

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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When Orhan Pamuk met Anselm Kiefer

As a child, Pamuk dreamed of becoming a painter, and the dream endured even after he won the Nobel prize. So what happened when, drawings in pocket, he visited the studio of his artistic hero?

Orhan Pamuk



Brushing with brilliance ... Orhan Pamuk (left) with Anselm Kiefer.

I've always thought of art as my path to happiness. Between the ages of seven and 22, I wanted to be a painter, and spent a lot of time drawing, especially during my adolescence. My family were supportive. I even had a little studio in an apartment in Istanbul, full of old furniture. I had plans to be a famous painter one day.

Twenty years later, none of these dreams had come true; I was writing novels in Istanbul, and getting them published. Art still remained a promise of future happiness, rather than something I could enjoy in the present.

Throughout the 1980s, whenever I came across the work of great artists like Anselm Kiefer, I was seized by an emotion somewhere between jealousy and regret at having missed out on the life I was meant to live. But part of me understood that the happiness I yearned for was out of my reach. Kiefer's formidable art proved that, contrary to what I'd believed in my childhood and youth, thinking in images and daydreams was no guarantee of artistic fulfilment. The strength behind each vigorous stroke of the brush, and indeed the physical presence of the painter, were both essential components of that magical equation we call art. My body, my shoulder, my arm, my hand would not have been capable of creating any of this, and the force of Kiefer's art helped me a little to come to terms with this painful truth.

Still, the dream of emulating Kiefer, or at least the hope that I might yet be an accomplished painter someday, endured unsettlingly in some corner of my mind, like a sin I wished I could forget. This joyful restlessness was inspired in part by those elements of Kiefer's oeuvre that stand alongside his outsize, dramatic paintings: the books he created in his youth, with the help of photos, which have made him an artist so dear to writers and bibliophiles.

In Kiefer's aesthetics, books themselves are sacred, as well as the texts they carry. His art conveys this feeling by accentuating the "thingness" – to use Heidegger's term – of letters, words and texts. When we look at the enormous books he has sculpted in recent years from sheets of lead and other metals, they tell us that their sacred quality exists in their textures as much as it does in the texts within. All his books – whether they are made of paper, metal or plaster – have the ability to leave a writer such as myself with the illusion that it is not the text itself that makes a book sacred, but the texture.

It is almost as if Kiefer's books are telling us to look beyond what words represent and signify, and notice instead their texture and the connections they form. This is somewhat like looking at a wall and being struck by its overall feel rather than the individual bricks that compose it. (Kiefer likes to study walls and paint each brick individually, just as he is interested in brick factories, but when we observe his work, we don't necessarily see those bricks, or even the wall itself – rather, what we notice is its texture.) I wonder if this is the key to his brilliance; or perhaps it is because his paintings are so extraordinary that they give rise to these impressions.

One thing I'm sure of is that this literary texture percolates from Kiefer's books to the rest of his art. With every mountain, plain, forest, German legend and neglected railway track or road he depicts, this great artist invites us to read his paintings as if they were books. The literary texture that spills over from Kiefer's books and illuminates his paintings turns all that he creates into something we can read. We find ourselves looking at his trees, his railroads and mountains as if they were text; their secrets are hiding just beneath that vibrant, vivid, surprising surface we are reading, though reading it, of course, is not so easy after all.

My mind was busy with these thoughts as Kiefer's gallerist, Thaddaeus Ropac, took me to the artist's studio in France. In the car on the way out of Paris, I was nervous but equally excited, like a little boy going to the movies for the first time. I had met the artist in Salzburg in 2008, and I was familiar with his work from museums and books. Perhaps seeing his work inside his studio would bring forth new emotions. Perhaps one day I might even give up on novels and devote my time to painting.

There was so much to admire in that enormous studio that when I saw the artist's new work, I was overwhelmed. I knew Kiefer's world well; I had seen paintings like these before, and sculptures similar to the poppies and childlike aeroplanes that stood before me now. There was some comfort in seeing the artist's now familiar handwriting on his paintings. As ever, Kiefer had left written indications on his paintings that pointed us towards the legend, the text or the poet (Ingeborg Bachmann, Paul Celan, Arthur Rimbaud) that had inspired him in each case, and reminded us of the story or the history that lay behind each painting.

