

art

Anselm Kiefer at the Met Breuer

Jonathan Goodman

Now over seventy, Anselm Kiefer still maintains a powerful presence in German art--indeed, in art worldwide. He is best known for his long perspectives of rutted fields messy with collaged materials, for his frightening portraits of the ovens used to burn the gassed Jews, and for his romantic treatments of the landscape and women--painted almost always with a hint of menace, likely to acknowledge the deaths brought about the Shoah. Kiefer's technical ability is not in question--except perhaps from the restoration experts working on his paintings, who must re-adhere the plant life and detritus of his work, the early work especially. Kiefer is a profoundly controversial figure--as a student in his mid-twenties, Kiefer went to famous German sites associated with the Reich and took pictures of himself delivering the *Sieg Heil* salute, a gesture still illegal in Germany. The artist has explained such provocative behavior by saying he was attempting to revisit the myths that have made Germany so great, but also so terrible, a nation. Germany, now thoroughly recovered from its past, ethically and economically, nonetheless must address the waves of judgment carried on by each new generation, not only Jewish but among peoples worldwide. To be fair, the Germans have been very thorough about facing their guilt in an attempt to make sense--and peace--of and with what happened. Even so, history dies hard, and some historical events, like the Holocaust, simply cannot be relegated to the margins.

At the same time, it is fair to say that Germany's honest investigations and shouldering of their moral responsibilities have resulted in art that has been profoundly important in recent years, even those who do not directly address its recent history--one thinks of Kiefer, Gerhard Richter, Georg Immendorf, Blinky Palermo. But no one except Kiefer in the current roster of German artists has so directly met the challenge of historical awareness, as this show of 34 works on paper and 1 painting indicate. What is it about Germany that makes Germany so German? Or is the question merely rhetorical, an attempt to essentialize a people and culture that must take its place among others? Kiefer himself seems a bit divided about the essentialism he embraces--his art is both grim and beautiful, which may be an example more of his personality than any august, high-minded attempt to read German history proper. Jewish people are resettling in Germany again; many Israelis live in Berlin. So the point of Germany's rehabilitation is rather moot. Kiefer, though, can't let go of the heavy, but inspired, mythologies of the German imagination; his refusal to forget resonates throughout his art. But it is also true that he cannot become the token prophet of a demoralized culture, one that in fact is working quite well in this moment. Kiefer is a moral historian of more than considerable stature, but one of the difficult things about his position is that its grandness now feels slightly grandiose, given the fact that Germany yielded to an imaginary purity of vision, with the result of mass murder.

It isn't that Kiefer is riding a trend, nor do I feel he is seeking fame by addressing a controversial issue. Something else is happening--namely, both the dissection and preservation of an outlook whose implications have soured, to say the least! Kiefer is clearly a very self-conscious artist, being someone whose goal was both public and abstract: the exploration, in both a nostalgic and critical fashion, of an idealism that did have moments that were large--before such idealism became deadly. Most of German architecture made during the Nazi era was impressive but aggressive, cold, and brutal, qualities that cannot be lightly dismissed. Kiefer's innate intelligence resulted in the double recognition I have spoken of, in the sense that the culture's largeness of spirit cannot be separated from its heinous crimes. The artist, born in 1945, the last year of the Second World War, has deliberately strived to exorcise those demons that have obsessed the German public for decades. One might remain indifferent toward Kiefer's theatrical efforts and pronounce the judgment that no matter how good the art may be, it cannot redeem the genocide that took place. But, then, maybe Kiefer isn't trying to redeem history so much as he trying to describe the illness in his culture that enabled such mass murder to take place. But, even so, if the imagery produced by Kiefer is taken at face value, as part of the artist seems to want, then we have choice but to condemn the art. Maybe the truth lies somewhere between Kiefer's tongue-in-cheek revisiting of the Nazi horrors and his equally forceful warning that such things must never, never be done again--maybe both attitudes exist at the same time in the works on paper. This is strange, but likely true.

Kiefer is nothing in not direct in the moving image--which is also free of the grandiosity he posts regularly in other pictures--*Dein Goldenes Haar Margarete* (date)--in which the words "Your golden hair, Margarete," written in German, hang over images of golden wheat, bending to the audience's right, seemingly blown in that direction by the wind. To offset the tans and browns that make up most of the composition, Kiefer has added a blue ground behind the wheat, and dark, heavy cloud cover above the German phrase, which is part of the great poem in German by the Jewish poet Paul Celan, called "Death Fugue\." "Your golden hair, Margaret" refers to the Aryan population in contrast to the Jewish population--exampled in the contrasting phrase, "Your ashen hair, Shulamith"--that constitute the two peoples alluded to in the lyric. Celan's poem "The Death Fugue" is central to German post-war literature--it is likely the strongest poems in German on the Shoah. Simply by quoting the line he does, Kiefer is alluding to history in a way that has been unforgettably established by Celan. We can't jump genres to cross compare the achievements of a watercolor with those of a poem, but clearly Kiefer is attempting a large reading of his country's guilt--even if the imagery of the wheat seems entirely innocent (perhaps that is part of its unspoken menace). In this watercolor, thought, the words change everything. Kiefer has found a way to exemplify and indeed enlarge the responsibility of German by quoting the most famous poem judging its lost ethics.

