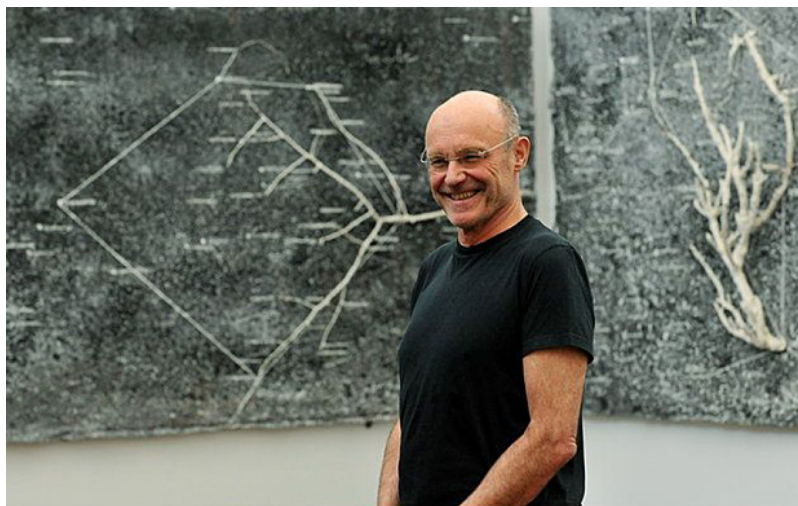


GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The Telegraph

Anselm Kiefer on life, legacy and Barjac: ‘I have no style, I’m not a brand’ *Mark Hudson visits the German artist Anselm Kiefer at his vast studio complex in southeastern France*

Mark Hudson



The artist Anselm Kiefer stands in front of two of his paintings from the series ‘The Secret Life of Plants for Robert Fludd’ from 2001/02 in the Frieder Burda Museum in Baden-Baden, Germany, 05 October 2011. Photo: Alamy

A concrete tower looms alarmingly overhead, blocking out the blazing Provencal sun. Constructed from casts of shipping containers stacked one on top of the other, it is one of nine such structures dotted around the parched scrub like the wreckage of some abandoned ancient city. And it looks terrifyingly precarious. The work of German artist Anselm Kiefer, it must, I assume, have been constructed with meticulous architectural precision. “Not at all,” an assistant tells me. “They fall down all the time.”

When I was told I was being taken to Kiefer’s “studio”, a place few outsiders are permitted to see, hidden away in a rugged, mountainous hinterland at Barjac, north-west of Avignon, I hardly expected it to be small. The days when successful artists confined themselves to a small stark room or remote shack to wrestle with some intractable formal problem are long gone. If Damien Hirst can buy up large tracts of Devon and Gloucestershire, together with one of Regents Park’s most palatial mansions, to house his art collection and work spaces, why should Kiefer, an artist of no lesser ambition and energy, 20 years Hirst’s senior, do things by halves? Still, I wasn’t quite prepared for quite this kind of scale.

Passing through an entrance barrier of rusting metal – one of Kiefer’s signature materials – a track ascends among what look like large agricultural siloes, each containing a key Kiefer installation. On the slopes around the central complex, constructed from an old silk factory,

are Kew-size greenhouses containing more mega-art works: full-size lead aeroplanes sprouting desiccated sunflowers, arrangements of gigantic lead books, the rubble of earlier installations carefully preserved. And at the centre of it all, I'm told, accessed via a network of tunnels, is a subterranean chamber, lined in lead, where, Kiefer has written, "you will no doubt experience strange feelings."

Now 69, Kiefer sprang to prominence in the early Eighties as part of the so-called New Image Painting phenomenon, a return to expressionistic bravura after the Seventies' Minimalist cool, an international tendency typified by Julian Schnabel in America and a generation of young German artists, including Georg Baselitz, Jorg Immendorf and Kiefer himself, whose work expressed a sense of ambiguous unease about their country's past.

Kiefer was already notorious in Germany for his Occupations, a series of photographs in which he appeared giving the Nazi salute. Incorporating a range of totalitarian references from the sayings of Mao to the bombastic structures of Hitler's architect Albert Speer, Kiefer's work was both a commentary on power and grandeur and an embodiment of power and grandeur in its own right, incorporating a range of instantly recognisable elements – thickly encrusted surfaces matted with lead, rust and earth and scrawled poetic and philosophical quotations – that made him one of the world's most commercially successful, yet enigmatic artists.

