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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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KIEFER IS COMING

LORNA DAVIES



Monumental, brave, provocative, uncompromising, Anselm Kiefer's works are large in scale and ambitious in scope. This month, like Anish Kapoor and Andy Warhol before him, the man described as "a colossus of contemporary art" arrives in Mayfair to take over the Royal Academy's main galleries.

The show will be the most significant of the German artist's work ever held in the UK, spanning his entire 40-year career and unveiling new work created in direct response to the RA's galleries.

Kiefer has worked in a range of mediums including painting, photography, sculpture and installation, drawing on themes of religion, history, mythology, literature and science. He has courted controversy since the early days, particularly in his Occupations series in 1969, when, aged 24, Kiefer reenacted the Nazi salute outside prominent buildings in France, Switzerland and Italy. Kiefer's work confronts Germany's darker history head-on.

"Born at the very end of the war, Kiefer's history lessons at school only lightly touched on the Third Reich, and it was this absence of knowledge that he says made him more interested, coupled with the lack of storytelling from the adults about this time," says Kathleen Soriano, the departing director of exhibitions at the RA and curator of the exhibition, who has been working with Kiefer on the retrospective for four years.

Kiefer was born to a Catholic family in the Black Forest region of Germany in 1945, and claims that he always knew that he was an artist. However, his appetite for knowledge led him first to law school, before embarking on art studies at Karlsruhe and Dusseldorf, where he studied informally under performance artist Joseph Beuys.

The first gallery contains books, drawings, paintings, photography and some early watercolours that have a "lyricism and lightness of touch that I think will surprise many," Soriano explains.

His paintings, for which Kiefer is most famous, will take centre stage. Often landscapes with darkly symbolic and mythical forests, they have grown increasingly large throughout Kiefer's career, with additions of broken glass, lead, dried flowers and plants. So large, in fact, that the Museum of Modern Art had to reinforce its walls for his New York exhibition in 1988-89.

His unique large-scale artists books include worked-over photographs and sheets of lead layered over with paint or minerals.

An avid reader, literature has played a hugely important role in Kiefer's work. Of poems, he says: "I swim to them, from one to another; in between, without them, I am lost."

The end of the show will return to Kiefer's painted woodcuts but this time on a new scale, with a new concept for the installation and a new body of watercolour work painted onto plaster.

Following his two brutal yet fragile sculptures that filled the courtyard of the RA in 2007, Kiefer has also created a new courtyard installation to open the show.

Kiefer's works are loaded with meaning and history, and much has been made from the analysis of his works over the years. The interpretation in this show, however, will be quite minimal. Soriano says that this is, "to allow the viewer's own interpretation of the works and to allow a purely aesthetic response to what I think are sublimely beautiful works."

Kiefer, now 69, is considered to be one of the most important artists of his generation. Christopher Le Brun, the president of the RA, says Kiefer's influence is 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."

Kiefer says he is happy to have the retrospective, although he admits: "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."

Anselm Kiefer is at the Royal Academy, Burlington House, Piccadilly, September 27-December 14.

Tickets £14.

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