So far as I can recall, there are no dead bodies, no actual acts of violence evident in Kiefer's works referring to the Nazi times. The literalism that plagues so much contemporary political art today is not given in Kiefer's work. Instead, as many good German artists do, he works symbolically--through suggested rather than directly imagined violence. For that reason, his points seem more powerful and less didactic--the latter surely a quick way of killing a political notion! Kiefer doesn't want us to directly re-experience the Shoah; instead, he wants us to probe its origins, its implications, and its consequences. Hence the lack of overt violence. This does not mean, however, that violence is only and always implied. In the great watercolor titled *Winter Landscape* (date), the head and neck of a woman dominates the top of the composition; dark clouds form a band of lightlessness, depressed in feeling, on either side of her. The rest of the image is taken up with a line of leafless trees in mid-ground, and in the foreground, a field of snow with dark spots, likely stones or revealed earth, punctuating the snow's whiteness. A winter landscape by itself is grim enough to anyone from anywhere, but the woman's throat seems to have been cut, or at least that is what is being suggested; splotches of red blood disfigure her neck. Directly beneath her, on the snow, we more red spots. It is hard to think of a more violent, or more vulnerable, picture than that of a cut throat. There is no visible allusion to the Nazi past, yet it is impossible to move beyond what we see without thinking of gratuitous violence, the inevitable companion to a senseless misunderstanding of a people considered different, beyond the pale. The grim eloquence of winter is nature's go-between in regard to human survival and inhuman cruelty. It is a self-sufficient language Kiefer employs here, but the language is profoundly damaged.

*Kranke Kunst* (date), or *Sick Art* in English translation, must refer to the show of so-called "degenerative art," exhibited in Munich in 1937 to educate the public in regard to illness evident in modernist-leaning works of art. Here Kiefer plays his hand close to the vest, with a wide, open landscape of mountains coming to to a flat expanse of a river; dotting this landscape, in the upper left especially, we see what look like small blooms of color. While the flowers are not easily identified--they are poppies perhaps--the innocence of the image, dominated by a simple landscape and the presence of the flowers, is meant to undermine the heavy judgment of the Nazi exhibition, never directly referred to. Given Kiefer's interests, the watercolor makes it clear that, if the reading of this image as a counter-image to the show of morally reckless images is right, nothing but a simple innocence can salvage art from its being the prey of racially demagogic totalitarianism. When fine art is made use of for political reasons, it tends to lose its emphasis over time because the circumstances that made such art necessary have receded or vanished from the current social context. There is very little good political art being made today--in America especially, where the display of essentially private suffering, along with the insistence on psychic victimization, has overwhelmed the public understanding of public suffering. In this astonishingly powerful show, Kiefer makes it known that images adjacent to, or at a distance from, the subject matter they actually treat are that much more powerful for their *implied* significance, being the tip of the iceberg in their display. Again, the literalism attaching itself to

visual politics in America is profoundly damaged by its refusal to use to address suffering in imaginative terms--if the terms are visual, as they usually are in fine art, surely it makes sense that literalism is only one of a number of options available to the artist, and is perhaps the weakest.

In the epically operatic work *My Father Pledged Me a Sword* (date), it looks like Kiefer has taken the image directly from a scene in Wagner's *Ring* cycle. From a blue dome the hand of God extends a reddish sword, from which the zigzags of a lightning bolt swiftly moves to hit the ground. Behind the sword is a bright-yellow aura; the sky itself is stormy and colorful--brown near the top of the composition, followed by descending layers of deep indigo, gray, and white. On the gray field, a fire extending horizontally is seen. This is nothing if not the end of the world, as adumbrated by a holy--and consciously Christian--vision: the sword looks very much like a cross. Whatever one may think of Wagner's grandiosities, he did outline an epic vision, one that aligns with the German question for an esthetic purity that turned dark when forced onto a supposedly moral racial platform. Kiefer is truly an important painter for our time, not only because he confronts the history that engulfed his fathers but also because the terms of the grandiosity are so powerfully given and arranged as art--they speak to the need for a moralizing art across cultures and time, although a false majesty *must* be avoided. Every artist of genuine stature implicitly understands the necessity of a moral outlook; the question today is whether this problem should be directly or indirectly addressed. A direct advance risks literalizing the problem and killing the effectiveness of the art in the process, while an indirect attack may lose track of visibly portraying the issue(s) involved. To Kiefer's credit, he manages to use both at once--even when he is starkly literal, as in his painting of the gas chamber's wooden room, his imagination is large enough to provide us with the space to envision *something else*, in addition to the death chambers he portrays--namely, the dead themselves.

