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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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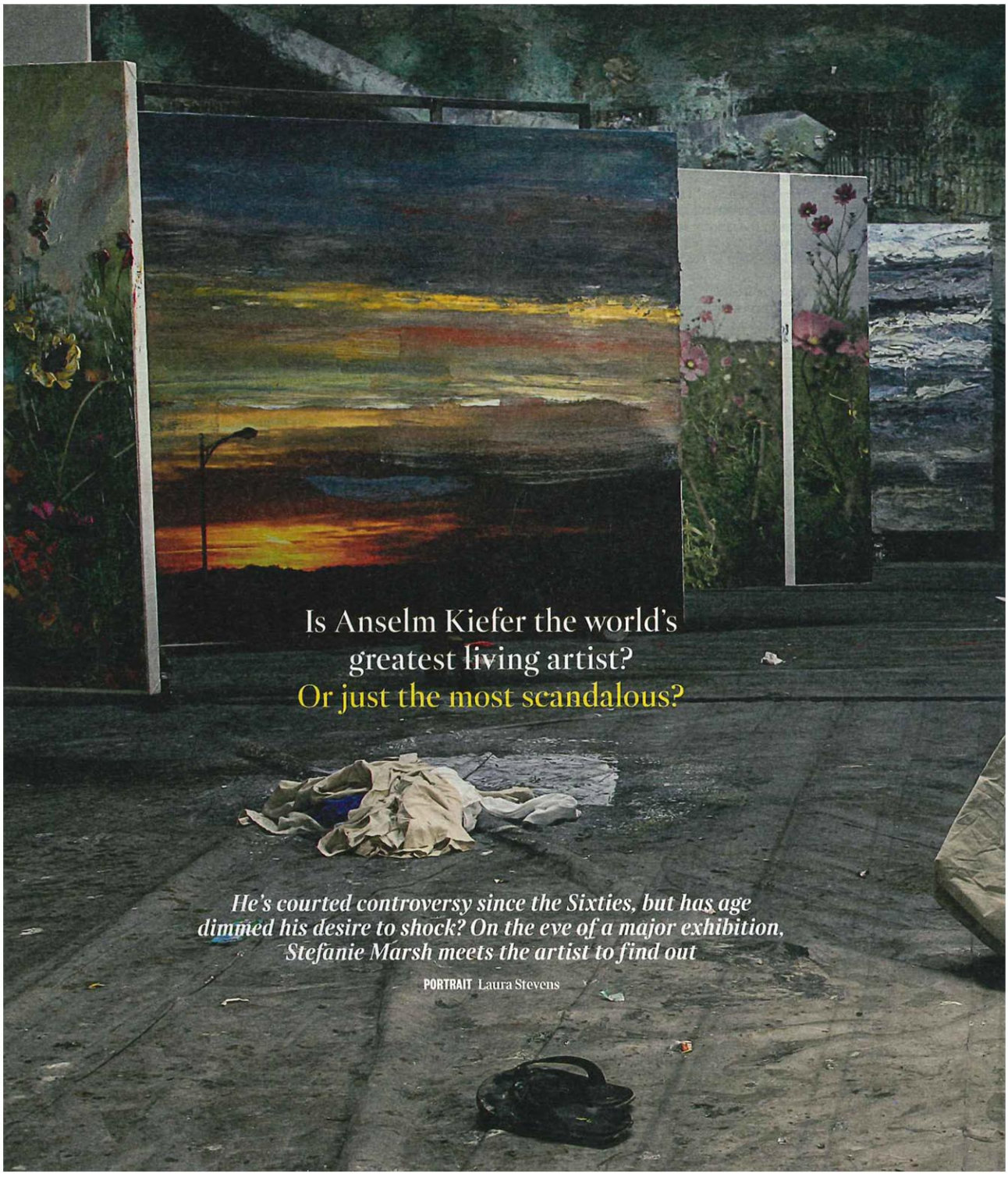
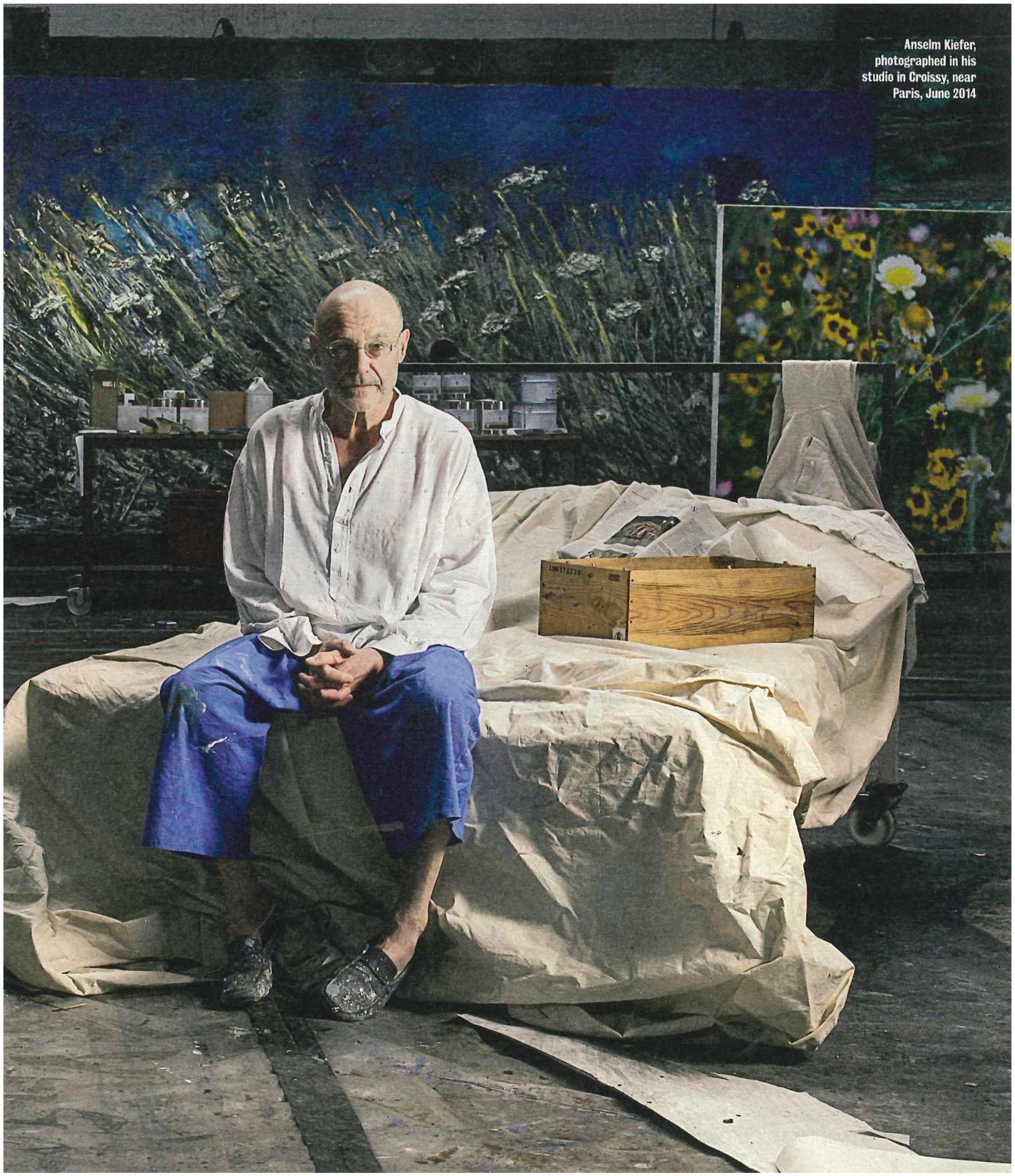


