

GAGOSIAN

THE  TIMES

Anselm Kiefer: the German artist taking over the Doge's Palace
The artist's monumental works for the Venice Biennale will hang alongside masterpieces by Titian and Tintoretto. He talks to Rachel Campbell-Johnston

Rachel Campbell-Johnston



Anselm Kiefer
GEORGES PONCET

Could a mad fantasy finally be fulfilled? When the artist Anselm Kiefer was a child, he tells me, his greatest ambition was to become the pope. “I wanted to have always perfection,” he says. He had been brought up as a Catholic. He had served as an altar boy. He knew the mass in Latin. “And the pope seemed to me the very highest thing you could be.”

Later, convinced by his parents that this particular dream was impossible — “a German had never been pope, they told me” — he changed his aim. He swapped pontiff for painter. But it was only the focus of his ambitions that had shifted, not their scale. “I am the greatest painter, and there’s no doubt,” his youthful journal records.

“I had a genius complex,” Kiefer says, dismissing such juvenile bravado with a grin. “It was all just a nonsense.” And yet, as he opens his latest show in Venice, are his childhood dreams in some bizarre way proving true?

According to legend, Christianity was brought to Venice by the apostle St Mark. He endowed the doge of the city with a religious power akin to that of the pope. And now, like some modern-day answer to this historical potentate, Kiefer has moved into the Palazzo Ducale — the Doge’s Palace, that masterpiece of gothic architecture that, flanking St Mark’s Square, now stands as the very symbol of Venice. He is one of the first contemporary artists to be invited to show there, to present his works in the company of such superlative predecessors as Titian, Veronese and Tintoretto.

A series of truly gigantic canvases, painted over the course of the past two pandemic years and responding in their size and subject matter specifically to this site, have been installed in the

palazzo's Sala dello Scrutinio, the resplendent chamber in which votes were once cast for the next doge. You can hardly help but sense a strange resonance.

The idea must have felt overwhelming, I think as I watch him enter. He divests himself of the sweeping black coat and skull cap (OK, beanie hat) that, given the context, had led me at first to mistake him for a visiting cleric, and stands, a slight, bespectacled figure in an understated dark suit, in what must surely be one of the world's most impressive spaces. The canvases he has created, mounted on temporary structures, immerse him. They conceal the monumental pictures — including *Conquest of Zara* by Tintoretto — that normally adorn the walls. But craning upwards to the ceiling, you find your mind reeling amid the heroic dramas trumpeting Venice's martial victories that are embedded in a glowing firmament of heavily ornate gilt.

Does he feel at home here, I wonder? It was “a grand challenge”, he replies. Tintoretto is his favourite painter, he explains, and visitors who come to see his latest show will arrive by way of the world-famous chamber of the great council, over which Tintoretto's late masterpiece *Il Paradiso* presides. The heavenly panorama (at more than 22m long and 7m high, it is one of the largest canvases in the world) captures a vision of some 500 figures, plunging and soaring, floating and diving, as they surge towards their salvation. Ruskin had “no hesitation” in describing it as “by far the most precious work of art of any kind whatsoever, now existing in the world”.



Kiefer's Questi scritti, quando verranno bruciati, daranno finalmente un po' di luce
GEORGES PONCET

That is what Kiefer is up against. “I love it,” he says, “its fantastic conception of space . . . the way it's moving all the time.” It is the movement, he explains, that has influenced him most. He has been reading about Alfred Wegener, the scientist associated with the theory of continental drift. “The movement of the continents is a metaphor,” he says. “Everything is always moving: history, society and ideas.” And this constant flux, eroding all boundaries, links people and places and philosophies across space and time. His own epic canvases, he suggests, the landscapes that look ancient yet modern, the looming structures that might equally be classical ruins or the burnt-out monuments of the Third Reich, are all about moving restlessly back and forward across time.

Kiefer first tapped into this idea of human connectivity when he was a boy. His family had moved to a house near the Rhine, and one winter the river burst its banks. The water flooded their basement. “The Rhine is the frontier between Germany and France,” Kiefer says, “but now it was in our cellar. The border had spread, it was moving, the water was everywhere. So you see, there are no boundaries, nothing ever stays still. Electrons are always in movement.”

Nationalism, with its jealously guarded frontiers, is emphatically not the answer for an artist who was born, the son of an authoritarian Nazi officer (“he would beat me with a stick — but it wasn't so unusual in those days”), six months before the end of the Second World War. Bombs

were falling all around, and if his mother hadn't had to give birth in the cellar of a hospital she would have been killed, he says. The family home was destroyed in an air raid that day, leaving nothing but rubble and his mother's sewing machine standing upright on the pavement.

Kiefer was brought up amid the remnants of a defeated and discredited culture. The war in Ukraine, he says, is disturbing deep memories. He cannot recall the times when, as a baby, he would be hidden in the forest by his parents from the raids of the bombers, but he knows that they happened. He remembers playing as a child amid ruins. "So I can very well imagine how it is in Ukraine, how it is to sit in the cellar. Yes, I can imagine this. It's entering my dreams. I have nightmares. It's horrible, you know, that because you are smaller you get invaded by a bigger force. It's so 19th century. It should not be happening now."

He won't be making work specifically about the war in Ukraine. "I don't deal with daily politics in my work," he says. "My works are about layering, about layering different histories: my history, human history, geological history. They are about time's flow."



