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ARTNEWS

Transformation and Transcendence: Anselm Kiefer Surprises at Gagosian Gallery With Airy, Sensual New Work

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Anselm Kiefer, *Aurora*, 2015–17, oil, emulsion, acrylic, shellac, and sediment of an electrolysis on canvas, 110 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 149 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 3 $\frac{5}{8}$ inches. PHOTO: ©GEORGES PONCET; ART: ©ANSELM KIEFER/COURTESY GAGOSIAN

Anselm Kiefer tends to make heavy work. His themes are weighty—the artist is known for examining German history and exhuming German guilt—and his colossal craggy canvases loaded with lead regularly require museums to reinforce their walls. But if navigating a typical Kiefer exhibition feels like bush-whacking through the Black Forest, exploring his current show at Gagosian Gallery on West 21st Street is akin to wandering through Circe’s enchanted woods. There are a few wall-strainers here, to be sure, but jewel-hued watercolors, as airy and loose as the oils are dense and monumental, predominate. Through these works, Kiefer has conjured up a seductive, sensual reverie of transformation and transcendence.



Anselm Kiefer, *Les extases féminines (The Feminine Ecstasies)*, 2013, watercolor on paper, 65 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 60 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches. PHOTO: ©GEORGES PONCET; ART: ©ANSELM KIEFER/COURTESY GAGOSIAN

Most of the watercolors depict women in states of sexual bliss. The figures float naked above blooming flowers, drift through dawn-streaked skies, and lounge on the surface of the sea. The woman touching herself in *[The] Feminine Ecstasies* (2013) reclines in a fluid realm of radiant red flowers. Kiefer painted her on wet paper, allowing the rose tones of her body to feather and bleed into the blues of the background. The distinctions between breasts, lips, and petals dissolve. This sense of abandonment, of escaping fixed states, lies at the heart of show.

The most spectacular watercolors in the exhibition are painted on plaster. Bound into 30 large sculptural books, they share the title *Klingsor's Garden* (2016–17), an allusion to the magical grove of seductresses in *Parsifal*. (Would it be a Kiefer show without a Wagner reference?) These works, in their intimacy and keen observation, recall Pierre Bonnard's tender drawings of his bathing wife, as well as Gustav Klimt's erotic sketches of masturbating models. Kiefer painted the plaster to resemble marble and his women emerge out of illusionistic veins of chalky orange and garnet red. The edges of the pages are chipped and ragged, as though the frescoes were the surviving fragments of an ancient temple both sacred and profane.

All of these works are blatantly voyeuristic, but Kiefer's nudes are not objectified victims of the male gaze. They appear so elemental, so powerfully unto themselves, that the viewer feels more like an incidental spectator to a sublime eternal truth. Looking at them, one experiences the same kind of self-effacement brought on by standing at the ocean's edge and imagining untold eons of waves.



Anselm Kiefer, *For Segantini: die bösen Mütter* (*For Segantini: The Bad Mothers*), 2011–12, oil, emulsion, acrylic, shellac, wood, metal, lead, and sediment of an electrolysis on canvas.

PHOTO: ©GEORGES PONCET; ART: ©ANSELM KIEFER/COURTESY GAGOSIAN

Other watercolors in the exhibition depict cemeteries, snow-covered fields, and passenger jets in flight. Taken together, these works epitomize Kiefer's fascination with metamorphosis. Rows of young crops echo the rows of graves, evoking the cycles of life and death, day and night, summer and winter suggested by the exhibition's title: "Transition from Cool to Warm." The soaring planes, like the floating women, exist in a fleeting, liminal state. They have left one place without having arrived at the next. The jets also offset the mythic atemporality of the other paintings, giving the show some contemporary grit. They ground us even as we take flight.