The Financial Times
February 6, 2026

GAGOSIAN

FINANCIAL TIMES

Anselm Kiefer, master of spectacle, on the lost women of history

The artist's stunning portraits of female alchemists shine in Milan's bomb-scarred Palazzo Reale

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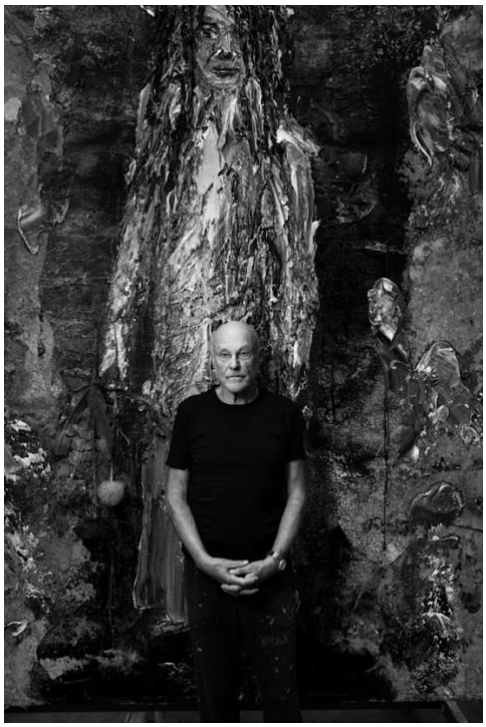
Anselm Kiefer's 'Le Alchimiste' in the Sala delle Cariatidi of the Palazzo Reale, Milan © Photographed by Ela Bialkowska, Okno Studio

Pale winter sun bounces off gilded stucco and cracked walls, and rows of mirrors reflect the shattered bodies of the haughty sculptures that once held up the columns in Palazzo Reale's Hall of Caryatids.

In Napoleon's time, the classical Sala delle Cariatidi was Europe's largest, most elaborate ballroom, dripping chandeliers. In 1943, British bombs devastated it. Left open to the elements for years afterwards, the Hall was never fully restored, and has survived as a mix of ruin and grandeur: an emblem of suffering, resilience and memory.

When I push through the throng around the Duomo — Milan is awash with visitors for the Winter Olympics — and cross the square to enter this fascinating, silent, elegiac room, I am welcomed by 80-year-old Anselm Kiefer.

Dressed all in black, lean, agile, eagle-eyed, he is zigzagging between dozens of monumental, freestanding golden depictions of Renaissance women emerging from a churning darkness. They too are multiplied in the mirrors, and also gaze on the solemn caryatids. These figures comprise Le Alchimiste (The Women Alchemists), a stunning exhibition that is the highlight of Milan's Olympics cultural showcase.



Anselm Kiefer, photographed in front of one of his 'Alchemists' series of paintings © Paolo Pellegrin

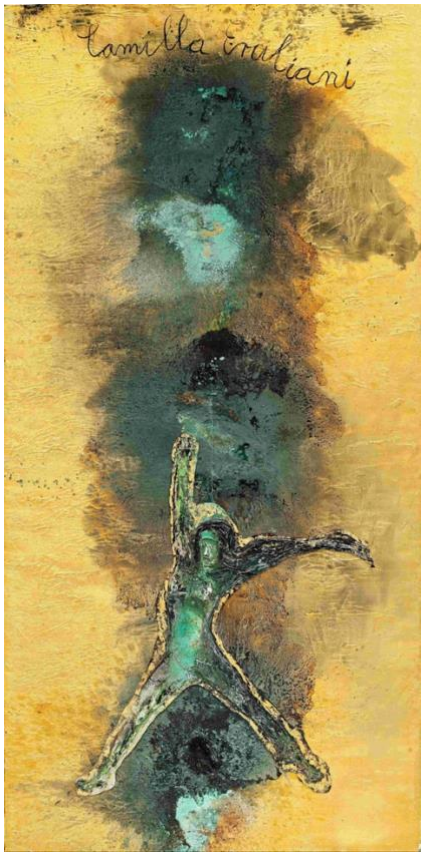
Fingering fresh paint — "oh good, it's dry" — Kiefer immediately directs my attention to the weathered stone sculptures. "The caryatids inspired me," he says. "They are so wonderful. In Germany they would have restored them, but in Italy, no — the Italians are more elegant. Unrestored, they're more abstract."

