

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The New York Times

Anselm Kiefer and His Hallmarks Have a Moment

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Anselm Kiefer in the new installation for his retrospective at the Pompidou Center in Paris. Atelier Anselm Kiefer, 2015

PARIS — As Paris reeled in the weeks after the Nov. 13 attacks, the German artist Anselm Kiefer was finishing up an apocalyptic installation at the Pompidou Center.

Waves of undulating sand are dotted with upright slabs of mushrooms. A rusting machine gun lays across a hospital gurney made of lead inscribed with the name of the 1970s German terrorist Ulrike Meinhof. At the rear, a huge canvas shows a ravaged, wintry forest receding into the distance.

The work, “For Madame de Staël: Germany,” which is part of a new Kiefer retrospective here, appears to include a pointed message about a new generation of extremists who have taken aim at Europe. And French newspapers have pointed out that the mushrooms resemble tombstones, and the German news media has noted that Mr. Kiefer’s themes of destruction and rejuvenation resonate with a traumatized nation.

Not necessarily, said Mr. Kiefer, who has worked in France since 1992, with a mansion in the Marais district and a studio in a former department store warehouse outside of Paris.

“What happened in Paris is a really dramatic, horrible accident, and they are criminals, but it is not war,” he said on a recent afternoon at the center, where he was reviewing the exhibition ahead of its Dec. 16 opening.

He said the work was influenced by German romanticism, the 19th-century philosophical movement that, he said, spawned dangerous political offshoots like Nazism and the 1970s radicals like Ms. Meinhof who yearned “to be powerful, to be someone, to be great, to have an adventure.”

The mushrooms, inscribed with the names of German poets, painters and philosophers, are simply references to hallucinogenic psilocybin that, according to Mr. Kiefer’s reading, they had reportedly sampled.

That mix of specific imagery and ambiguous intent has been a hallmark of Mr. Kiefer’s work since the 1960s, when he shocked Germans — and drew accusations of neo-Nazism — with photographs of himself delivering Hitler salutes while wearing his father’s green military coat from the Wehrmacht.

In person, Mr. Kiefer, dressed in a black T-shirt and dark pants, was noticeably more cheerful than the air of melancholy that surrounds his works gathered at the Pompidou. He called for a glass of cognac as he took a break from surveying preparations for the retrospective, which museum officials said had been under discussion for 10 years.

“It is not my aim to be provocative,” he said. The Nazi salutes were “provocative, but I wanted to understand myself and what I would have done in those times, what I am, my history.”

He added, “These were questions I had, and what I found was that humankind was wrongly constructed, something in our brain that is wrong.”

The Pompidou retrospective, which ends April 18, is part of a recent flurry of attention in Europe for the 70-year-old Mr. Kiefer. A show at the National Library of France through Feb. 7 displays his handmade books, some of which are sheets of lead layered with sand, ashes, hair, plants and broken glass. The Royal Academy of Art in London staged its own retrospective in 2014, and the Albertina museum in Vienna will feature more than 30 of his enormous woodcuts starting in March.

The Paris show, arranged thematically and chronologically, spreads across more than 10 rooms on the sixth floor of the Pompidou and includes almost 150 works from both public and private collections; Mr. Kiefer said he made personal appeals to persuade reluctant owners to lend.

His canvases are lyrical studies of ruins, built up with layers of rubble, ash, sand, scavenged clothes and straw, and dense with historical symbols, like a coiled snake associated with seraphim, the biblical angels.

In one room, 40 vitrines display arrangements of found objects like volcanic stones, ferns and leaden objects in the shape of anatomical organs.

Another room is devoted to works that explore the kabbalah, the Jewish mystical movement involving symbols that Mr. Kiefer, who was raised as a Catholic, said had intrigued him since a visit to Israel in 1984.

Mr. Kiefer was born two months before the end of World War II in Europe, part of a generation of Germans who grew up in a climate of amnesia and guilt about the Nazi regime, but with no memory of it.

His reception in Germany, where his work has plumbed uncomfortable truths about the country's history, has been considerably chillier than in the rest of Europe and overseas. Even after the retrospectives in London and now in Paris, Mr. Kiefer said he considered a similar show in Germany to be unlikely.

"I will not do one very soon," he said. "They don't like me. You know, I had a big success in London, but in Germany they think I am not modest enough and small enough.

"I still have time, perhaps in 10 or 15 years," he added.

Critics of Mr. Kiefer have cited his tendencies toward grandiosity and inscrutability. Taking stock of his exhibitions abroad, the German newspaper Die Welt observed, "Only we in this country still have not quite understood what he has to proclaim."

Matthew Biro, an art history professor at the University of Michigan and author of two books on Mr. Kiefer, said that the shows demonstrated Mr. Kiefer's relevance.

Mr. Biro said much of the criticism of Mr. Kiefer was "because he was going his own way." He added, "Now the art world is moving back to much more engagement with history and politics, which is something he has been doing a long time."

Jean-Michel Bouhours, the curator of the Pompidou retrospective, said that taken together, the works stirred powerful emotions at a time when France is confronting issues like terrorism and anti-Semitism. Mr. Kiefer, he said, worked on the installation up until days before the show opened, adding the machine gun to "For Madame de Staël" at the last minute because it was "much more current with the news."

Mr. Kiefer said he had always sought a motive to paint, starting with German history. "And then later, I sought another reason, because I always had to have a reason."

For "Madame de Stael," he said, he wanted to show in the most basic way another side of Germany, one that could, at times, be brutal.

"I tried do to something I like to do, and I played in the sand," he said. "A field of sand is where you can do what you want."