

The New York Times
November 18, 2010

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Art Review

A Spectacle With a Message



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

Anselm Kiefer's "Cetus," part of his ambitious exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery

By ROBERTA SMITH

Published: November 18, 2010

The German artist Anselm Kiefer knows how to put on a show. The dour and dusty copse of art with which he has forested the vast Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea may elicit awe, skepticism or disdain — or perhaps a conflicted combination of all three. But its initial power is hard to deny.

This is Mr. Kiefer's first exhibition in New York in eight years and possibly the best he has ever mounted in the city, at least on his own terms. Those terms value theatricality,

moral instruction and a variety of materials and objects — natural, artistic, industrial, found, made — employed with brutish verve.

His new works blend painting, sculpture and set design; incorporate elements of filmmaking, performance and photography; and marshal the forces of history, literature and religious thought. They demonstrate his ineluctable progress within the presumptuous Wagnerian tradition of the *gesamtkunstwerk*, or total work of art. This evolution was undoubtedly aided by ambitious undertakings like a 2007 solo show at the cavernous Grand Palais in Paris and “In the Beginning,” a 2009 primal theater work in Paris that was evidently mostly music- and plot-free, made in collaboration with the composer and clarinetist Jörg Widmann.

Portentously titled “Next Year in Jerusalem,” the Gagosian exhibition is effective middlebrow art as catharsis, spectacle with a message. As with many a successful Broadway drama, we leave feeling that our heartstrings have been exercised or at least manipulated. We’ve been through the ringer, and it was awesome. Now 65, Mr. Kiefer began his career in the late 1960s on the cusp of Post-Minimalism, an admiring student of Joseph Beuys working in the triangle of Conceptual art, photography and performance. In his best-known work from that period, he documented himself delivering the Nazi salute on once-occupied lands, often in his father’s Nazi uniforms. But he rode to fame in the 1980s as a Neo-Expressionist painter, and then kept moving toward increasingly theatrical mixings of mediums.

He’s been on his own now for a couple of decades, a philosopher-showman with an immense following whose art popularizes Post-Minimalism’s strategies with the use of big, accessible themes. His main theme is Germanness and its discontents, of which he is a prime example. He was born in the last weeks of World War II, and the human cost and devastation of that conflict remain the spine and the hook of his art.

Mr. Kiefer’s latest efforts take the ash-strewn, desiccated wasteland where his art has long dwelt to new, enveloping extremes. The Gagosian space is crowded with 25 sculptures encased in large, often towering vitrines with floors of cracked (or scorched)

earth. Each contains a sinister ruin: the fuselage or engine of a vintage airplane; a fleet of small suspended U-boats made of lead; a white plaster ball or wedding gown jagged with shards of glass; an immense and brittle thorn bush dotted with painted flames.

There are giant burned books of lead and paper; Jacob's Ladder, also in lead; and Lilith's dresses in sackcloth. Titles scrawled on the vitrines ricochet from fact to faith and back: "Flying Fortress," "The Red Sea," "Valentinus" (a second-century Gnostic theologian), "Thora" (a Norse goddess represented by a typewriter made of lead).

There are occasional moments of amusing self-reference. In the vitrine-sculpture "Zerstörung des Tempels" ("The Destruction of the Temple") strands of repeating images suggest giant filmstrips of a bombed building but document a sculpture from Mr. Kiefer's Grand Palais exhibition. The strips occur in other pieces, always accompanied by an outsize film reel and canister made of soft lead that form one of the show's best details. They evoke Beuys, the young Richard Serra and Claes Oldenburg all at once.

Meanwhile the gallery walls are ringed with paint-encrusted landscapes of the panoramic kind that have long been part of Mr. Kiefer's repertory. Mountains loom above snowy fields spiked with dead stalks. Winged palettes hover over expanses of gray ocean. And then there is the show's heart of darkness: "Occupations," a large steel shed that evokes box cars, crematoria, barracks or meat lockers. Visible through its many doors, shaggy photographs hang from hooks like enormous pelts. They are the images from Mr. Kiefer's 1970s world tour of Nazi salutes — blown up and mounted on lead on burlap. Their loaded repackaging here signifies his expanded ambition, and a determination that we not miss the point. Never forget. Ever.

To wander among these works is to participate in a performance piece of the artist's devising. The sheer density of the installation gives it an almost interactive, relational-aesthetics quality. As we gawk, peer and crane, decipher the titles and mull over the allusions — all the while avoiding collisions with other similarly engaged people — we form a cast of extras trapped in some museum of devastation.

It's the dustbin of history expanded into giant prop storage in a theater where death and destruction prevail, but various ancient faiths offer the possibility of redemption. And yet really giving in to the work requires suspending the suspicion that religion and faith are not part of the solution. They are most of the problem.

There's a disconnect in most of these pieces between the ideas and the extravagant materiality. The themes are rarely in the forms; they're more in the titles, their explanations or the heavy-handed associations, not to mention the extensive Anselm Kiefer glossary on the Web site, which accounts for the feeling of being manipulated. The strongest, freshest paintings — which are also glass-encased and depict wintry sun-shot expanses of barren trees — personify the emotional push-pull typical of Mr. Kiefer's art.

Heavy with paint yet photographic in depth, these images are banked with more dried bushes, cast-resin ferns and occasionally strewn with large, synthetic teeth and snakeskins. They look a little like neglected shop windows, yet they achieve a stark, haunting beauty even as they rather too obviously evoke the kind of woods where refugees hide.

Three are titled "Merkaba," which means, roughly, vehicle of enlightenment. A fourth, with a U-boat lurking in the bushes, is titled "Fitzcarraldo," evoking the grandiose determination of both the 19th-century Peruvian rubber baron Carlos Fitzcarrald, who transported a 30-ton steamboat over a mountainous isthmus for business purposes, and Werner Herzog, who made a back-breaking movie about it.

Mr. Kiefer has become better and better at making Anselm Kiefers. In them grandiosity rarely takes a holiday. A very few pieces here stand on their own as visual and emotional entities. One is "Steigend steigend sinke nieder" ("Rising, rising, falling down"), a tall vitrine occupied by a cluster of giant white cast-resin sunflowers growing downward from its ceiling. These mysterious creature-plants resemble mushrooms, but they turn heliotropically upward as if seeking the sun. They're alive.