

GAGOSIAN



Anselm Kiefer, Palazzo Strozzi review — rebellious angels and radiation-paintings mark a return to form *The artist's tendency to grandiosity is well tempered in his Florence show*

Jackie Wullschläger



'Fall of the Angel' greets visitors to the Palazzo Strozzi © Anselm Kiefer. Photo: Ela Bialkowska, OKNO Studio. Courtesy Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi

In Florence's Palazzo Strozzi, German king of spectacle Anselm Kiefer meets his match. His exceptional exhibition *Fallen Angels* begins in the vast colonnaded courtyard with archangel Michael, a huge dynamic figure with outstretched wings, swooping across an eight-metre translucent gold ground. Below, rebel angels plummet into Kiefer's chaotic charcoal, shellac and fabric surfaces — our own dark material world, animated by the crowds thronging this inner square in the city centre. As Kiefer turns the popular Strozzi courtyard, with its wide benches and

ample sheltered spaces, into an arena for a sumptuous collision between heaven and earth, this gleaming opening painting “Fall of the Angel” stops in their tracks those ambling in from fashionable via Tornabuoni or the bars on Piazza Strozzi. Kiefer’s is a brand new mixed-media piece, but his archangel is a Renaissance interloper — he is an enlarged version of Luca Giordano’s St Michael — and, for a moment as you enter, it seems that an old gilded altarpiece has wandered in from a church or the nearby Uffizi.

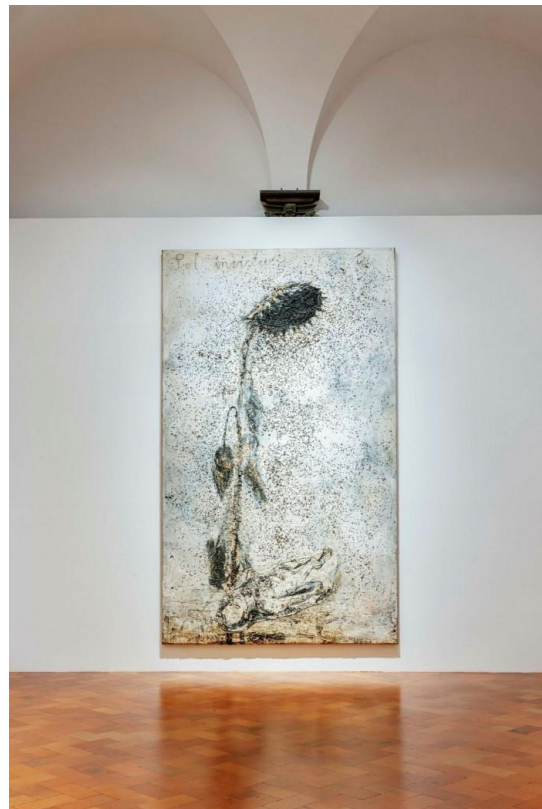
In the first upstairs room, the rebellious angels return, this time as so many empty three-dimensional tunics, hanging off a toxic blue-green canvas. A gigantic sharp-edged wing — an actual dented wing from a military aircraft, relic of wartime disaster — juts out menacingly, sorrowfully, across the grand piano nobile gallery.



Kiefer’s painting ‘Lucifer’, with a dented wing from a military aircraft jutting out of the canvas © Anselm Kiefer. Photo: Ela Bialkowska, OKNO Studio. Courtesy Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi

This painting is called “Lucifer”; it could as well be Icarus, or any rebel or dreamer flying too close to the sun. Sunflowers, in a pair of gold-leaf still lifes crazily expanded to six metres, tower over us too; Kiefer plays on their anthropomorphic pathos, heads turned towards us as they droop and fade, their stalks lovely curling arabesques, one entwined with a plaster and terracotta gilded snake. Kiefer inscribes these to Heliogabalus, the decadent teenage emperor from Syria who tried to establish the cult of the sun in Rome and was assassinated.

Five centuries ago, the Strozzi family built their austere, colossal stone palace, with three magnificent portals each opening on to a different street, radiating arches and enormous mullioned windows, to outdo the Medici’s home in scale and drama — 15 properties were demolished to make room. Hubris was duly punished: shortly after the palace’s completion, Filippo Strozzi the Younger was imprisoned and murdered by the Medici in their nearby fortress.



© Anselm Kiefer. Photo: Ela Bialkowska, OKNO Studio. Courtesy Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi (2)

Now Kiefer has moved in with further tales of transient glory and vaulting ambitions, not least his own. *Fallen Angels* is the most engaging, successful contemporary response to this formidable building since Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi began hosting exhibitions in 2006.

