

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The Boston Globe

Kiefer conjures history, irony, and myth at Mass MoCA

Sebastian Smee



Half of the 30 paintings by Anselm Kiefer that comprise "Velimir Chlebnikov." Arthur Evans

NORTH ADAMS — During the summer of 1887, Gabriele d’Annunzio, the Italian decadent poet, journalist, and later soldier and politician, took to the seas with his friend Adolfo de Bosis. Their vessel, the *Lady Clara*, was cruising along the Adriatic Coast when it ran into strife.

Unfortunately, neither d’Annunzio nor de Bosis knew anything about sailing. Things (as they do at sea) quickly turned ugly, and the two young men had to be rescued by an Italian warship. They were taken to Venice.

D’Annunzio had never been on a naval vessel before. Nor had he been to Venice. The two experiences altered him profoundly.

The following summer, he wrote a series of 10 articles, later collected as “The Italian Armada,” in which he called on the Italian government to form a powerful navy. Pouring scorn on small-minded, penny-pinching politicians obsessed with “arithmetic,” he declared that Italy would either be a great naval power or it would be nothing.

Six years later, he wrote a series of poems called “Odi Navali,” or Naval Odes. Their giddiness in the face of military might prefigures the Futurist verse of F. T. Marinetti, not to mention the windy braggadoccio of Italian fascism:

“Craft of steel, straight, swift, swimming/ lovely as a naked weapon, alive, quivering/ . . . you suffer no coward on the burning plates/ of the bridge, which throbs with the pulsations.”

The words “Odi Navali,” are scrawled repeatedly on a mesmerizing series of paintings by the German artist Anselm Kiefer at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams. Fifteen of these paintings, all heavily encrusted in Kiefer’s signature gray and white paint, mixed with rust, straw, dirt, and material objects, are arranged on one wall in three rows of five. They face 15 more on the opposite wall. Almost all are seascapes. Most have lead models of World War II-era warships attached. Some have paint-stiffened gloves, dried sunflowers, or ropes.

The suite of 30 paintings, each about 6 by 11 feet, is called “Velimir Chlebnikov,” after the Russian Futurist poet who developed a language, liberated from sense, called “zaum,” and concluded, by way of dense arithmetic, that the course of history was profoundly altered every 317 years by climactic sea battles.

Kiefer’s paintings, which were made in Barjac, his former home and studio in the south of France, have been installed in a rectangular shed made of gray corrugated steel, positioned at a slight angle inside a much bigger building.

That bigger structure is a million-gallon concrete water storage tank that was recently converted by architect Bill Katz into a gallery specifically for the display of three vast Kiefer installations, and paid for by the Hall Art Foundation, which also owns the work.

The new building, which opened to the public last fall, is situated at a slight remove from the rest of Mass MoCA’s exhibition spaces. It was closed again over the winter; maintaining a safe outside path through ice and snow to the new building was deemed too much of a challenge, for now at least. But the 10,000-square-foot annex is open again until next winter, and the Kiefer show will stay up, seasonally, for the next 15 years.

No mere afterthought, it’s an exhibit as stirring and meaty, in its way, as Mass MoCA’s 25-year retrospective of wall drawings by Sol LeWitt, the long-term exhibit (a collaboration with the Yale University Art Gallery) that inspired it.

Kiefer’s work has a comedic quality that is easily overlooked. He was born in southern Germany in 1945, during the dark, chaotic death twitches of the Third Reich. He came to prominence — and notoriety — in the late ’60s with photographs he took of himself dressed in paramilitary costumes, offering the Nazi salute in various locations in France, Switzerland, and Italy.

His work, which made him an international star in the 1980s, has always been draped in the heavy cloak of German history, and in a sense of ruin and evacuation that conjures the catastrophe of World War II, even as it harks back to ancient and medieval myth. His paintings find a natty correlative for this temporal dynamic in spatial tensions he contrives between densely worked, material surfaces and deep, sweeping lines of perspective.



