

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### Brobdingnagian BIJOUX

by Elisabeth Kley

In the early 1990s, Anselm Kiefer, the celebrated German Neo-Expressionist and connoisseur of apocalyptic doom, left his wife, children and home near Frankfurt and moved to France. Around the same time, he put together an exhibition for Marian Goodman Gallery in New York called "Flight from Egypt," somewhat hubristically implying that his departure from Germany was akin to the Biblical Exodus of Hebrew slaves. The show's major installation, a towering stack of paintings and other works sprinkled with soil and lichen, worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, was titled *Twenty Years of Loneliness* (critic Roberta Smith suggested it should have been "Twenty Years of Rising Prices"). Also included in the exhibition were dozens of huge, handmade books, all stained with the artist's own semen, a sign of his loveless marriage. The post-opening dinner took place in a loft decorated with white cloth, and featured pale organ meats served by waiters with their faces painted white.

"Next Year in Jerusalem," Anselm Kiefer's current exhibition at Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea (and his first show in New York since 2002), is equally overscaled, though the intervening years have made his works seem considerably less bizarre. A nine-page glossary available at the front desk is a kind of iconographical guide to the 13 huge paintings and 23 sculptural constructions within, via gnomic references to the Kabbalah, the Bible, Norse mythology and wartime German destruction.

Kiefer is of course notorious for his engagement with Germany's Nazi past, beginning with *Occupations* (1969), a series of large self-portrait photographs of the artist giving the Nazi salute in countries the Germans had occupied -- a gesture guaranteed to

offend. Blurring the distinction between parody and homage, however, his huge ravaged landscapes, slathered with paint, earth and straw in a palette of gray, taupe and ghostly white, conjured up the bleakness and savagery lurking deep in Hitler's imagined collective German psyche.

*Occupations*, the current Gagosian show's largest work, represents Kiefer's return to his earliest artistic roots. A huge steel box with multiple doors, resembling a gas chamber for the artist's youthful persona, is filled with 79 gargantuan photographs (printed on lead) from the 1969 series. Hanging from hooks below fluorescent lights, jammed together so as to be all but unviewable, they could be masterpieces stored in a Brutalist gallery's back room.

The rest of the Gagosian Gallery space, like a Brobdingnagian jewelry store filled with oversized bijoux, is cluttered with gigantic glass and steel vitrines, some 14 feet tall, sheltering installations assembled from all manner of weathered detritus, mostly leaden in color: ash, stones, brambles, ravaged tree trunks, model boats, an airplane engine, a rusty metal tub filled with dirty water. Many of the vitrines have a floor covered with what resembles cracked earth, a ground that is in fact made from oil emulsion, acrylic, shellac and clay.

Poignancy is expressed via several hackneyed motifs, including empty, wasted garments. *Die Schechina*, for example, is a white French ball-gown pierced with shards of glass; *Lilith* is a portrait of the mythical Hebrew seductress as a paint-spattered smock in a cage; and doll-sized outfits climb up a ladder in *Jakobs Traum*, a recreation of the Biblical ladder in Jacob's dream where angels climbed to heaven.

Mural-sized paintings, measuring up to 12 x 19 ft., depict vague winged creatures flying above empty seas and egg-line stones. Displaying Kiefer's uncanny ability to make paint look like guano, these behemoths could be constructed out of their own excrement. Other paintings show snow-capped mountain ranges edging vast bleached fields marked by rows of black lines that could be unmarked graves.

Kiefer is widely viewed as the darkly brilliant poet of Germany's tragic history. But is he? Just one second of *Shoah*, Claude Lanzmann's 1985 epic film about the Holocaust, or a single Dix etching of a disfigured veteran communicate more about war's atrocities than the cumulative tonnage of this overblown collection of materialized clichés. The show's title, "Next Year in Jerusalem" (a phrase that typically marks the Jewish diaspora at Passover), is scrawled in Hebrew in Kiefer's signature handwriting in the gallery's vestibule, but in fact the work offers little hope.

Anselm Kiefer, "Next Year in Jerusalem," Nov. 6-Dec. 18, 2010, at Gagosian Gallery, 555 West 24th Street, New York, N.Y. 10011