

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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## Inside Anselm Kiefer's astonishing 200-acre art studio

*Steampunk shipping containers, planes full of sunflowers and triptychs the size of squash courts – Michael Prodger visits the place that's produced some of the most extraordinary artworks of the last century*

Michael Prodger



*Kiefer's towers punctuate the parched landscape around his studio complex at Barjac in southern France, 2012. Courtesy of Charles Duprat/Royal Academy.*

Anselm Kiefer is a bewildering artist to get to grips with. The word that comes up most often when his work is discussed is the heart-sinking and slippery “references”. His vast pictures, thick with paint and embedded with objects from sunflowers and diamonds to lumps of lead, nod to the Nazis and Norse myth, to Kabbalah and the Egyptian gods, to philosophy and poetry, and to alchemy and the spirit of materials. How is one to unpick such a complex personal cosmology? Kiefer himself refuses to help: “Art really is something very difficult,” he says. “It is difficult to make, and it is sometimes difficult for the viewer to understand ... A part of it should always include having to scratch your head.”

Now 69, Kiefer is the subject of a retrospective at the Royal Academy, where he is an honorary academician and which, through its summer exhibitions, has done much to bring him to the attention of the British public. This show is part of an extended German moment in UK galleries: Gerhard Richter and Georg Baselitz have both had exhibitions recently, while Sigmar Polke comes to Tate Modern next month. It is therefore a good time to judge Kiefer's standing. Such is the scale of many of the pieces in the exhibition, 40% of which are new, that the RA is leaving more time to hang them than it did for the Anish Kapoor show in 2009, wax-firing

cannon and all.

Kiefer's Germanness is different from Richter, Baselitz and Polke's; they are of a slightly older generation and from the Protestant east of Germany rather than Kiefer's Catholic west. Unlike his peers, Kiefer has no personal memories of the war but only of its aftermath. He is a child of the rubble and of the national silence about Hitler's atrocities that settled on Germany after 1945. It was here that he formulated his idea that "creation and destruction are one and the same". Whatever else is going on in his pictures and sculptures, history is always present.

The weight and seriousness of his art can perhaps be traced to the day of his birth, two months before VE Day. Kiefer's mother was living in the Black Forest town of Donaueschingen, where the rivers Breg and Brigach converge to form the Danube. Thanks to its military garrison and rail hub it was a regular target for allied bombers. On the day he was born, 8 March 1945, the house next door, belonging to his parents' landlords, received a direct hit. The only thing that survived was the couple's Singer sewing machine, which was blown into the street where it landed upside down amid the debris and dust. This lump of metal set into crumbled greys and earths was a prototype Kiefer, fashioned by high explosives.

Kiefer is a great revisitor of themes. His art is best seen not as a progression but as a cycle, and as such a reflection of the way he sees the present and the past. "No atom is ever lost," he points out, and so, for him, the atoms that surround him and make up his work are the tangible remains of former times and long dead people. An atom or two that are now part of Anselm Kiefer himself, he believes, were once a part of Shakespeare, Nietzsche and indeed Hitler.

Such mutability fascinates him. It is why he often includes a material such as straw in his pictures, or dribbles acid on them and leaves them out in the rain, or dunks his sculptures in an electrolysis bath, so that even when they have taken their place in a gallery the pieces continue to change. Kiefer gives the old artistic adage of "truth to materials" a new twist.

A favourite substance, lead, has an even weightier role: as he explains it, "lead comes from the depths of the earth, from which it is extracted and a shaman then places a chunk of it on a plinth between heaven and earth, between the spheres of the Nigredo and the spirituality of the Albedo ... equally I could mention the sacred groves of the Druids, the Celts, the Germanic tribes ...". No viewer confronted by Kiefer's lead books, for example, could be expected to extrapolate even a fraction of this – perhaps the only word that makes some sort of sense is "shaman". However, few viewers standing in front of the work itself could fail to sense that this is not the meretricious gobbledygook of the contemporary art world taken to a new level but that, for the artist, there is something meaningful going on, however knotted or nebulous that meaning might be.

The Kiefer worldview is best seen at La Ribaute, his 200 acre compound near Barjac in the Cévennes. At the centre of the estate is a handsome stone manor that was once the heart of a silk factory, and around it is a series of barns where the manufacturing processes took place. When Kiefer moved there in 1992 he needed 70 lorries to move the contents of his studio: he would need rather more now. The artist turned this quiet domain into a Brobdingnagian Gesamtkunstwerk, surely one of the most extraordinary artworks of the last century.

The grounds are dotted with teetering towers made from the stacked concrete casts of shipping containers that resemble a steampunk San Gimignano. There are Kew Gardens-size greenhouses that are used as immense vitrines, containing a 12-foot lead battleship washed up on a choppy sea of broken concrete or a full-scale lead aeroplane sprouting sunflowers. Elsewhere there is a cathedral-like barn with six house-size paintings in it and an underground temple of Karnak,

where the columns were made by digging out the earth from around the foundations of the buildings above. There are tunnels and subterranean hospital wards, a lead-lined room full of water and a series of pavilions, each bigger than a squash court, with doors that open like an altarpiece triptych to reveal a single work inside. Metaphysics and megalomania are mixed on a daunting scale, and the effect is overwhelming.

