

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### ANSELM KIEFER Next Year in Jerusalem

*by Stephanie Buhmann*

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Anselm Kiefer, "Mount Tabor" (2009). Oil, emulsion, acrylic, and shellac on canvas. 149 5/8 × 149 5/8 × 3 1/8 in. Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery.

Among the group of German artists responsible for rebuilding their country's culture during the postwar era, Anselm Kiefer is the most quintessential. Gerhard Richter might possess the stoic persona and discipline befitting the cliché of the cool-headed German, and Jörg Immendorf and Martin Kippenberger might have been the most radical in defying it. Kiefer, however, who has lived in France for decades to (as he puts it) "possibly have a better look at Germany," is the only one to vehemently tackle and obsess over what Germans cannot escape: their history.

Kiefer's paintings and sculptures address specifics, but also allude to what is usually hidden between the lines. He has made it his ambition to formulate what many would

prefer to leave unsaid. His subjects are concrete without being literal, frequently involving iconic German landscapes Caspar-David-Friedrich-Noir, so to speak, rich in architectural ruins and impenetrable woods. What makes Kiefer's work so highly associative, above all, is texture. Cracked, thickly-layered surfaces recall countless images of destruction: the horrors of the concentration camps, the burnt soil of Pomerania, the ashes of Dresden, or the aftermath of contemporary wars.

In a recent conversation at the 92nd Street Y, Kiefer stressed that, to him, destruction does not signify an end, but a beginning. The root of this sentiment might be explained by his personal history, which began amid destruction. Born in 1945, only months before the end of World War II, his first weeks were spent underground, hiding with his family in a bomb shelter. Two decades later, when forming his consciousness as an artist, he began to reflect on the elements of Germany's recent past that had transitioned into his future. His earliest works included performances that targeted the myth of the *Stunde Null*, or "zero hour." Marking the capitulation of the Nazi government and the official end of World War II on May 8, 1945, the *Stunde Null* implied the promise of a clean start. To Kiefer, who shared the sentiments of the student movements of the 1960s, the concept of the *Stunde Null* was not only a misleading illusion, but also a possible crime.

In *Next Year in Jerusalem*, his first New York solo exhibition since 2002, Kiefer is recovering his rhythm. While his last local show centered on an awkward and unconvincing collection of works inspired by the events of September 11, this exhibition is nothing if not stunning. Kiefer, who explains that each of these works is a reaction to a personal "shock" initiated by something he has read, seen, or heard about, succeeds in shocking his audience as well.



Anselm Kiefer, "Trinity," 2010. Oil, emulsion, acrylic, shellac, ash, thorn bushes, resin ferns, and lead on canvas in glass and steel frames, 130 11/16 × 226 13/16 × 13 13/16 inches, (332 × 576 × 35 cm).

Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery.

He has created a jaw-dropping labyrinth of gigantic glass and steel vitrines surrounded by monumental landscape paintings. These rectangular cases seem to spring from the gallery floor like massive trees, each containing a distinct display of distressed cotton dresses, dried sunflowers, model submarines, film spools, or burned books. With their titles inscribed on the glass, these still lifes translate as historic microcosms, neatly compressed and yet clearly visible.

*Next Year in Jerusalem* revolves around a work called *Occupations*, which leads us back to Kiefer's artistic beginnings and a series of actions he staged in 1969.

*Occupations* is an installation of photographs from that year featuring a younger Kiefer making the Nazi salute in front of various historically significant European sites. Inside a steel enclosure, 76 of these newly printed, large-scale photographs are mounted on lead and hung on thick metal hooks, like pieces of drying meat, aging for consumption. From there, Kiefer spins his tale in multiple directions, addressing a vast array of cultural myths and metaphors. Among his manifold references (the Old and New Testaments, the Kabbalah, ancient Roman history, the writings of Ingeborg Bachmann and Paul Célan, to name a few), some are not readily apparent or meaningful to all. The challenge is not to solve a riddle, but rather to travel this comprehensive and deeply moving archive of human history, philosophy, and emotion.