Detail of Kiefer's sculpture "Etroits sont les Vaisseaux" ("Narrow Are the Vessels"). Elizabeth Solaka/Anselm Kiefer

But, as those first performances warned, Kiefer also has an eye for the preposterous, and a take on extremity that is not exclusively ironical or critical. Often, he seems to revel in it. No wonder he makes people nervous.

The “Velimir Chlebnikov” paintings, for instance, are charged by the preposterousness of d’Annunzio’s nationalist rhetoric about naval power — triggered, of course, by his own haplessness at sea.

One may be amused, too, by an ironical connection between Chlebnikov’s obsessive mathematical calculations, conjured by Kiefer with madly scrawled equations, and d’Annunzio’s rhetorical contempt for the arithmetic of Italian politicians resistant to his call for profligate spending on a navy.

Ironies always multiply behind Kiefer’s works. D’Annunzio, for instance, was both an influence on and a rival to Mussolini, who bribed the popular poet to stay away from politics. He later regretted not taking d’Annunzio’s advice against aligning Italy with Hitler’s Germany.

Two of the “Velimir Chlebnikov” paintings veer away from naval imagery and into the realm of Greek mythology. One, in a manner recalling Cy Twombly, is inscribed with the names of the doomed mythological figure Hero and his lover, the priestess Leander.

The other has the name of Aphrodite, the goddess Leander served. (Aphrodite was the goddess of love, of course, but also of the sea and war, and a patron of sailors.) A swath of white paint conjures the foam of the sea — or, in Greek mythology, the sperm of Aphrodite’s castrated father Uranus, which, mingled with the sea, brought about her birth.

The second of the three Kiefer installations is a long stack of undulating concrete slabs combined with rusting steel, lead, and earth. It was first shown at Mass MoCA back in 2007, for 18 months. Its owners, the oil trader Andy Hall and his wife, Christine, who together established the Hall Art Foundation, had been forced to remove it from their Ridgefield, Conn., property after a legal battle. That short-term display planted the seed that led to the transformation of the old water tank and this more ambitious installation.

The work is echt Kiefer: part dumb ruin, over-trodden by time, and part all-or-nothing poetic gambit. It goes brilliantly with the “Velimir Chlebnikov” paintings. (A third installation of lead beds, called “The Women of the Revolution,” seemed less successful to me.)

The concrete and steel sculpture is named after the poem which inspired it: “Etroits sont les Vaisseaux” (“Narrow Are the Vessels”), by Alexis Leger, the mid-20th-century French Nobel laureate in literature who wrote under the name of Saint-John Perse.

The poem is as undulant and beguilingly sensuous as Kiefer’s concrete comes to seem, the longer you spend in its presence. Filled with imagery of disaster and eros, of solitude and coupling, of man and woman, myth and nature, it has unforgettable lines about cities that “wear down” as “women dream” and the land “mourns its gods.”

Kiefer has inscribed two lines from the poem on a wall above the work: “One same wave throughout the world, one same wave since Troy/Rolls its haunch toward us.”

There are other lines that conjure the image of Aphrodite: “may I go once more and linger on your shore, in the slow unrolling of your coils of clay — woman who forms and unforms with the wave that engenders her.” And later still, making clearer the work’s connection with the ships in “Velimir Chlebnikov,” the poem’s narrator asks, “And what is this body itself, save image and form of the ship?”

There are stirring references, too, to “a great destiny on the march over the waters,” along with entreaties to the “precarious gods” to “hasten to the masks” and “cover the exodus of the great myths.”

It all chimes with the sense of ruin, spiritual evacuation, and heaving eroticism that powers so much of Kiefer’s work. And although one may fairly ask whether the work on its own — a pile of rubble, from one point of view — bears so much poetic, historical, and mythological weight, my own dazzled, dumbstruck answer is yes, absolutely. Why not?