

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Pass Over in Silence: Anselm Kiefer at Gagosian

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Kiefer's Trinity.

"Next Year in Jerusalem," the formula of collective hope—for some Jews literal, for others metaphorical—that conventionally ends the Passover seder, is also the title of Anselm Kiefer's mighty and overwhelming new show at Gagosian Gallery on 24th Street. It begins, on one wall, with an enormous textured oil painting—crusts and teeth and waves of paint snap out nearly an inch from the canvas—that shows, in soot-black, plaster-white and half a dozen different, cleanly distinguishable shades of concrete and battleship gray, a skeletal-winged oval horror coming to rest in a nest of similar horrors. They may be tornados, or caves, or eggs of mass destruction. Little bloodstains speckle the canvas; they are, like single deaths in wartime, easy to miss from more than an inch away.

Only after walking halfway through the show, past half a dozen shocking installations in large vitrines, past *Occupations*, Mr. Kiefer's reworking of his 1969 piece of the same title, which shows the artist giving the *Hitlergruss* in front of famous sights in Europe, when you come to a second monumental painting of the same winged horror hovering over the face of the waters, do you realize it's the spirit of God.

As the paintings continue around the gallery walls, small black figures—Giacometti does Bergen-Belsen—appear, marching across a Red Sea rendered as an icy arctic desert shading slowly into the snowy feet of turbulent, pointed mountains. The fact that they're mountains doesn't prevent them from also threatening to crash down like a tsunami over the hapless black figures coming to meet them. In the final painting, the yellowish tinge always present in Mr. Kiefer's whites grows stronger, so that what might have been plaster becomes bone, and the patches of blood are unhidden and striking, because there are bullet holes in the canvas for them to bleed from.

The death-camp allusions of the vitrines—the ragged, spotted shirts; the scorched and broken earth; the model-size submarines and battleships—are the first things you notice, and you wonder, what does it mean to put them behind glass? Is it a comment on how we lock away our history? But the glass doors have handles—must they therefore open again? The show's title, likewise, could be ironic despair, or it could mean that the decay and dessication of one body is the birth and growth of another. It could suggest that what happened in Europe has echoes in the occupied territories, or it could threaten that what happened in Europe may yet finish in Jerusalem—but none of this is really to the point. This work isn't really about the War: it's about what the War was about. Each vitrine contains a separate encounter with the unspeakable.

In some cases—as in *Lilith*, which shows a small rectangular cage hanging in the air—it is merely a horror that surpasses speech, but in others—for example, in *Danaë*, where the god takes the form of a single white sunflower discharging a handful of gilded seeds—it is an unspeakable power or beauty. But for the most part, it's clear that the unspeakable is unspeakable precisely because it surpasses horror and beauty both. In

Ararat, we see warships and submarines hanging from wires over a broken ground upon which they've never landed. In *Exodus*, a coffin-shaped bathtub full of rusty red water. In one version of Jacob's ladder, the ladder's vertical stringers almost meet as they touch the glass roof, as if in parody of the laws of perspective and whatever notions of moral or scientific progress might attach to them; in the other, the ladder is hung with children's clothes. In *Die Shechinah*—the *shechinah*, or presence of God, is treated in Jewish mysticism as a divine bride or female aspect of divinity—a tomb-white wedding dress floats full but without body, either stabbed by or blooming with large fragments of glass, while from its neck emerges a diagram of the Tree of Life, with *En Sof*, the final unknowable, given its own half-circle of glass at the top. In another vitrine, Mr. Kiefer constructs a bush of dead branches and thorns and hangs inside it six black, irregular panels with painted flames. The title, lettered across the face, is *Ich Bin der Ich Bin*, "I am that I am."

John Updike once wrote that the Hebrew Bible, usually read as the record of one people's relationship with one particular deity, could also be read as the record of that same people's reverent and terrible encounter with the simple fact of the way things are. If the way things are could talk, this is what it would say.