

DESOLATE VISION OF PAST CAPTURES TODAY'S ZEITGEIST

Artist Anselm Kiefer is having a moment, with two solo shows of his work launching in the city and a documentary premiering at Cannes

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It seems the world cannot get enough of Anselm Kiefer's terrifying vision.

Last spring, the German artist's colossal evocations of past cataclysms and the unrelenting cycles of history temporarily supplanted the ancient frescoes glorifying victories in battle in a vast chamber inside the Palazzo Ducale in Venice.

The title of the exhibition conveyed the desolate effects of the floor-to-ceiling spectacle: "These Writings, When Burned, Will Finally Give Some Light".

Kiefer's vast landscapes, thick with impasto and embedded with burnt books and other detritus, were of scenes ravaged by fire and water. In one, a viewer gazing up from a scorched field of dead branches and barbed wire would catch sight of a coffin nailed to the canvas, hovering in the sky.

This month, a feature-length documentary about the artist will premiere at the Cannes Film Festival. Its director, Wim Wenders, promises an immersive telling of the 78-year-old's life story and his art, starting from his birth in Germany at the end of the second world war. Unlike an earlier 2010 film about Kiefer by Sophie Fiennes, this one is in 3D.

"That's why I can't come to Hong Kong, I have to attend the screening," the artist says via video link from his studio on the outskirts of Paris.

The pandemic has concentrated many delayed projects, including two solo exhibitions of Kiefer's work launching in Hong Kong this week.

"Hortus Conclusus", Latin for an enclosed garden, is a miniature retrospective at the Gagosian. "Golden Age", which features a group of recent works, will open concurrently at Villepin.

The Gagosian exhibition is focused on how history, literature and different belief systems, from Christianity and Norse mythology to Jewish Kabbalah mysticism have influenced Kiefer.

The earliest painting on show, *Your ashen hair, Shulamith* (1981), is inspired by poet Paul Celan's chilling *Death Fugue*, in

which the Jewish bride of King Solomon is contrasted with Aryan "golden hair Margareta" in a hideous recollection of the Holocaust.

"The age of the painting means little. I often take paintings out of the depot and work on them again. It's all in flux," Kiefer says.

The title, written in a cursive hand, can be seen above a devastated wheat field layered with actual straw. A burnt patch in the middle, made with charcoal, resembles the silhouette of a body with long hair down to the waist.

This ugly, gaping wound in the land looks fresh and raw as little flames flicker on its periphery, although the artist's loose brush strokes mean that they could also be some kind of flower rising out of the ashes.

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ANSELM KIEFER

Kiefer believes it is important to remind people of painful histories. His previous Hong Kong exhibition, in 2012, was called "Let a Thousand Flowers Bloom" – a misquote of Mao Zedong's 1956 campaign to lure critics of communist rule into the open.

In one of the paintings shown that year, a benign-looking Chairman Mao looms above a field of poppies – a symbol of remembrance. Land retains memories of what has been done on it, Kiefer insists, and his landscapes are never innocent.

Decay, violence, and entropy are themes which fit the zeitgeist – and probably the reason his art is being seen everywhere.

As Kiefer's friend of over 20 years, former French prime minister Dominique de Villepin wrote in the Post last year, the old world order is collapsing and the global community is in a "spiral of crises".

Not exactly an golden age of mankind.

"Gold is not necessarily a good thing or a bad thing," Kiefer says. Its value and meaning are as malleable as it is as a material.

Just think about the end of the gold standard in the world monetary system and how the US unilaterally ended it when president Richard Nixon needed money to fund the Vietnam war in 1971, he argues.

As someone who believes that the relative peace of the past few decades was a fluke rather than arrived at by design, a "golden age" can only exist in art, and the creation of the artist as alchemist, he says.

De Villepin, who is hosting an exhibition of Kiefer's work at the eponymous gallery he co-founded in 2019 with his son, Ardur, says its title, "Golden Age", refers to the artist's multiple sense of time and is not mere sarcasm.

"The golden age is not something in the past. It is a promise of something achievable in the future," Dominique de Villepin says.

"It is all part of the cycle of life, and I think that Anselm shows that by considering time in three different dimensions – human time, cosmic time and geological time."

The gold appears as the sky in a number of mountain landscapes that Kiefer painted in 2021 and 2022. De Villepin, who was close to the late French-Chinese artist Zao Wou-Ki, suggests that the series has echoes of the Asian ink art tradition of multiple perspectives.

"When things don't change any more, they are dead. Another beautiful installation in the show is a bicycle with bricks. You can feel that the bricks are waiting to play a role in history, to get onto the wheel of fortune, to seize a fantastic opportunity to rebuild the world," he says.

Kiefer himself is less ebullient, but he does not despair.

"Art is always cynical. And cynical encompasses being critical. But I am hopeful. Hope has nothing to do with optimism. It is simply that you expect something that is different."

"Hortus Conclusus", Gagosian Hong Kong, 7/F Pedder Building, 12 Pedder Street, Central, Tue-Sat, 11am-7pm, May 17-Aug 5.

"Golden Age", Villepin, G-2/F, 53-55 Hollywood Road, Central, Sun-Wed 11am-6pm (by appointment only), Thurs to Sat, 11am-7pm (open to the public), May 19 - September.



Your ashen hair, Shulamith (1981), by Anselm Kiefer. Photo courtesy of Gagosian Gallery and the artist