I caught sight of Kiefer as the car pulled into the hill-top complex, where a group of middle-aged men all with shaven heads and glasses stood in conference. The tallest of them, wearing an anorak that oddly compounded an impression of monk-like severity, approached us. Who were we? What were we doing there? It was Kiefer, not quite hostile or suspicious, but authoritative, and wanting to know who was entering his domain. Reassured, Kiefer returned to his companions, but he would, I was told, rejoin me later for tea.

A massive rusting metal tube runs overhead, connecting the two parts of the old factory, and looking as though it must have served some industrial function. In fact Kiefer installed it after moving here in 1992 to allow passage between his living quarters at one end to his work space at the other. What's wrong with simply walking over the ground? I wonder. "But when it rains?" says Kiefer's studio manager Waltraud Forelli. Glancing around at the arid landscape I imagine this is hardly a pressing concern. But the presence of this retro-fantasy structure points to the fact this place, which Kiefer calls la Ribaute, isn't so much an overblown studio or domicile as a work of art in its own right, in which every element reflects Kiefer's interior vision, his perennial themes of monumentality and decay, of the struggle between the earthly and the heavenly, his interests in philosophy, alchemy and mythology, all on a massive scale.

Wandering around the cathedral-like exhibition spaces, glancing into an indoor amphitheatre formed from yet more towering container casts, entering vast greenhouses full of self-created rubble, you find yourself trying to compute how many works Kiefer must have sold, and at what price, to pay for all this.

When he reappears, clad in jeans and t-shirt, sporting dark glasses and puffing on a large cigar, Kiefer seems almost disappointingly normal-sized. He wears his years lightly, giving an impression of not wanting to appear to draw attention to himself, while inevitably doing precisely that.

“This question of scale is something people keep coming back to,” he says. “But for me it’s not the point. As an artist you go as far as your arm can reach, and this is my size, my temperament, my gesture.”

But isn’t this all part of a larger phenomenon of gigantism in contemporary art, manifest in everything from Anish Kapoor’s Olympic Tower to the various Tate Modern installations?

“What you’re talking about is public art, art that is part of architecture. What I do has nothing to do with that.”

We’re standing in front of a panoramic recent painting, *The German Salvation Line*, in which the images and names of philosophers representing the “earthly”, such as Jung and Heidegger, are seen grounded on the banks of the Rhine, while those representing the “heavenly”, such as Kant and Hegel, float around a rainbow at the end of which sits Karl Marx. The image is, Kiefer says with a chuckle, intended “ironically”. Indeed while Kiefer tends to be thought of as the embodiment of German high seriousness, his work is, he says, “full of irony”.

Yet the handling of the paint, in heavy black lines that give it the look of a widescreen woodcut, is virtually indistinguishable from that seen in his first major British exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1982. It is as though having established a range of stylistic ties and a trademark vocabulary of images, Kiefer endlessly redeploys these elements, but doesn’t now seek to develop them.

“I have no style,” he says, bristling slightly. “I’m not a brand.”

Yet isn’t a brand exactly what Kiefer has become, having created a visual world that is not only immediately identifiable as Kieferesque, but clearly hugely lucrative?

I see a lot more of the Kieferesque a few weeks later, when I visit him in his principle studio outside Paris – the place where the real work is done – an environment that is, if anything, even more daunting in scale than Barjac. The former warehouse of the Samaritaine department store, it stretches immeasurably into the distance, its furthest reaches blocked from view by concrete container towers that touch the ceiling, more lead aeroplanes and bungalow-sized vitrines, with the figures of assistants moving ant-like among them. Kiefer’s work was always ambitious in scale, and from the late Eighties, when it started attracting seriously high prices, seemed to become ever bigger and more monumental.

Beside the car park at the back of the building jet fighters and tanks (real ones) lie dumped on the verges or half-hidden among the trees. “We buy them in Eastern Europe,” says manager Forelli with an as-you-do shrug. They’re part of a vast array of objects and materials that Kiefer buys up with the idea they may one day be absorbed into works of art.

“When you grow up living with your parents in one tiny room, you always crave space,” says Kiefer, sitting in the studio office, as if in explanation of the surrounding vastness.

He has lived in France since 1992. While it tends to be assumed that this is for political reasons, it is, he says, largely personal. ‘I had a new wife who didn’t want to live in Germany. Always,’ he says, “I follow my women.”

He left his first wife and children in Germany on his move to Barjac in 1992. Since 2008 he has lived in Paris, in a large house in the Marais district, with his second wife, the Austrian photographer Renate Graf, and their two children.

Kiefer was born into a strongly Roman Catholic background in Donaueschingen in the Black Forest, close to the French and Swiss borders, in the last weeks of World War Two. He grew up in a world where evidence of the devastation of war was everywhere, but the war itself and its causes were barely mentioned.