Is Anselm Kiefer the world's greatest living artist? Or just the most scandalous?

He's courted controversy since the Sixties, but has age dimmed his desire to shock? On the eve of a major exhibition, Stefanie Marsh meets the artist to find out

PORTRAIT Laura Stevens



Anselm Kiefer, photographed in his studio in Groissy, near Paris, June 2014

A scene from the early life of Anselm Kiefer shows an unusually confident boy, well in advance of his peers, with an inbuilt fascination with things spiritual and a rock-solid sense of his own destiny. By the age of five, little Anselm – born two months before the end of the Second World War, in among the intriguing (to a child) postwar rubble of the backwater town of Donaueschingen in the Black Forest – had already formed concrete ideas about where his future lay, and spent many private moments trying to align his vision of himself with the real world. He was raised a Catholic and served as an altar boy; his future seemed to lie in the Church. The thought often occurred to him: "I want to be Pope."

Or so it was reported a few years ago. "Who told you that?" You did, in an article in 2007. Perhaps it was a misprint. "No, no, no, no," Kiefer – precise, laconic, prolific, focused, witty, German – corrects this grave error. "I wanted to be Jesus," he says.

By the time he started school, he reluctantly began to acknowledge that a future as Jesus Christ was unlikely to be realised, so he downsized his ambition to Pope. "But back then I thought only Italians could be Pope," he says. "It was another 40 years until the Germans got a Pope."

Why the Pope/Jesus complex?

"I wanted to be the best."

In the world?

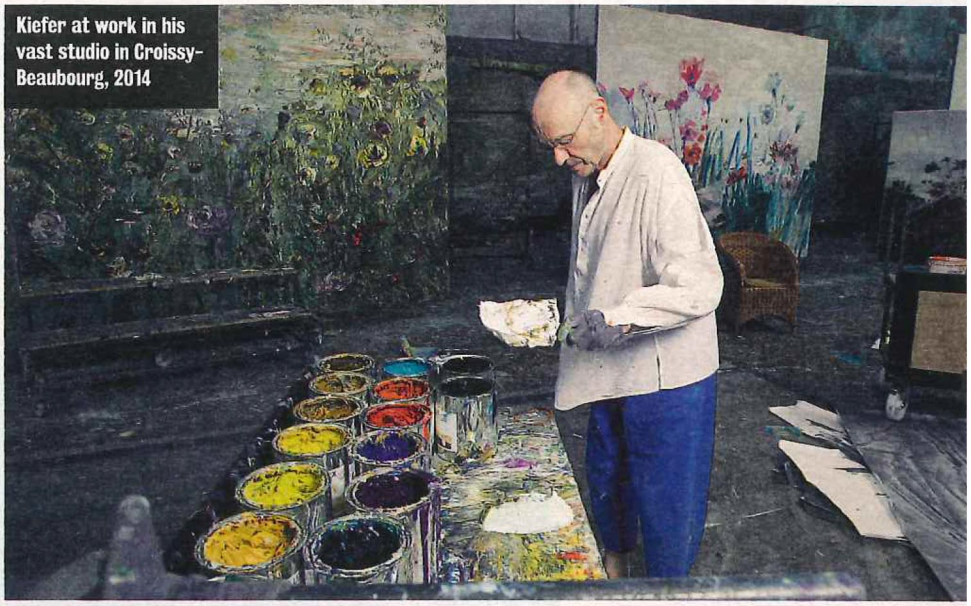
"In the world."

At what?

"I wanted to be the best. And I wanted to be the first, the original."

Kiefer's grand aspiration for world domination, he says, sprang not from power lust but from a spiritual quest that failed to be resolved by his Catholic faith. His first communion, for example, was a terrible let-down. "I thought, 'Now something really amazing is going to happen.' And I was so disappointed because nothing did. There were presents – you get presents at your first communion – and I thought, 'I don't like these presents. I want something else.' Some revelation, or something." He sucks momentarily on a gigantic cigar. "It was a depressing day for me because nothing happened. Except presents."

Becoming an artist wasn't as alien an idea as it might have been to other young boys of his age. Kiefer's father, an officer during the Second World War, worked as a professor of art. Whether his son is now the world's greatest living artist is debatable, but he almost always features in the top five in those lists compiled by art magazines. His ranking usually depends on whose list it is. "The Germans don't like me so much," he grins.



