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Romancing the Rose: Anselm Kiefer's Eroticism at Gagosian

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Installation shot of the exhibition under review, "Anselm Kiefer: Transition from Cool to Warm" at Gagosian Gallery, New York. Artworks © Anselm Kiefer. Photo by Rob McKeever

Within the high walls of a cloistered garden, a young man falls in love with a rose, but seeking every possible avenue through which to attain his affection, it becomes increasingly clear he can never have it without destroying that aspect of it which he loves. With the general plot line of the original "Romance of the Rose" (1230 CE) in our minds, and its universal ramifications for all human relationships, we can follow the path that Anselm Kiefer weaves in his newest exhibition, "Transition from Cool to Warm," rich with themes of sexuality, eroticism, femininity and longing. Though bookended with several massive paintings, the heart of the exhibition comprises watercolors and books. The exhibition has also been, to extend the metaphor, bookmarked by two events: an interview with Paul Holdengräber at The New York Public Library and an intimate demonstration of the plaster-soaked-cardboard books taken out of their vitrines at the gallery. These extra-curricular activities allowed the viewer into Kiefer's thorny garden, and explicated a profound transition of the artist/author from his pulpit of philosopher and historian to a much more earthy place, looking up at the stars with the rest of us.

The exhibition has been laid out along the plan of a basilica, with a pair of rooms as aisles on either side of a main nave. The inner sanctum of the gallery contains a presentation of Kiefer's newest one-off art books—hybrid objects that ensnare a dizzying number of references: to Wagner and Nordic mythology, Abrahamic traditions, Rodin, Picasso and the modern conception of data storage and presentation. On the evening of June 22nd, several of the books were removed from their vitrines and presented up-close. Vitrines have always served Kiefer well, and the chunky archaic tomes were accessible to the viewer as splayed hydra-like assemblages within their glass cases. Out of the cases though, and with their heavy encrusted leaves turned by two preparators, the static objects became storytellers. When reading, flipping a page is usually not such a big deal, though the term "page-turner" does still resonate; but when presented with Kiefer's oversize monolithic works, the viewer is forced to digest the imagery of the page; a marbled background overlaid with a languorous female figure traced in fragile graphite lines and then fluidly enlivened with watercolor in pink, beige, ochre, or any iteration of a flesh tone

imaginable. With each turn the manuscript groans and the balance of weight shifts as one image recedes into shadow and another goddess or nymph appears. The majority of the books cover the subject of “Klingsor’s Garden,” 33 volumes in all, referencing the garden of women/flowers who attempt to seduce the hero in Wagner’s opera Parsifal. In contrast to the mythological is the historical “Jules Michelet: les Reines de France” (2013). Particularly edifying was the presentation of Kiefer’s original sketchbook, “Erotik im Fernen Osten oder Transition from Cool to Warm” from the mid-1970’s. This fragile and deeply personal narrative placed the artist’s newest pieces in context. The female imagery has existed in Kiefer’s cosmology as a hot, diaphanous and perhaps uncomfortable balance to the epic literature and historical landscapes that have comprised his main corpus.

The day before the opening of the exhibition Kiefer was interviewed at the New York Public Library. Kiefer’s interlocutor, Paul Holdengräber, was able to expertly unpack much of the symbolism that forms a sturdy foundation for the current work. The discussion focused on the immediacy of the work in the life of the artist: Kiefer was brought up in a house in ruins, as it was bombed on the night his mother rushed to the hospital to give birth to him (or so the story goes), so the destructive propensities of history and the devastation in his work is from direct observation and experience. This was heightened in the discussion by Holdengräber’s bold decision to frankly address Kiefer’s “Occupations” series, the artist’s powerful and equivocal assessment of the war. On the humorous side, a slide of the artist dressed as a Cardinal underlined the fact that as a youth he longed to enter the Catholic Church and rise up the ranks of sacred hierarchy but was thwarted by the blunt assertion that no German could be pope. These revelations of juicy subtexts aid immeasurably in the understanding of the work, and even hint at the angle at which Kiefer approaches the erotic.

Unlike Picasso, the sexual imagery of whose late work emerges from his own lascivious fantasies, Kiefer’s vision is predicated on the works of his poet friend Jean-Noël Vuarnet, whose “*Extases Féminines*” (Paris, 1980) described the experiences of such personages as Hildegard of Bingen and Catherine of Siena. (Kiefer’s series of watercolors inspired by Vuarnet is on view.) Kiefer immediately builds a religious and numinous subtext into his eroticism, much as Wagner does with his field of seductive flower girls crossed with Christian iconography in Parsifal, and this accounts for the flowers as well as the Christian symbolism mixed together in the watercolors. The paintings which serve as something of a preface and epilogue to the main, bookish, body of the exhibition also engage the darker side of Kiefer’s Catholicism: *Ohne title (untitled)* 2017 and *Des Meeres und der Liebe Wellen (The Waves of Sea and Love)* (2017) prominently feature lead torturously peeling off the surface of the canvas, an aesthetic choice that the artist in his Public Library discussion paralleled to the flaying of St. Bartholomew, while *Schlange (snake)* (2017) is a large vertical canvas crowned with a re-bar grate, a recreation of a grill on which to roast any number of saintly individuals. While that is decidedly hot, the oscillation between cool and warm is very perceptible in the artist’s handling of intense human emotions such as faith, lust, love and loss. Rather than cast himself into the flames, he prefers to ponder such issues within the walled garden he has built out of plaster volumes.