

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY



### The art of Anselm Kiefer rises from the ruins

By Jackie Wullschlager

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Entering a golden courtyard through a hidden gate in a *hôtel particulier* in the Marais, you expect the noise and dust of Paris to still instantly. But in German artist Anselm Kiefer's stately home in the French capital, you instead meet chaos. Assistants shriek as they lug giant boards across cobbles. Bricks totter, barbed wire sways, a motorised buggy whirrs. Sculptures of life-size, headless figures ballooning into white crinolines lend a surreal note. Through the din, a thin, greying, ascetic-looking man in black T-shirt and jeans carefully dabs lead on a large panel crusty with silver-blue impasto.

When I admire his fragmented women, Kiefer laughs dryly and inquires which one I identify with. Spidery graffiti on stone walls reveal that the martyr topped with a rack is the tortured St Catherine; the brick block-head belongs to Greek courtesan Phryne, who offered to rebuild Thebes; and a figure whose neck soars into a tower of charred books is Sappho but also, the artist adds, "a monument to all the unknown women poets".

### EDITOR'S CHOICE

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Kiefer is a builder-scholar who makes art from a mix of rubble and mythology. The sets and props filling his courtyard are for the world premiere of *Am Anfang* (In the

Beginning), with which the Bastille Opera celebrates its 20th anniversary next week; the production is also Gerard Mortier's Paris swansong. It is Kiefer's first work with opera, though not for want of invitations. "I am usually offered Wagner," he grins, "but I say no because it's too ..." he flounders for the English word, "too next".

Kiefer does indeed recall Wagner. His dense, coagulated paintings, layered with materials from wire cages to sunflower seeds to children's clothes, and sculptural installations such as the sombre "Palm Sunday", currently on show at Tate Modern, evoke the grand narrative structures and metaphysical scope of the 19th-century romantic tradition. But Kiefer is also a 21st-century multimedia artist, and for the Bastille he strikes an experimental note. Working with young clarinettist and composer Jörg Widmann, he crosses art with new music and a sort of abstract drama: "the actors look like sculptures; they don't move; I've even painted their clothes" .

The spectator at Tuesday's opening will be greeted by a map representing the Fertile Crescent, the area between Anatolia, Mesopotamia and Egypt that has long obsessed Kiefer. "My work is called *In the Beginning*," he says, "because it begins by the end. This is a region of the world where our destiny has been played out ... where empires have risen and fallen. A place of ruins that chronicle the throes and rebirths the world has undergone."

His condition in accepting Mortier's invitation was "not to play it all on one level. The Bastille is on nine levels, with studios on different floors; it's like a little town, and I thought, I'll do it if I can play it as a landscape." He has piled up "12,000 years of bricks" on different stages, while 12 towers – representing the tribes of Israel – shudder as Widmann's chords "sound through the ruins like celestial messengers come from the desert, to take possession of space and time". Beginning in 600 BC, "when there was a lot of action in the fertile crescent, the Jews were separated into the diaspora, there was a sense of the world melting" – but paralleling today's political unrest too – the opera turns on history's endgames, from the destruction of Babylon and Thebes to the

*Trümmerfrauen*, the “rubble women” who scratched and scraped at Germany’s debris in 1945.

Kiefer was born in Donaueschingen at the end of the second world war, and “failed to die. My mother couldn’t feed me and there was no powdered milk – at the last moment it came from Switzerland. I was born in the cellar, they put wax in my ears to shut out the bombings – like Odysseus blocking out the sirens of Donaueschingen.”

The visual imprint of his childhood is inescapable in paintings and sculptures which turn on ruined buildings, burnt-out remains, grey-brown-black tonalities. “As a child I had no toys; our house was bombed, but there were lots of bricks. Ruins are wonderful because they are the beginning of something new, you can do something with them.” By the age of four, he was a little builder, begging “for bits of cement, but they couldn’t give me any”. He is still compensating, he laughs. He erected 52 new buildings around his atelier in Barjac near Nîmes, creating his own village; his second Paris studio is the enormous former depot of department store La Samaritaine.

Kiefer dots his conversation with wry jokes, as if forcing himself to lighten up, but he remains, like his art, deadly earnest. “The psychological situation” of Germany during his childhood “was horrible. There is no morality about war; it always destroys people’s minds.” He began his career as a photographer with performances mimicking the Nazi salute; his work, infused with Jewish mysticism and post-Holocaust writings such as Paul Celan’s *Death Fugue*, is one long challenge to the Germans “who tried to forget”, as well as a self-doubting response to philosopher Theodor Adorno’s questions about art after Auschwitz. “I had no responsibility but I feel completely involved. In the night I still think someone can come to take me away. The denunciations ... I know it won’t happen but I wake up and think on that. The brutishness, the horror is unimaginable.” He left Germany in 1990, the year of reunification.

The theme of *In the Beginning*, latent in all Kiefer’s art, is “theodicy” – theological attempts to defend God’s goodness in the face of the existence of evil. “Man is so badly constructed, there is a mistake in our brain,” Kiefer says. “If you give man permission

and reason, he will behave like that [like the Nazis] – not everybody, but yes, I think, the majority. I was always overwhelmed by the Old Testament – by its poetry and brutalism. Its God is threatening, vengeful. To prove God is good is to prove something impossible.”

Brought up “too strictly” as a Catholic in a “little, bourgeois milieu”, Kiefer dreamed of France, “spoke like Racine and Corneille” at school, and developed “a genius complex. I thought, ‘I don’t need to go to art school.’ I chose law, I thought that was the most cynical thing to do. I always looked to the most unreasonable solution, I always tried to prove the contrary.”

Later he acquired an art education, and was influenced by Joseph Beuys, whom he believes he appreciated more “because I had studied law”. But he brushes away questions of artistic inheritance – “I don’t want to speak about other artists, it’s not interesting. I feel in a long line with the dinosaurs. Memory is my material.”

We adjourn for mineral water in the long cool library lining the ground floor round the courtyard. A book on Caspar David Friedrich lies on the table and Kiefer admits to the impact of the philosophy of romanticism. “I’m a little particle in this immense intelligence. We know nothing of why we are here, where we come from. First the world is flat, then it’s round, now there are galaxies and the big bang. The universe is so big, absurd – this is what makes me insecure.”

In *In the Beginning*, the Jewish people “stride across the stage, delineating its limits, heading for where there is nothing other than nothingness”. The key biblical quotation is from Isaiah: “My heart panted, fearfulness affrighted me. The night of my pleasure hath He turned into fear unto me.” Is there then, I ask, no redemption in Kiefer’s vision?

He answers slowly. “I can recognise beauty. For me, the work is redemption. It’s the only way I can live, the only possibility to create an illusion. It’s still an illusion – but it’s my illusion.”

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*'Am Anfang' is at the Opera Bastille, Paris, from July 7 to 14, +33 1 71 25 24 23*

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