Kiefer at work in his vast studio in Croissy-Beaubourg, 2014

'It's so outstanding what Germans can do in a good way, and also what they can do in the worst way'

Certainly, his pre-eminence must give comfort to the people who spotted him in the early days and bought his vast, very beautiful, very moving impasto-laden paintings along the way, which helped to cement his reputation. They would probably be terribly hurt, though, if they ever caught wind of their favourite artist's attitude towards them. "I think it's completely unnecessary to buy a painting. You can see it in a museum. Buying art is compensation – when a successful industrial man with billions suddenly discovers that money is not all in life. He becomes interested in other things, spiritual things. To collect is to compensate."

This last thought reminds him of how much he abhors the crude mechanisms of the art world. "I hate art fairs. I forbid all my galleries to take my work to them. They are destroying art. They put the works together in a nonsense way that has nothing to do with art. Art fairs are something really perverse."

He's heard tell of dealers who take snaps of his work to show collectors at art fairs on the down-low. "They can go to the toilet and show videos." He finds this intensely annoying. "I can't control what they show in the toilet."

One suspects Kiefer's artistic significance also depends on whether the tastemakers compiling the lists are German or not. In America, Kiefer is considered a god, if not *the* god, of the art world. The people of Germany are more ambivalent about their most famous sons and daughters, and the feeling, from Kiefer's standpoint, is mutual.

He has not lived in Germany for years, having moved to Italy, on the wishes of his first wife ("I have always followed women"), and then, in 1992, to the south of France. He settled in the village of Barjac where he bought, did up and lived in an old silk factory, whose interior and the surrounding 86 hectares he converted, over 17 years, into an extraordinary studio-estate. He erected more than 50 separate edifices, including glass and steel greenhouses, concrete bunkers, huge, faltering concrete towers and free-standing staircases. At the beginning of the millennium, he added an amphitheatre and a crypt.

Germany doesn't seem to want him back. He now lives and works in Croissy-Beaubourg on the outskirts of Paris. He has transformed an abandoned department store depot into an enormous hangar-type studio. The low drawl and zoom of planes from a small airport nearby are a constant accompaniment to his (sometimes 18-hour) working days.

"Since I've lived in France, I've discovered how German I am," he says. "I'm not fed up with being German. It's so outstanding what Germans can do in a good way, and also what they can do in the worst way. Can you imagine if they hadn't expelled the Jews? They would have made the atomic bomb. It was there. It's really remarkable."

The studio is high-ceilinged and vast, like a museum. Its bright rooms and the corridors that connect them are used mainly by a handful of cats and the bicycles that Kiefer ➡

and his assistants use to get around. The work in it is, to my mind, astonishing, moving, evocative, stunning. Enormous. The walls are hung with hundreds of canvases laden with thick layers of impasto, straw, lead, copper, ash. They often depict ravaged grand buildings, land and cityscapes.

On the floor, on large tables, are hundreds of tools, building materials, photographs and books he is working on; a neatly arranged chaos. As a child, Kiefer played with the bricks of bombed-out houses, and he still loves making art from rubble and discarded objects. He has made sculptures from the lead and tiles from the roof of Cologne cathedral, which was bombed heavily during the war. "My studio," he says, "is like a brain."

Kiefer picks up an innocuous-looking large colour photograph of two made-up women in a bar; one of them is his wife. With a snigger, he asks me to identify her companion. She's not bad looking, if somewhat awkwardly made up and angular. I study her long face, her tobacco-stained teeth, then look back at Kiefer, who is grinning madly, with tobacco-stained teeth. You? He cackles an affirmation. "We were celebrating my wife's birthday."