The Doge's Palace in Venice, where Kiefer will display his new exhibition
GETTY IMAGES

"The Germans spoke after the war of 'zero hour'. They thought they could start again. But this is not possible. You can't just put it away and say now we are different. Remember, Hitler had a lot of approval at the beginning. The majority were for him for a long time. The pit of mud is still there, and from time to time it goes gloop. We have, for example, an extreme right wing in Germany now. You can never eliminate history."

The frankness with which he acknowledges his Nazi legacy has caused outrage. Kiefer at first studied law; "with my genius complex I had thought that I don't need these art schools". But giving up after the first year — "My professor liked me very much — he said, 'Please don't leave us,' but I thought, you need art school to criticise you" — he enrolled at art college instead. He launched his career with a project called *Occupations/Heroic Symbols* that, in a disturbingly warped version of the Grand Tour, involved him posing for photographs in an assortment of deserted locations, performing the Nazi salute.

The images, and the memories they confronted so openly, appalled audiences. But Kiefer was undeterred. He kept hacking away at the burial chamber of Nazi history, excavating its macabre trophies and then smashing them together with Germanic mythologies, with religious, philosophical and literary references in his work. He wanted to shake his nation from its wilful amnesia. When, in 1980, he and his countryman Georg Baselitz took over the German pavilion at the Venice Biennale, their grotesquely fascist imagery was vilified.

Does he expect his work now to stir such controversy? “It wasn’t controversy,” he declares, “it was complete negativity. But I don’t expect anything now.”



Tintoretto's *Il Paradiso*
ALAMY

The visitor, however, can expect an awful lot. Exhibitions in which contemporaries are presented in the context of historical masters turn out only too often to be dispiriting. The weight of a talent that has survived the long sifting of history all too easily overpowers the fashionable. Even our most celebrated modern masters can fall foul of such vanity projects. I love the work of Francis Bacon, but he has never quite recovered, in my mind, from that moment when he was hung alongside his idol Diego Velázquez at the Hermitage in Russia. His paintings were drained of their power.

With Kiefer, this is not the case. I defy you to step into the Sala dello Scrutinio and not be stopped, awestruck, in your tracks. Vast apocalyptic scenes, their surfaces encrusted with paint, straw and ash; splashed with lead; sheened with gold; stuck with pieces of wood, cloth and metal (anything from old workers’ tools through battered supermarket trolleys to an entire lead sarcophagus) overwhelm you. An ocean of waves rushes towards you. A burning building cuts its stark silhouette against flames. Angels rise in glory. A burnt forest stretches endlessly into the distance. It is as though you are standing amid some historical tempest, amid a great, brooding darkness riven with bright flaring.

Questi scritti, quando verranno bruciati, daranno finalmente un po’ di luce is the title. It translates as “When they are burnt, these writings will finally provide some light”. Kiefer is quoting from a Venetian philosopher, Andrea Emo. “Nobody knows him because when he was living he didn’t publish anything — it wasn’t necessary, he was living in a wonderful palace and didn’t need to.” But discovering him ten years ago, Kiefer was struck. “His philosophy was like my working process,” he says. “He gave me the intellectual formulation for my method. I always think that when I begin a painting it is already an annihilation. When I start to paint I am always desperate. It will never be as perfect as I wanted, as the idea in my head . . . As soon as I start I know it will be changed, demolished. And that is what Emo says: that being and nothingness are not one after the other — they are both in the same time.”

A smaller room adjoins the main show. It has the feel of a side chapel, and within it Kiefer has created a curved apse-like structure — “only five metres high”, he says, which, given that the other canvases are more than eight metres, might indeed not be massive. (“People always say

that my works are so big . . . they are not big — they are as they should be,” Kiefer interjects.) Lines of charred sticks follow their long perspectival lines away into the wastelands of an ashen white distance. There are stacks of burnt books. The title of the show has been scrawled in loopy letters across the scene.

What does he want us to feel as, settling down on the bench before it, we look? “I don’t ask for any emotion. I want to give my emotion,” Kiefer says. And what was that? “It shows our smallness in the cosmos — we are really nothing. Imagine there are billions of galaxies, billions . . . Each has billions of stars. And you are on one of these stars. Emo wrote all his life on this philosophy. He was aware of the nothingness of everything — but if you burn it, it can give a little bit of light . . . like igniting a cigar,” he says. (Kiefer smokes cigars.)

Does this mean he’s an optimist? He bursts out laughing. “Oh, what a question! Is that a joke? I am not a pessimist or an optimist. I think all can happen. I think ruins are something beautiful because they are a beginning and not an end. But there is no possibility to make it better because men are constructed in the wrong way. The same nonsense happens all the time. The ideology was that, if we defeated Hitler, the world would be better. But what is better now? In 1991, when the Soviet Union was collapsing, there was a chance to do something really new, but the Americans wanted to show off, to say our ‘system’ is the winner. But what is the point of talking about a winner when in a moment it can all be destroyed by atomic war . . . it’s just childish.

“History is full of defeats and victories,” he continues. “It has all the elements of politics today. You can see all sorts of symmetries. All we can do in the face of it is the best that we can.”

Kiefer, it seems to me, now achieves his crowning moment. Surely this show is indeed the best he can do. And where could he go next? He laughs. “Well, now we have had a German pope . . . ” The comment is left hanging. Then he adds: “I have all the costumes. Yes, they are hanging in my wardrobe. And I can still say the Latin mass by heart.”

Anselm Kiefer is at the Palazzo Ducale, Venice (palazzoducale.visitmuve.it), from March 26 to October 29