Was there anything in this austere childhood that hinted at his later penchant for building and planning on a large scale?

“I would dig tunnels in the garden, put drawings in them and bury them. You can see this at Barjac on a bigger scale. I would build little houses with bricks from bombed buildings. People think of ruins as the end of something, but for me they were the beginning. When you have ruins you can start again.”

The son of an art teacher, Kiefer drew and painted from an early age, but decided to study law, rather than art. ‘I felt I didn’t need art school. I thought, I’m a genius,’ he says with a laugh. Eventually he realised his paintings weren’t working, and enrolled in the local college in Freiburg. ‘They told me, now you can do what you want. I had always followed rules, in the Catholic Church and in law school. So this freedom was a revelation.’

But Kiefer didn’t find a focus for his ambitions till someone gave him a record created by the American forces for the political re-education of the Germans containing fragments of speeches by Hitler, Goebbels and Goering.

“I was shocked, horrified, but also fascinated. From the Seventies, there was a lot of discussion in Germany about the war, every week there was a television programme about that period. But at that time, the Fifties and Sixties, people didn’t want to talk about it. I realised I had to find out more.

“As an artist you have to find something that deeply interests you. It’s not enough to make art that is about art, to look at Matisse and Picasso and say, how can I paint like them? You have to be obsessed by something that can’t come out in any other way, then the other things – the skill and technique – will follow.”

This belated immersion in his country’s recent past led to Kiefer’s breakthrough work, the Occupations, created when he was still a student, in which he had himself photographed in neighbouring countries, wearing his father’s army uniform and jackboots, giving the Nazi salute.

“I would say I was occupying these places,’ says Kiefer. ‘It wasn’t easy. My girlfriend took the photographs, and I’d be shaking with nerves.”

And what did he mean by these “actions” as he called them?

“That things didn’t finish in 1945. Not a single judge or lawyer was prosecuted as a result of the war. Much of the state machinery remained as it was.” When Kiefer presented these images as his graduation work his professors were dumbfounded. ‘I told them, this work is really good, I want the highest grade or nothing. That got me in a lot of trouble.”

At that time, the late Sixties, Germany was in a ferment of political unrest and artistic experimentation, much of it centred round the great conceptual artist Joseph Beuys. "I was deep in the provinces. I hardly knew these things were happening. Then I heard about Beuys and I thought, I have to go there. Twice a year I would roll up my paintings, put them on the roof of my Beetle and drive to Dusseldorf."

While Kiefer claims that Beuys was more important as a source of encouragement than a direct influence, both artists share a preoccupation with the mystical and metaphysical properties of materials. He sees lead, for example, as in constant flux, changeable, "like people", while having the weight to "carry history". These are notions deeply rooted in the German Romantic tradition, which permeates every aspect of Kiefer's work. "For me ideas aren't up in the sky and materials down in the earth," he says. "Materials have a spirit that is evoked by the physical presence, which can be accessed and opened up. In the Romantic tradition everything is connected in a kind of universal underground."

It would be easy to write Kiefer off as a megalomaniac creator of overblown symbols, someone who through the weird workings of the art market and the international culture system, has been given too much power and too much money. As I walk onto the vast floor of Kiefer's studio, into the "universal underground" of Kiefer's imagination and the mind-boggling assortment of objects he has amassed to give it reality, I would like on one level to remain indifferent. Yet I don't feel that. Once you've immersed yourself in the fractured, densely encrusted surfaces of Kiefer's work you find yourself noticing the textures of the world around you with greater intensity. Looking out of the train on the way here, at the acres of brutalised graffiti-spattered concrete, the rivers of rusting railway lines and flat, furrowed French fields I find myself seeing these things, feeling the resonances of Europe's troubled and endlessly contested history, almost as though through Kiefer's eyes. At a time when most art is only about itself and its relationship to the market, his work challenges the past and his own role and, by extension, our role within it.

And Kiefer hasn't come to this from a position of privilege. Everything here has been achieved through his own energy and imaginative ingenuity. So what ultimately will happen to it all? He has said that he would like the Barjac complex to overgrow and crumble into the land, for his imaginary ruins to become real ruins. In the meantime, will the general public have any opportunity to see it?

"I hope so," says Kiefer. "But it cannot be large numbers as there are safety issues. And I don't want buses."

And when they do finally make it here, what is the intended impact?

"Oh, I have no intended impact. None at all. Each viewer can create their own experience, their own work from what they see. It's nice if people understand the ideas and references behind my work, but it's absolutely not necessary. There is no intention, no big idea behind that place. I just started it..."