kiefer's typical large-scale format imparts a sense of portentous enormity to the experience. Before one of these mighty paintings, the viewer might feel his face pushed against the painted field, or perhaps feel as if he were flying over it, though at a very low altitude.

While Kiefer demonstrates with his art that the land has been besmirched—and by implication that mankind is in a state of mourning—

he offers an antidote, albeit fictional. Through miracles and fables, the blackened earth can be restored, even turned to gold. Thus Kiefer, at times, paints pictures of a transmuted world. Whether drawing on events in the Kaballah, other religious and spiritual sources, or alchemy, he seeks to show that the land can be effectively transformed: where the earth had been despoiled, flowers might appear.

With the group of works on view at MASS MoCA, we see Kiefer sustaining his mission for art. Employing his familiar pictorial motifs and expressive means, he insists that history matters. Indeed, in his hands, history is a visceral and bizarre concoction that requires a war painter/poet to create imaginative linkages between the past and the present.

### About the Paintings

Starting in the late 1970s Kiefer forged toys from lead—ships and airplanes primarily. In the case of *Luftschlacht um England (Air Battle in England)* (1988) Kiefer attached a toy military airplane and added a title referring to World War II. At once, the work evoked a number of crucial themes for Kiefer. The aircraft appears to be seen both in the air and over the ground. Flight is a favorite topic for Kiefer, in part because of its association to the mythic Icarus, who sought to fly to the heavens on waxwings, only to fail as the wings melted in the light of the sun. Icarus's iconic dream has been transposed to military planes, which, too, might well plunge to the earth, renting the ground asunder.

Kiefer has often made use of World War II era boats to mock the Nazis' pretentious and miserable naval history. In *A.E.I.O.U. (Elizabeth*

of Austria) (1987) such a conveyance reappears but in an earlier historical context. It is used here as a stand-in portrait attribute for Elizabeth (1837–1898), who was famed for her steamer *Miro-mar* by which she traveled the world. The AEIOU, written above, is an acronym from her era, describing Austria's aggressive rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. As depicted here, Austrian authority is projected by a ship that would appear to be from the 1930s or '40s. Such a conflation of personalities, eras, and symbols is typical of Kiefer's methodology, in which history consists of recurring events and personalities. Just to add further to the mélange of associations is the conflicted character of Elizabeth herself, who was a subtle thinker, supportive of democracy and prone to removing herself from having to exercise the powers and duties of her throne.

*Rorate Caeli desuper et nubes pluant iustum* (2005–2006) invokes the start of the fourth lesson for the Ember Saturday in Advent: "Drop down dew, ye heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain the just." This passage also includes the phrase used for the title of another painting shown here, *Aperiatur terra et germinet salvatorem* (2005–2006) ("Let the earth be opened and send forth a Savior"). Together the two titles describe a typological parallel to developments Kiefer had explored in earlier paintings, based on the Kaballah ("The Breaking of the Vessels") and in the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite, the first-century Greek convert to Christianity. In each of these, an emanation from the heavens descends to earth and enlightens humanity, carrying it to a high state of being. The entire cycle seems to offer up a vision of salvation; in effect, the landscape that receives the dew becomes saved, whereupon it is prepared to "send forth a Savior."

Although *Die Nachricht vom Fall Trojas* (2006) and *Olympe—für Victor Hugo* (2005–2006) do not visually depart from the preceding pair of paintings, they have a different thematic cast by virtue of their titles. Both explicitly invoke war. With its blackened earth, the former calls forth a ravaged landscape, in this case Troy.

In sum, the four late canvasses shown here represent a medley devoted to Kiefer's great theme of the landscape. His mantra—the land—retains a mournful power for him that has continued for almost forty years, varying in its connotations but not in its essential emotional appeal as a container and purveyor of human history.

### **About the Sculpture**

Kiefer has turned to sculpture on numerous occasions, using three dimensions to further elaborate his favorite themes. In *Étroits sont les vaisseaux* (*Narrow are the Vessels*) (2002) the war issue is implied with a kind of plastic intensity and disturbing power. The concrete that composes the sculpture has an eerie resemblance to the rubble remaining after bombings of streets and buildings. Here that imagery is given an undulating form recalling the sculpted "waves" Kiefer attached to a number of paintings of the early 1990s, but the wave association in this case has a specific reference: an ode to the sea by French Nobel Laureate, diplomat, and poet St.-Jean Perse (Alexis Leger) in which he writes of the ocean as an elemental force of nature motivated by love and war.

*Excerpted from "Art With a Purpose: The Continuing Saga of Anselm Kiefer" by Mark Rosenthal.*

*The full essay is in the book Anselm Kiefer: Sculpture and Paintings (Derneberg/MASS MoCA Publications) which is available in the MASS MoCA lobby at Hardware: the MASS MoCA Store or by calling 413.664.4481 x8140.*