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Anselm Kiefer's mythological marvel lands in New York *The gigantic sculpture at the Rockefeller Center is loaded with historical, literary and philosophical meanings*

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Anselm Kiefer unveils his new sculpture 'Uraeus' at New York's Rockefeller Center © Getty

New York's towering Rockefeller Center is no stranger to public art. In recent years, millions of people have seen an upturned swimming pool thanks to Elmgreen & Dragset (2016), the psychedelic "Mr Pointy" from Takashi Murakami (2003) and a gigantic puppy made of blooming flowers by Jeff Koons (2000), all organised by Public Art Fund and the property group Tishman Speyer. And this week the centre's most imposing work yet was unveiled: Anselm Kiefer's 20-foot-tall and 30-foot-wide "Uraeus".

"We're excited. It's a quintessential Kiefer work, but he has never been in such a public setting," says Nicholas Baume, director and chief curator of Public Art Fund.

The imagery is nothing if not weighty, from an artist who rarely disappoints on this front: a serpent coils up the high altar towards an oversized open book that is carried by enormous eagle wings. Dozens more books are strewn at the base — have they been discarded or are they waiting to rise up? The sins of mankind, truth and justice, punishment and redemption all come to mind through motifs that will be familiar to the German artist's fans.

The sculpture is loaded with historical, literary and philosophical meanings that are unlikely to be apparent to everyone. For example, the work's title, "Uraeus", refers to the upright shape of the Egyptian cobra, conferring power, divine authority and sovereignty. If that seems obscure,

“Uraeus” at least trips more easily off the tongue than the artist’s original name for the sculpture, “Thus spoke Zarathustra”, after Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophical novel, which Kiefer calls “the highest book there is”.

At the same time, the work is as demanding as you want it to be. Kiefer trusts the New York public to have its own interpretations. “It’s a gut feeling. You’ll find all these motifs somewhere in everyone’s cultural memory. There are the same ideas and images in ancient Egypt and modern Germany,” he says. And for those of a less philosophical bent? “Well, Game of Thrones draws on mythology,” he points out.

For “Uraeus”, Kiefer has worked in his favourite medium of lead, which appeals partly for its history within alchemy — “it’s the first step on the way to gold”, he says — but also because “it is wonderful to work in, so flexible”. Deceptively so. When we meet, he demonstrates this by folding a page in one of the books on a maquette of “Uraeus” in his vast studio on the outskirts of Paris. Leaning against the walls are some of his recent paintings, loaded with lead, which Kiefer uses both as a means of destruction — the metal rips the paint back from the canvas — and a creative force, a paradox that drives him.

Kiefer and Baume began their conversations about his New York project eight years ago, with the artist initially looking at places more on the fringes of Manhattan. “I liked the look of a pier on the Hudson River, which then fell down,” Kiefer says. Indeed, Pier 54, already in a dilapidated state, eventually collapsed during the Hurricane Sandy storms of 2012.

This may have proved the best turn of events for “Uraeus”: the Rockefeller Center’s skyscraper setting seems particularly apt for an artist whose body of work includes unstable, apocalyptic concrete towers. Kiefer is pleased to have secured the spot, whose permanent sculptures and history are also the stuff of mythology, old and new. “It’s Manhattan in miniature,” he says.

New York City holds particular meaning for Kiefer, as it does and has done for many artists. His career was made there, he says, by early showings at Marian Goodman gallery in the 1980s (the artist now works with Gagosian gallery, which is presenting “Uraeus” with Public Art Fund and Tishman Speyer). “Germany rejected me but Jewish refugees who had fled to the US discovered something in my work,” he says. Kiefer was born during the second world war and grew up in south-west Germany. He became one of the first artists of his generation to deal with the country’s Nazi past — in 1969 he photographed himself performing the Nazi salute in an act of provocation.

“There was this belief that after Hitler the world would be good, but it isn’t. Populists are in power in Europe and Nazism never went away. It’s been in the swamp that is now rising,” Kiefer says.

Whether any of this darkness is contained in “Uraeus” is difficult to gauge — Kiefer dances between seriousness and playfulness during most of our conversation. Certainly its heroic drama seems to chime with our times. The artist judges the US from a gentler perspective, however. “The US has had its problems too, just look at McCarthyism,” he says. “But America always seems to get there in the end.”