

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

theguardian

Royal Academy's Anselm Kiefer exhibition shows 'powerful vision'
German artist's retrospective charts progress from early watercolours to controversial 1970s re-enactments of Nazi salute

Mark Brown



Anselm Kiefer, Heroic Symbol V (Heroisches Sinnbild V), 1970, oil on canvas. Photograph: Anselm Kiefer

Anselm Kiefer is probably best known for his dramatic, monumental paintings, which are sometimes so heavy that gallery walls have to be reinforced for them to hang. But his first full retrospective shows there is much more to him than just size.

For example, his early watercolours possess a “lyricism and lightness of touch that I think will surprise many,” said Kathleen Soriano, the departing director of exhibitions at the Royal Academy and curator of what promises to be a significant exhibition.

The RA said it was giving over its galleries to the German artist on a similar scale to its exhibitions for David Hockney and Anish Kapoor.

Kiefer is considered as one of the most important artists of his generation. Christopher Le Brun, the president of the RA, said Kiefer’s influence was enormous. “If anybody has brought back the idea of history painting and painting with a serious subject matter, with moral and powerful vision, it is Anselm. He has absolutely transformed European art.”

Soriano has spent the last four years planning the show with Kiefer and there will be at least five galleries of new work, she said.

Kiefer said he was happy to have the retrospective, although he admitted: “I think a retrospective for an artist is difficult because it is boring. It is your own work. I prefer to look to the future.”

On Tuesday the RA gave its first details of the show. The exhibition will span Kiefer's career over more than 40 years and include painting, sculpture, photography and installation. It will explore Kiefer's fascination with history and his attempts to address some of the biggest moral and philosophical issues.

His work confronts head-on Germany's darker history and the show will include photographs and paintings from his Occupations and Heroic Symbols series from the late 1960s and early 1970s. The images, controversial at the time, record Kiefer's re-enactment of the Nazi salute made in locations across Europe.

Kiefer is not a fan of forensically dissecting his art and has previously spoken of how he fears that the beauty of art will "dissolve into ashes" when it is talked about

His paintings are loaded with meaning, however, and while they will be explored at length in the audio guides and the catalogue, Soriano said they planned minimal interpretation in the show.

"This is to allow the viewer to make their own personal connections with the works and also to allow for the purely aesthetic response to, what I feel, are sublimely beautiful works."

There will also be a major Kiefer installation planned for the RA's courtyard.

Anselm Kiefer is at the Royal Academy from 27 September - 14 December