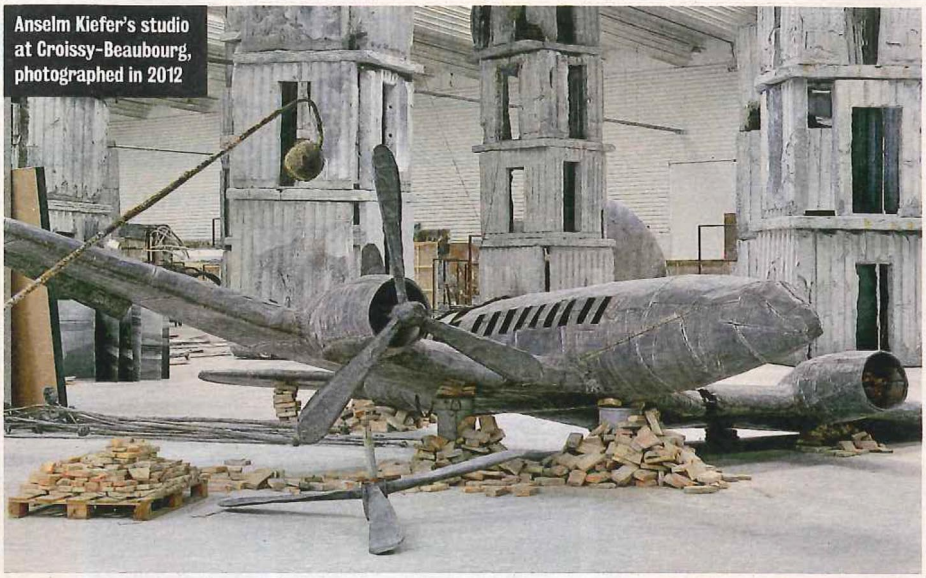
One of the reasons the Germans don't know whether they like him or not is because they are still unsure if he is a neo-Nazi, a reading of his work that has been dismissed as superficial and, it has been claimed, reveals the Germans for the literalists they are.

Kiefer studied law, then switched to art. His first major work, *Occupations* (1969), became an instant scandal and remains one of his most controversial pieces. It comprises a series of photographs of Kiefer dressed in his father's military uniform, performing the Nazi salute in front of prominent buildings, such as the Coliseum, in Italy, and in France and Switzerland. His aim was to re-enact the military act of occupation, Nero's, as much as Hitler's. The Germans took the work literally and it frightened them.

"They said I was a neo-Nazi, because of the salute. It was very difficult for them. I put my hand on the wound. In the Sixties, you know, Germany was becoming successful and then they didn't want the hand on the wound." Kiefer's work was figurative – and therefore to the point – in an era when abstract art ruled. "They said, 'It's dangerous. You have to think of the victims.'" The only person who stood up for Kiefer was a fellow painter named Kuechenmeister. "He'd been in a concentration camp and he defended it."

A look of nostalgic satisfaction passes across Kiefer's face. "I was something like an exotic flower. I was different." Of course, he doesn't identify with Hitler or Nero, he says. He re-enacted their actions in order "to understand the madness".

He frightened Germany again in 1980,



Anselm Kiefer's studio at Croissy-Beaubourg, photographed in 2012

'The Germans said I was a neo-Nazi. It was very difficult for them. I put my hand on the wound'

when he was selected to represent his country at the Venice biennale. His work at the time was based on the overscaled neo-classical architecture of the Third Reich and its themes included the cult of Wagner and the Holocaust. Later, German diplomats begged him to cancel a show in Jerusalem "because they thought if this German neo-Nazi goes to Jerusalem, it will be a big scandal".

What caused the most consternation among his countrymen was the fact that most of the people buying and collecting Kiefer's work were, he says, Jewish. "The Germans couldn't say anything about anything Jewish. That was forbidden. 'Why are they buying this horrible art?' They couldn't say this."

Kiefer chews on his cigar with languid amusement. Coffee arrives on a tray. I meet Celia, his cook. Didn't his father mind him wearing his old Wehrmacht uniform for *Occupations*? No, his father understood that this was performance art, and "he was kind of proud that I was using his clothes. In my family there was the myth: 'What is wrong with the Wehrmacht? It wasn't involved.' That's not true. We all know that today. But my father was an officer and he was awarded the Military Cross, and saying the Wehrmacht wasn't involved was how they [morally] saved themselves. But they saw it all: Kristallnacht in 1936, in every town. They told me that they didn't see it, but everyone saw it. They smashed the windows."