Kiefer intends the RA exhibition to be a “concentration” of Barjac. La Ribaute is no longer his main workplace, he has another Ozymandian studio set-up – 36,000 square metres in a former Samaritaine department store warehouse at Croissy-Beaubourg outside Paris. La Ribaute is the site for what Kiefer calls “reverse architecture” – putting artefacts back into the landscape. He moved there for its wildness and to escape the art world, and now he is thinking of leaving it to the French state. Given his origins he likes the idea of a German artist making such a gesture; it is another way of addressing and redressing the past.

The painting that in turn best concentrates his various concerns is *Margarete* (1981), based on Paul Celan’s poem “Death Fugue”. Celan was a German-speaking Jew, born in Romania, and the poem was written in response to his time in a death camp. Its two protagonists are Margarete, a German prison guard, and Shulamith (the subject of a companion piece), a prisoner. In the painting plant-like fronds grow out of a clinker soil, each topped with a flame. The fronds are made of straw (a representation of Margarete’s blond hair) while the soil represents the remains of Shulamith’s hair after the ovens have turned it to ash (Kiefer will often mix sand and ash into his paint). The flames are those of the furnaces, the flickering of spirits, the formation of stars, the artist himself ... the interpretations, as so often with Kiefer, are innumerable.

Fields make frequent appearances in Kiefer’s pictures, usually furrowed, barren and on the brink of regrowth. These paintings, and the earth in *Margarete*, are in turn a reference to the Nazis’ fixation with Blut und Boden (blood and soil) and Hitler’s belief that “true Germans” came from the soil. This appears too, in transmuted form, in his recent *Morgenthau* paintings of wheatfields – grey and black ones in his case. Although, with their hovering crows, they are a dark homage to one of Kiefer’s artistic heroes, Van Gogh, they refer too to the Morgenthau Plan, conceived towards the end of the war by the US treasury secretary Henry Morgenthau Jr to turn a demilitarised and deindustrialised Germany into a vast agricultural landscape instead – Europe’s bread basket. One of Kiefer’s pavilions at Barjac contains a Morgenthau installation: a field of wheat fashioned from rushes, with each of the heads covered in gold leaf, and, in the middle of this operatically bucolic statement, a coiled snake. It is Kiefer’s version of Nicolas Poussin’s 1637 memento mori painting *Et in Arcadia ego* – “I [death] am here, even in Arcadia.”

In all Kiefer’s idiosyncratic pastorals there is a link too to German Romantic painting and specifically that of Caspar David Friedrich. Friedrich’s motif of the figure seen from behind contemplating the immensity of nature – the Rückenfigur – appears explicitly in some of Kiefer’s more recent paintings. It was an idea he first played with as an art student in 1969 in his *Occupations* pictures. In these he photographed himself in his father’s army uniform standing on rocky outcrops, sea shores or in front of famous buildings giving the Nazi salute. The gesture was not just shocking, but illegal. It was his way of forcing his fellow Germans to confront the past rather than ignore it. The affront he generated has seen him accused of neo-Nazism and his relationship with his compatriots remains uneasy. For all his celebrity, the bulk of his paintings, he says, have been bought by Jewish collectors.

One of the changes in Kiefer's work instigated by his move to France was a broadening of his themes. As he left Germany behind he moved on from the war too. His art from the 1990s onwards has had at its heart the connection between earth and heaven. When he paints the constellations he uses the same dark tonality and denuded palette he employs when painting the earth – even though he starts painting in colour and then covers it with greys and browns. There is the same encrusted paint and the same swirl suggesting both order and chaos.

In this flux sits his interest in alchemy and the writings of the Jacobean astrologer-chemist Robert Fludd. What Kiefer tries to do in his work is what Fludd tried to do with base metals: examine what links an earthbound substance such as lead with a heavenly one such as gold, and how one becomes the other. His response can be seen in a new sculpture that will greet visitors to the RA, *The Language of the Birds*. It shows a pile of lead books that has grown wings and is trying to fly off.

For Kiefer, painting and sculpting are themselves transcendent processes. "It begins in the dark after an intense experience, a shock", he says. "At first it is an urge, a pounding. You don't know what it is, but it compels you to act. At first, it is very vague. It must be vague, otherwise it would just be a visualisation of the shock experience." When he has finished working on a piece he often returns it to the dark, putting it into a shipping container and leaving it, like wine in a bottle. When the container is opened it is, he says, like seeing the work for the first time – a rebirth.

The majority of visitors to the RA will of course actually be seeing Kiefer's work for the first time. Some brave people will try to unravel what they see, others – sensibly perhaps – will acknowledge the presence of all those references and then immerse themselves in these allusive, baffling, mysterious and – above all – powerful pictures and sculptures.