

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Art of darkness: Monumental ideas swirl in paintings of Anselm Kiefer

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Visitors to the Albright-Knox Art Gallery look at an original work by German-born artist Anselm Kiefer, who is currently featured in a special show. Charles Lewis/Buffalo News

Almost everything about Anselm Kiefer's art is monumental.

The paintings are monumental, stretching up to 21 feet across and towering overhead, holding our attention hostage for an uncomfortably long time. The ideas embedded in those paintings are monumental, ranging from the unfathomable suffering of World War II to the imponderable size and scope of the universe.

And Kiefer's ambitions – to explode any naive or simplistic notions we might hold about the world around us and to spark a flame of curiosity in viewers that mirrors his own – are perhaps the most monumental things of all. Those ambitions get plenty of room to breathe in the Albright-Knox Art Gallery's smart and striking exhibition "Anselm Kiefer: Beyond Landscape," which opened Sunday and runs for almost a year.

The three major Kiefer paintings on display in the exhibition – two landscapes from the Albright-Knox collection and one seascape loan from a private collector – are much more than pretty pictures. They are grandiose invitations to consider grandiose questions, prompts to think about what it means to belong to a nation, to live in a quietly violent age or to think about our precarious place in nature.

Each one hangs in its own dedicated gallery, with nothing to distract visitors' gazes.

“To have more than one in a room is almost like listening to two symphonies at the same time,” said Albright-Knox Art Gallery Director Janne Sirén, who organized the show.

Visitors to the exhibition are being encouraged to contribute their own thoughts to the show. One gallery, filled with books on Kiefer as well as iPads, computers and blank sheets of paper, is dedicated to collecting visitors responses to Kiefer’s work and other landscapes from the gallery’s collection. Gallerygoers’ scrawled responses to Kiefer’s work, which began to appear on the gallery wall Sunday, will be compiled in a catalog to be published after the exhibition closes. There also is a website, kieferebeyondlandscape.tumblr.com, where audiences can leave their responses on the gallery’s computers or at their home.

Sirén, who is making the first major statement of his young tenure with this exhibition, suggested that while Kiefer’s ideas may be imposing, his work is accessible from many different angles.

“He is a polyglot as a painter,” Sirén said as he stood in front of Kiefer’s overwhelming piece “die Milchstrasse,” or “The Milky Way,” a dark landscape of a seemingly post-apocalyptic field that the gallery purchased in 1988 to celebrate its 125th anniversary. “He speaks in many languages and allows for multiple entry points for viewers to reflect. You can just adore it as an aesthetic thing, or not adore it, but you can also have a historical conversation with it.”

The impetus for the show was the Albright-Knox’s purchase of a new painting by Kiefer, the deceptively bucolic scene “der Morgenthau Plan.” The piece, at more than 18 feet long and 9 feet tall, depicts an overgrown field from what might be the perspective of a small dog. Thick globs of paint protrude from the heavy-duty surface, forming the wilting petals of wildflowers and underbrush beneath an idyllic blue sky.

This seems all well and good until you consider the painting’s title, inscribed in Kiefer’s typically inelegant script in the upper-left corner. The title refers to a genocidal scheme conceived and very nearly brought to fruition by U.S. Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau to rid Germany of its industry and reduce it to an agrarian state. That plan, while it certainly would have hobbled the country’s war machinery, would also have resulted in the starvation of up to 40 percent of the German population.

Though the new Kiefer painting has a happier and more soothing color palette than “Milchstrasse,” its message carries much darker tones. “In ‘Milchstrasse,’ the work is darker,” Sirén said. “But here, the resonance is much darker. In ‘Milchstrasse,’ it’s the Milky Way. Here, there’s actually a very sinister historical point.”

The largest gallery has been given over entirely to Kiefer’s enormous seascape titled after the four rivers that vaguely form the boundaries of the German state. The angry turquoise sea, bordered by a heavy and pronounced lead frame, seems to seethe and froth as you stand in front of it. Its huge scale calls to mind the ambitions of great German artists who came before Kiefer, from Bach to Goethe. And, like “der Morgenthau Plan,” it looks strikingly beautiful until you consider the implications Kiefer is making about German nationalism and the terrors it wrought in the years leading up to his birth in 1945.

Sirén put it this way, quoting the artist’s own thoughts from the wall label for the gallery’s newest Kiefer painting:

“True art does not portray beauty alone,” he said. “Beauty requires a counterpart.”