If there is anything missing from these remarkable works of art, it is the Jewish dead. This might be the way a criticism of this work would be leveled; the art surrounds the dark ethics of the Nazi reich without portraying their victims. But it can also be argued that by not doing so, Kiefer is asking his viewers to *imagine* the dead in all their perished humanity and transparent victimization. The Jewish dead of course are the most important part of the picture, but they would not fit into the work of a German artist obsessed with retelling the intricate tale of German spiritual ambition. But, even so, the drops of blood remain on the throat of the beautiful German girl, as well as on the snow beneath her. There is only so much romanticizing one give voice to in the face of actual history! So it becomes clear that Kiefer's love affair with the *Sturm und Drang* is undercut by the events that he symbolically portrays. This makes his position complicated, which is a good thing in Kiefer's case--moral complexity is likely the only path available to a German artist like him,, whose mythologies he himself never sees completely as pure. Yet the imagery holds in these works of art--in the sense that the exaltation is not merely overdone, it is also genuine. Kiefer may only be playing with fire, but for moments the fire turns

real. Because Kiefer was born in 1945, the war is truly a part of his life, even if he was not old enough to remember it. The point is that the works of art belong to a living legacy, not one beset by historical revisions. An artist born after the war would not have had the same sense of its depredations, whereas we can say that Kiefer's involvement is personal and therefore deeply felt, even should he lack a direct memory of its events.

But Kiefer is not only a visionary historian of German damnation--he is also a provider of visionary prospects, albeit prospects undercut by history. One of the most beautiful images in the show is called *Everyone Stands under His Own Dome of Heaven* (date). It consists of a large blue dome placed in the middle of a white-yellow field dotted with what look like pieces of earth poking through the snowy terrain. A blueish-gray sky looms up above the field. There is a single small figure beneath the dome, which certainly would make sense as an illustration of the painting's title--if it were not for the fact that the person is lifting his arm in the Nazi salute! It is hard to think of a more lyric title or image--a representation, verbally and visually, of both our loneliness and our attempt to salvage our isolation, supported by the god(s) above us. This picture would be entirely successful as an image of spiritual sustenance if the man underneath the dome was not enacting his alliance with a genocidal program. The picture also reminds us of Kiefer's project, while a very young man, to raise the same salute in photos including major sites of German politics and culture. We could lessen the impact of the watercolor considerably by saying that nothing is perfect and that the inclusion of the lifted hand in so romantic a prospect denies the objective beauty of the composition. But, inevitably, the visionary landscape and the Nazi salute coexist, hand in hand.

But even if we are forced to admit to the double standard of the painting, we do not have to turn away entirely from Kiefer's extraordinary gift for picturing otherworldliness, Kiefer's vision remains human, as all visions do, but that does not detract from his willingness to attempt a spirituality hardly anyone in the contemporary art world would concede. Maybe the problem lies in the extremity of the position: it is true that Kiefer's German vision of transcendence must continue in the light of a genocidal past. But it is also true that this past is close to 75 years done with. If Kiefer is intent on exploring the mindset that led to Auschwitz, its existence as fact is as important as its imaginative existence in the hands of the painter. The same is true of his audience, which cannot praise these works as isolated events of the imagination. Indeed, they must be seen as provisional attempts at a largeness--the raised salute inexorably constrains Kiefer's moral vision, no matter how hard he tries to escape it. There is no other way to read the implications of such art. Kiefer warns just as often as he celebrates--and this is the strength of his oeuvre. I know of no one who has been so exquisitely tuned to the weaknesses as well as the strengths of German culture, which despite the vicissitudes of its past remains, at its best, visionary and inclined toward the skies (to use an image from Kiefer). His honesty, tenacity, and deep-seated sense of virtue is clear in this show, even if the paintings include a throat that has been cut and images of the Nazi salute. Thus, we are given an entire view, one that does not

evade Germany's murderous history. The artist's images of transcendence would not be believable without the bleak mortality accompanying them.

Jonathan Goodman