Including “*Heroic Symbols*”, photographs reprising Kiefer’s 1969 degree show where he posed making the Nazi salute in Paestum, Rome and other places emblematic of early western civilisation — he expected “the highest grade or nothing at all” — the exhibition is something of a mini-retrospective, as well as featuring pieces made especially for Florence. The self-portrait “*Sol Invictus*” (*Unconquered Sun*, 1995), a painting where the artist lies on the ground drenched in life-renewing sunflower seeds, declares his customary unwavering self-conviction, but most of the display feels fresh, questioning and in lively debate with Renaissance ideas and its setting.



'Irradiated Paintings', a floor-to-ceiling immersive installation of 60 discoloured canvases from the past four decades © Ela Bialkowska/Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi

The showpiece, “*Irradiated Paintings*” (1983-2023), is a floor-to-ceiling immersive installation of 60 densely layered, discoloured canvases from the last four decades, abstractions more or less of wracked landscapes, cities, dying flowers. The paintings have themselves been further scarred by a process of industrial galvanisation: being submerged in what Kiefer calls “baths of electrolysis . . . a sort of nuclear radiation inside containers. Now they are suffering from radiation sickness and have become temporarily marvellous.” An extensive central table with a mirrored surface dizzyingly reflects the whole thing and ourselves; staring at images of decay infinitely repeated and refracted, we peer down a hellhole.

It’s mesmerising: a fairground mirror-gimmick; a provocation recalling the horrors of Chernobyl and other nuclear disasters; a meditation on fragility and transformation; a joke (intentional?) on Kiefer’s own oeuvre — all the works across 40 years look the same — and also a boast about painting’s ability imaginatively to shape space, as altarpieces and frescoes once did.



The gamble of Kiefer's career has been to make horror beautiful © Anselm Kiefer. Photo: Ela Bialkowska, OKNO Studio. Courtesy Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi

It is therefore the show's most theatrical dialogue with the Renaissance. Preceded by a deliberately clumsy, bombastic canvas scrawled "Raffaello" and "La Scuola di Atene" which caricatures numerous philosophers' heads, "Irradiated Paintings" as an installation references Raphael's immersive Stanza della Segnatura in the Vatican. There "The School of Athens" is part of a cycle claiming harmony between ancient philosophy and Christian teaching — a foundational work of Renaissance optimistic humanism. Kiefer's tragicomic scenario of blurry disintegration-by-radiation is its parodic opposite.

Kiefer's art begins, he has said, with "all this catastrophe in my biography" — he was born in 1945 in Germany, grew up amid its bombed ruins and believes that mankind is "generally ill, we are constructed wrong". The gamble of his career has been to make horror beautiful — to turn inside-out Adorno's question about the possibility of art after Auschwitz — and thus to depict defeat without being, or appearing, defeated. While evoking rubble as its basis, his aesthetic is one of construction, layering, rebuilding, precariously, absurdly, from ruins.



© *Ela Bialkowska/Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi*

Even more than Palazzo Ducale for his single-room showstopper during the 2022 Venice Biennale, Palazzo Strozzi's solemn imposing architecture is a superb foil for all this. The show's most gorgeous room stars three new gold-ground architectonic paintings, the tottering fantastical townscapes "A phantom city, phaked of philim pholk" and "archaic zelotypia and the odium

teleologicum” — the titles inspired by *Finnegans Wake* — and “Cynara”, relating the myth of the nymph who rejected Zeus and was transformed into an artichoke, soft within, prickly outside. Kiefer has studded this canvas with 20 real, gilded artichokes.

From his statuesque, unstable “Women of Antiquity” series — figures moulded in plaster and resin from 19th-century-style wedding dresses, with assorted symbolic heads — Florence shows two brilliantly contrasting pieces of shaky hope versus rubble and violence. “Ave Maria turris eburnea” (Hail Mary, Ivory Tower), a Madonna whose face and neck form a column of white semi-ruined edifices echoing those in his permanent Milan installation “Seven Heavenly Palaces”, inspired by Jewish mysticism, faces “Nemesis”, the Greek goddess of vengeance with a boulder for a head.

Since his 2014 Royal Academy retrospective, Kiefer’s art has often seemed repetitive, overproduced, expensive decoration. Venice’s Palazzo Ducale presentation and now Palazzo Strozzi’s judiciously selected exhibition won me back. In Florence, Kiefer’s tendency to grandiosity is tempered as he confronts balanced Renaissance classicism, while the distinctive visual language he has evolved for his tragic vision of history holds its own. He will be 80 next year; *Fallen Angels* marks a return to his best form — inventive, surprising, enchanting.

To July 21, palazzostrozzi.org

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