

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Anselm Kiefer's Miami show

The artist's work sings in an exhibition drawing on the collection of Martin Z Margulies

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Anselm Kiefer's 'Ages of the World' (2014) at the Margulies Collection at the Warehouse, Miami. Photo: Jeanie Giebel

If ever there were an artist for the old world, it would be Anselm Kiefer. Born in Germany in 1945, he makes work that serves as a material requiem for his country's history. His canvases are less paintings than smashed, flattened corpses spilling out their insides — rubble, ash, grit, sand, scavenged clothes, tools and books, charred plants — like fossilised flesh.

Kiefer is steeped in the culture that has shaped this terrible beauty, from classical and Teutonic myth, to the Old Testament, Wagner, Goethe and, his greatest muse, the postwar Romanian Jewish poet Paul Celan. Ever since his series of paintings inspired by Celan's poem "Death Fugue", a lament for Jewish women who died in Nazi concentration camps, was unveiled in the early 1980s, he has been stamped as the cantor for his generation's anguish.

Of late, however, there have been mutterings that Kiefer is too ubiquitous, too commercial and has nothing new to say. The Royal Academy's 2014 exhibition in London, while majestic, almost crushed his work's humanity under the weight of its monumentality. Furthermore, it was marred by the Kiefer gift collection in the shop. To see those images printed on mugs and key rings was to wince at a marriage of profit and poor taste.

Given the nature of his material, one might not think that Miami — that tropical Art Deco den where fake and fortune seem entwined — would be the place where Kiefer's voice would rediscover the vulnerability that makes it sing. But the discreet approach shown by curator Katherine Hinds, long-time curator of the art collection owned by real estate developer Martin Z Margulies, works well for pieces that always risk tipping in to melodrama.

The show contains just seven works, spread through a suite of newly built rooms in the converted garment warehouses that house Margulies's collection. The small-scale, industrial

setting — white walls, cement floors and free-flowing spaces — fosters an intimate mood that is the perfect counterpoint to Kiefer’s apocalyptic operas. (That this is the largest show by Kiefer ever held in the US tells you just how much he is considered a European.)

Its centrepiece is “Ages of the World” (2014), which Margulies bought after he saw it at the Royal Academy. He loves it, he tells me, for “its primitiveness”. That’s a good word — sufficiently raw, violent and universal — for this desolate pyre of canvases interleaved with boulders, lead books and dead sunflowers that droop their calcified heads as if in mourning for a razed Arcadia.

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Increasingly, Kiefer’s imagination has been scavenging beyond recorded memory as if aware our fate was already inscribed on prehistoric rocks and plants. “Ages of the World”, which has two accompanying gouaches inscribed with two geological terms in German, *archaikum* and *mesozoioikum*, is anchored in this sense of deep, doomed time. But the work which sends shivers down the spine is “Secret of the Ferns”. Created by Kiefer in 2007, it consists of 48 paintings and two concrete huts. Margulies first saw it in Kiefer’s studio in Paris. “I thought, ‘This is an installation I can live with,’” he declares.

Good luck with that. I found it hard not to flee, so all-pervading was the air of catastrophe. I saw similar paintings by Kiefer in Lorcan O’Neill’s gallery in Rome in 2007, but in his tiny, sunlit space their sadness whispered of redemption. Here, they cover both walls like Gothic road maps to the Last Judgment. Burdened with lead, plaster, ash, shrivelled ferns and sackcloth dresses that are surely the remnants of some dark deed, this is painting as killing field. In the centre, a puddle of charcoal dribbles from one of sheds, which has “coal for two thousand years” inscribed across its roof as if quoting from some environmental Domesday Book.

To ask Kiefer, who is dealing with tragedy that stretches from the beginning to the end of days, to find something new to say is surely to miss the point. This exhibition reminds us, however, that his vitality depends mightily on his presentation. Here, simple wall texts explain with rare transparency Margulies’s approach to his purchases, and reproduce relevant poems by Celan. The show hits the right note of informative restraint.

It’s worth mentioning, too, that when Kiefer came to install “Secret of the Ferns” — which he adapted considerably for Margulies’s space — he was so impressed by his patron’s raft of charitable activities he donated a painting and spontaneously made a drawing of the tree of life on the wall.

One of those charities is The Lotus House, which offers support to homeless women and infants. This week, a group of them are staffing the space. As the glitzy Miami art crowd drifted about, Instagramming and gossiping, the presence of these witnesses from a different world seemed not insignificant. “They are people who have slipped through the cracks,” observed Margulies, when I asked him why he wanted to help them. For once, redemption is not to be found in art but in life.