Kiefer's mother was less positively disposed to her son's work. "My mother thought it was disgusting. 'These horrible things. Don't do them.' But, you know, I didn't give a s*** about the opinion of my parents. She wanted me to become a teacher until the end of my life. I think she would have preferred that." Why? "Because," says Kiefer, matter of factly, even a little snidely, "it's petit bourgeois."

This, among other self-constructed ironies, amuses the 69-year-old.

The bright white studio is so vast that, had he had time to give me a complete tour, instead of the abridged version, it would have taken several days. He has built a sort of annexe for his children and (second) wife, who come to stay with him, from Paris, three days a week. All the paintings here are works in progress, he says. Does he keep any of his completed works? Only the two gigantic paintings that hang either side of the entrance to his children's sleeping quarters.

Kiefer's painting *To The Unknown Painter* (1983) was sold by Christie's New York in 2011 for $3.6 million, a record for his work. It is thematically consistent with the other work he was creating at the time, and took as its subject the destruction of art by the Nazis and features scorched landscapes; turbulent skies; straw that will deteriorate over time, a reminder of death and decay; Nazi architecture, bunkers or tombs that call to mind Hitler's end. The paintings memorialise the artists that German fascism destroyed.

My mother is German, and German was my first language. Just looking at ➡

reproductions of Kiefer's paintings in a book produces in me, an art cynic, a profound emotional recognition that is not exactly disturbing, as some critics have described his work, but sorrowful. They evoke German history and culture through the centuries, not just the war, but the good things that came before it: the Romantic novelists, the heavily wooded landscape depicted so often in German literature, Grimm's fairytales.

It makes sense that it was, specifically, Jewish emigrés from Germany, by then naturalised Americans, who were drawn to Kiefer's work and its allusions both to the horrific recent past and the more distant, now vanished Germany in which they were raised for generations.

"Yes, Jewish people were being killed or expelled or going to America," says Kiefer. "They left Germany, but they still had all the German culture. And I think they discovered in me something they had left there. I don't think they were drawn to my work for political reasons; it was just the spiritual side."

The other interesting thing about Kiefer's past, and thus the influence on his work and mindset, is the people under whom he studied during his law degree. "Three of my professors were Nazis," he says. "I knew this. One of them was a brilliant lawyer but was, because of his former career, forbidden from doing any real teaching except for introductory lectures in the first two semesters."

Despite what his parents had told him, "Not a single one of these horrible lawyers was condemned. Can you imagine? The problem with revolutions is always that they kill all the capable people, and Germany didn't have a revolution. They didn't condemn [postwar chancellor] Adenauer's chief adviser. He was a real Nazi. He wrote the *Rassengesetze* [race laws]. And he wrote them because he was a brilliant lawyer, which made him indispensable to Adenauer."

As for the Americans: "Already in 1944, the Americans realised that if they destroyed Germany, it would be an easy ... *Wie heisst der Beute auf Englisch?* When an animal kills another one?" Prey. "Prey. Easy prey. For the communists. So the Nuremberg trials stopped."

For a long time after art school Kiefer was poor. Life was difficult, especially, one imagines, when he married his first wife, Julia, and had three children. (He is now married to an Austrian photographer, Renate Graf, with whom he has two children.) For many years he lived in the Odenwald, the middle of nowhere, and existed on a sort of barter economy with the locals, painting "cows and things" for farmers "and they would give me vegetables and meat".

In 1971 he met the performance artist and sculptor Joseph Beuys, and studied intermittently with him. Then, in 1974 he heard that a gallerist in Baden Baden was putting together a show: *14 by 14*, 14 paintings by 14 artists. "I put my paintings on the top of my Beetle and I went to this man and said, 'I'm here. I want to be in this show.'" Like a travelling salesman. "I was in the Oden forest. I was really isolated and I thought, 'Now I have to do something.' I remember I unrolled the paintings [they were enormous], and put them up. He had no idea who I was. I just think he needed someone to make up the 14."