As I nervously paced around Kiefer's immense studio, intoxicated by what I saw, I found myself thinking once again that perhaps the reason why I loved these paintings so much was the artist's ability to demonstrate the kinship of words and images, legends and landscapes. All these words, letters, trees, mountains, frail flowers and forgotten roads were part of a single text, and shared a

common texture. All I wanted was to be able to read these paintings and the forceful brushstrokes that had formed them. But I also knew that no matter how many times I looked back and forth between the words and the images before me, I would never be able to cross this horizon and find peace on the other side of that mountain on which I saw many signs and letters inscribed. That boundless tension between words and images, text and art, is at the heart of all Kiefer's oeuvre.

In the beginning was, indeed, the word, Kiefer's paintings seem to tell their beholder. But to look at art and the world and really understand what we see is so much more pleasurable than reading words and letters can ever be. Is it possible, then, to look at a painting and be able, ultimately, to read it? Is it possible to treat a book as a painting, and a painting as a book?

Texts and images all descend from an inexhaustible multitude of myths. Among the artists whose work I know, Kiefer is perhaps the most talented, ambitious and literary of them all, and maybe that is why his universe appeals to me so strongly.

As I stood before the masterpieces in his enormous studio, the child in my heart kept telling me that I could still be a painter – that I, too, could reveal the realm inside my mind through art. On the other hand, my grownup self, the happy, satisfied writer, was trying to remind myself that I was already doing with novels what Kiefer did in his art, and that I should be more humble and realistic in my expectations. Yet, dazed by the beauty of the paintings around me, I grieved over the loss of the childhood dream of painting I'd left behind.

That evening, Ropac hosted a dinner in his home on the banks of the Seine. He sat Kiefer and me next to each other before turning to the assembled guests to announce: "One of them wanted to be a writer and became a painter. The other wanted to be a painter and became a writer." We all laughed. But in truth, for me there was nothing to laugh about, since I still felt this way. Was that why I was getting through so much white wine? The waiters in their white gloves never let my glass sit empty.

Soon, I felt light-headed, and I began to think of the diary-notebook I kept in my pocket. It contained a number of little drawings I'd made with great care and fervour. Should I show the best of them to the great artist sitting next to me? He would surely understand.

I could feel, though, that this would be inappropriate. Everyone would laugh at me. I'd look ridiculous, like the dignified soldier in Thomas Mann's *Tonio Kröger* who stands up in the middle of a crowded formal dinner to recite his poetry. Perhaps I could show Anselm my drawings in some quiet corner later on. He was kind and understanding, and he would certainly treat my artistic instincts with respect.

But there was a firmer, more pragmatic whisper in my mind telling me: what's the point? If you really must draw, do it in the privacy of your own home, where no one can see. Don't go seeking anyone's approval – least of all a famous painter.

The whole thing was such a delicate matter for me that I resented the other guests' enjoyment as they made small talk around the table. Anselm was talking to them, too, taking in all the delights life had to offer to a man who had managed to achieve even more than what he'd hoped for. For a moment, I felt completely alone. I joined in the conversation. I decided I must never show him

my drawings. Yet I still felt the impulse to put my hand in my jacket pocket and bring out my notebook.

Then, Kiefer turned to me. He looked shy, almost uncertain.

“I have written a book, you know,” he said. “I would like you to read it.”

“What’s it called? Who publishes it?”

“*Notizbücher*. But there is no English translation.”

There followed a long silence. I felt I liked Kiefer even more, now. He wasn’t just a great artist; he was profound. It was a good thing I hadn’t bothered him with my drawings. Not to mention that, for the first time in my life, I felt at peace with the fact that I would never be a painter.

The dinner did not last long, and the guests suddenly got lost in the Parisian night. Outside, it was rainy and windy. I was agitated. I wanted to walk along the Seine, sort out my thoughts, and think about the day I’d spent in Kiefer’s studio. The beautiful paintings I had seen, the mythical, literary landscapes, came back to me now like memories from my own past. I wondered what there could be in his book, the one he wrote. But all that came to mind were his extraordinary paintings, and occasionally – as we all do when we admire someone – I felt as if I had painted them.

Translated from the Turkish by Ekin Oklap.