

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Albright-Knox buys mammoth painting by German artist Anselm Kiefer Yearlong exhibit planned around Kiefer landscape

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The Albright-Knox Art Gallery will exhibit German-born painter Anselm Kiefer's large 2012 landscape "der Morgenthau Plan," which it recently acquired, in a yearlong exhibition opening Nov. 17.

In his first big move as director of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Janne Sirén announced this week that the gallery has purchased a major new painting by the German-born artist Anselm Kiefer that will go on view in a yearlong exhibition opening Nov. 17.

And public reaction to the piece also will play a part.

The 2012 landscape, titled "der Morgenthau Plan" after an unrealized American scheme to obliterate Germany's industrial infrastructure in the wake of World War II, is more than 9 feet tall and 18 feet long. It depicts a field thick with wildflowers set against a baby-blue sky, rendered in a combination of acrylic and oil paint, emulsion and shellac applied with a long spatula across the surface of a photograph. It will join another major, large-scale painting by Kiefer, "Die Milchstrasse" or "The Milkyway," which the gallery bought in 1988 to celebrate its 125th anniversary.

To celebrate the acquisition and acquaint Western New Yorkers with the work and the acclaimed artist behind it, Sirén and gallery staffers quickly organized a yearlong exhibition featuring both of the Albright-Knox's Kiefer paintings and augmented by other loaned paintings by Kiefer and landscape works from the gallery's collection.

In an unorthodox move, the show also will feature a room dedicated to community feedback to the new painting, which the gallery will then compile in the official exhibition catalog to be released during the show's run.

Sirén, who first saw the piece in late April during a preview of a much buzzed-about show of Kiefer's work in New York City's Gagosian Gallery, said the painting was an ideal "bookend" to the piece already in the Albright-Knox collection.

"The world has changed since 1988. The Berlin Wall went down. The Soviet Union is collapsed," Sirén said. "In Kiefer's work, in an interesting way, he loops back and reminds us of the course of history. So yes, we do live in a post-Cold War world. Yes, we do live in a united Europe. Yes, the Euro-American relationships have evolved since then, but at the same time there are these historical rivers that still flow into the present."

Kiefer was born in the final weeks of the war to a starving family, on the same night his neighbor's house was flattened by a bomb. This made an impression on the artist from which all of his work derives.

In the gallery's first Kiefer work, the painter seems to be considering the cosmos through the lens of Germany's barren soil. In its latest acquisition, the artist focuses on a specific field of flowers, as if to zoom in from an impossibly huge scene to one that seems by comparison almost microscopic.

"Kiefer now, 25 years later, engages a small, beautiful part of bucolic nature that surrounds the place where he personally lives," Sirén said. "So now we're no longer in the cosmos, in the superstratosphere, but in the small, intimate, the detail, the anecdote. The world has become in a sense fragmented and you look at the fragment, but from that fragment the resonance is still to the larger cosmos that surrounds us, the fabric of human history."

Kiefer's work, Sirén said, is not as much about answering questions about post-war Germany or about the evolving relationship between America and Europe. It's more, he suggested, about posing interesting questions.

"He is not an ideologue who comes with a statement. He is the antithesis of that. He wants to say that there are no easy answers. There is only this quest for questions that we must, in order to preserve our humanity, be always attentive to," Sirén said. "And the whole exhibition concept in a sense is conceived around the idea that, you're not here to get ultimate answers. People say, 'I don't understand contemporary art.' Well, the point of contemporary art is to teach us how to ask questions and to think, not to provide answers. This is not simple math. It's a way of learning to think critically about ourselves, about the world around us."