There was something prophetic about this tiny, provincial show, an early glimpse of neo-Expressionism, the style, inspired by German Expressionist painters of the Twenties, such as Emil Nolde and George Grosz, that was to dominate the art world through to the mid-Eighties. At the time, all the artists who took part in *14 by 14* were unknown. They included Sigmund Polke, Georg Baselitz and Gerhard Richter. Then what happened?

"There was so much reaction. It was strange because it was quite provincial. And then ... Ah! Something like a miracle happened. An artist bought all my paintings."

> 'It was strange. I wrote, "I will be the best artist." I was 26, 27. I saw it, I knew it. It was a kind of mission'

Who?

"Baselitz."

How much did he pay for them?

"10,000 marks. I was poor, so I was happy."

Still, for years, "I was completely unknown. But in 1980 there was Venice and there was a big ... No one liked it. They said it was a revival of fascistic art and things like that."

Was Kiefer angry about this? Hurt? "No, never." Irritated? "No. I remember every journalist wrote that it was terrible, but I was not touched by this because I still had the conviction that I was good. And then in 1982, 1983, the American Jews discovered it and they started to collect it." Today, he says, more than 50 per cent of his collectors are Jewish.

Two years ago, there was another Kiefer-related scandal in Germany. The Green party got wind of the fact that he was buying a decommissioned nuclear power plant. "I was so impressed by the cooling tower. Have you ever been to a cooling tower? It's like the Pantheon. Fantastic. It was 62m high and I thought, 'I want to do something with it.'"

Shortly before exchanging contracts, "The Green party got really upset. 'We don't want to see this thing. We want to tear it down immediately. We want to turn it into a *pelouse* [meadow].' And this lady wrote me a letter, saying, 'We don't want a Pantheon for you.' Germans always erase the traces of history. The nuclear industry didn't want me to buy it any more because they didn't want a scandal."

He cites the example of Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, the former border between East and West Germany, which, for years after reunification in 1990, lay untouched, derelict and half-heartedly fenced off, like an enormous scar across the city. Now it's been done up, by some of the world's best architects, and looks like Legoland. "I would have left it as it was, for historical reasons. But Germans always want to hide these things."

Why? "Germany is not self-aware. It's not self-confident. So they're not really settled. I think because of a lack of self-esteem. They compensate by feeling superior. If someone is not really settled, it can be dangerous. That's why we need a united Europe." He thinks the present chancellor, Angela Merkel, is "not charismatic. Which is good."

Recently, Kiefer came across a book he wrote in the Sixties. He laughs, delightedly. "It was really very strange. I wrote, 'I will be the best artist.' I was 26, 27."

Where did this conviction come from? "I saw it. No, I knew it. It was a kind of mission. Next, was working hard. And you are always deceived. When you work all day long and you see it the next day and you think, 'It's all s***,' you are deceived. No, then I destroy it. Rejection comes from inside. For me, destruction is just a moment, and then I recreate it. If I do something I think is horrible, I do something radical."

We have a look at a few paintings on the wall. Are they complete?

"I hope so."

Why are they here?

"To control them."

What's going to happen to them?

"I think they are finished."

What about the impact his artistic achievement makes on other people? The first time I came across Kiefer, it was at the press launch for his forthcoming show at the Royal Academy. The curators looked terrified lest the great artist be offended, walk out, behave ... artistically. It was a bit like you were God in that room, I say.

"I'm a simple man, you know."

... Who wants to be God.

"People confuse the work with the artist. I'm quite normal. There's something working through you. I am not 100 per cent responsible." ■

Anselm Kiefer, Royal Academy of Arts, sponsored by BNP Paribas (September 27 to December 14). Times+ *members can attend an early-morning private view on September 27. Tickets cost £18 at mytimesplus.co.uk*