

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Anselm Kiefer's Magnificent Must-See Gagorian Gallery Show

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My belief that Anselm Kiefer is the greatest living artist is not shaken by "Next Year in Jerusalem (Le-shanah ha-ba-a b'Yerushalayim)," his current show at the Gagorian Gallery (555 West 24th Street) through December 18. Quite the opposite. I'm so convinced I'm right that I'm ready to swear on one of the multiple bibles by which he swears. According to Robin Vousden, who curated the presentation and edited the catalog, Kiefer himself regards these (ritual? ritualistic?) offerings as his most successful -- even if he doesn't repeat my boast for him and, I imagine, would never be tempted to.

It's possible, of course, that Kiefer says as much about every show after he's installed it. Nevertheless, I'll stand my ground about the show and his ranking, only conceding that I'm willing to hear arguments. What I'm really conceding is that my definition of great art may not jibe with others' definition.

I judge Kiefer's eminence on what he's responding to with his canvasses and sculptures. Not primarily interested as are so many contemporary artists in promoting theories of art, Kiefer tackles the signal episode of the twentieth century: World War II and, specifically, the Holocaust. He's been doing that and only that for close to five decades.

His work is about humanity's failure during those horrific events and the effect it's had on him as a German Catholic born March 8, 1945. Raised therefore as a post-war baby

with, it seems, all the defeatist attitudes, resentments and guilt associations implied, he's also someone who declares, "I am and have always been fascinated by Jewish mysticism."

Those elements, which look to have been seared into his DNA, are repeatedly incorporated in the works -- compounded by his abiding interests in the Old and New Testaments, in myths Greek and otherwise, in you-name-it. Indeed, he's not the sort of artist who evolves through a succession of periods (like, say, Pablo Picasso, whose "Guernica" presages Kiefer's oeuvre) but is instead one with an obsession played out from decade to decade in only subtle variations.

The ashes, battered books, brambles, painted dresses, fierce-angel imagery, parched floors, glass shards (echoing Kristallnacht?), damaged machines, impastoed empty grey spaces, into-the-woods imagery, string, scrawled names, unspooling film, resin sunflowers and sunflower seeds recur as if in haunted and haunting dreams.

Kiefer's most articulate interpreter, Marina Warner writes definitely in an essay from the exhibit's catalogue:

Kiefer's apocalyptic vision has been central to the dilemma about what to remember and how to remember it, to the tensions around oblivion and commemoration. He's an artist of memory, and his work touches to the quick of the Post-Nazi, post-Holocaust state of acute anxiety -- in Germany and far beyond.

But History metastasizes in Kiefer's art, which evidently belongs in the large category of monument and memorial -- anti-monuments, traumatic markers. The alchemical art builds a historical and literary polyphony, certainly, but at a deeper level it also relates to ritual, to ritual's yearning to redraft events, to turn death into a celebration.

In Kiefer's own words reprinted in the catalog from the speech he gave on accepting the 2008 Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, he first quotes Rabbi Eleasar saying, "Man is a piece at whose ends God and Satan are pulling -- in the end, God is clearly the stronger" -- after which the artist confides, "I, on the other hand, believe the outcome is undecided."

His uncertainty -- uncertainty, the pull between Heaven and Hell, a hallmark of his work -- can be glimpsed in one of his tall glass-and-steel vitrines on which the word "Tikkum" (or "tikkun," Hebrew for "healing") is written and another glass-and-steel vitrine on which the word "Entropie" is streaked.

They are only two of the staggering 39 pieces, the first few of which I spotted on my way in causing my eyes to widen in astonishment and my jaw to drop. Even though "awesome" as an expression is applied these days to everything from the outcome of the 2010 elections to a Nathan's hot dog, I'll use it. Kiefer's show is awesome when the works are viewed individually as well as when viewed panoramically in Gagolian's benevolently high-ceiled West Chelsea space(s).

Where to start? Which to single out for its fathomless implied meanings? Set at angles to each other, they pull you towards them. Perhaps the largest commands immediate attention. Called "Occupations 2010," it's a steel box with eight (partly open) doors through which can be seen some of 76 large black-white-&-grey photographs reproduced on distressed burlap. In many of the photographs Kiefer -- 40-ish, tousled, mustachioed, wearing street clothes--stands before blurred, desolate landscapes with his right arm raised in a Nazi "Sieg heil" salute.

The pose is meant ironically, ambiguously. Kiefer's expression in the pictures (all reproduced in the \$100 catalog) completely captures his deeply conflicted feelings as a native son of a 1945-decimated land. (Incidentally, the catalog includes 41 works, two of which can be seen at Gagolian as private viewings.)

But though each piece -- many with names conjuring Biblical references -- are intriguing, why go on about them? The point is to see them and experience the curses and blessings they confer.

In closing, it's worth saying that when people insist the Holocaust isn't a fit subject for any artist's undertaking, Kiefer -- who attended the opening after refusing to come to this country while George W. Bush was in office -- unequivocally gives the lie to the contention.