Imagined with great physical intensity, his own abstracted portrayals return forgotten women scientists, alchemists and apothecaries to glorious textured life — "a correction to history", Kiefer hopes — and magnificently animate the mutilated Hall. Built from agitated, nervy marks on surfaces burnished in gold,

or charred by electrolysis to produce glowing emerald-turquoise hues, then encrusted with lead, straw, tree branches, petals, Kiefer's women are, like the broken caryatids, majestic, alluring and fragile.

"Sophie Brahe", sister-collaborator of Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe, imitates the caryatids' columnar form and upward surge; rising towards the sun, she lifts a shimmering crucible above her head, a harvest of knowledge. "Isabella Cortese" is a luminous nude in a moonlit herb garden; above her hovers a sculpted volume, I Secreti, her bestseller (1561) of medicinal and alchemical recipes.

Kiefer uses mixed media to portray Sophie Brahe, sister-collaborator of astronomer Tycho . . .



. . . and 16th-century pharmacist Camilla Erculiani © Photographed by Nina Slavcheva

Resembling a spangled dancer, limbs stretching in all directions, “Camilla Erculiani” pivots towards us in a puff of coloured smoke; she ran Padua’s pharmacy Tre Stelle, debating with doctors and professors, and dodged the Inquisition by publishing her research in Krakow.

Each portrayal is distinctive; together they form a kaleidoscope of images that fragment, shift, combine and recombine through the mirrored reflections — including ours as we wander around. So Kiefer, master of immersive spectacle, muses on the chances of history, the spaces between official learning where these “courageous and obstinate women” sought knowledge as emancipation, spirituality as a sort of resistance.

Kiefer has “long been interested in women who make history” — “Women of the Revolution” and “Women of Antiquity” are earlier installations — and spent years studying obscure female alchemists. “Some were witches, some developed medicine,” he shrugs cheerfully.

His favourite? Grinning, he leads me to “Anna Maria Zieglerin”, a writhing figure with wild eyes and lurid grimace: “she’s horrible.” Her quest was not only gold but potions to choose a child’s sex, or speed up pregnancy; she was burnt alive as a poisoner/murderer in 1575. Kiefer was “thinking of [neurologist Jean-Martin] Charcot’s hysterical patients” for this portrait — “and she is my mother.”

The grotesque German/Austrian expressionist tradition is a potent, violent interloper in the exquisitely proportioned Hall. Holding a dried poisonous foxglove to her lips, “Lady Margaret Clifford”, a proud independent Tudor alchemist, is a green-faced femme fatale as fierce, angular and wide-eyed as any Kirchner portrait. “Terror for an artist is beautiful,” Kiefer says.

“Isabella of Aragon”, swooning Danaë-like in a deluge of gold flakes, and “Leona Constantia”, a mournfully gorgeous willowy silhouette swaying in rhythm to a tilting sunflower referencing her treatise “The Sunflower of the Wise”, recall Klimt and Schiele.

Kiefer also uses mixed media for his swooning Isabella of Aragon and . . .

. . . 16th-century alchemist Anna Zieglerin © Photographs: Nina Slavcheva

The Alchemists are sensual and sumptuous; the figures, Kiefer explains, “are part of the painting, not portraits, but there’s a moment in the development of the colours that it seems to be someone.” Of the superimposed layers, mixed media, transformations by oxidation, combustion, patinas, sediments from electrolysis, he says “it’s all chance and surprise. I’m just the organiser.”

Weren’t most alchemists charlatans? “Newton was a scientist and an alchemist, it always goes together,” Kiefer shoots back. “At a certain moment, the scientific becomes alchemy, it goes beyond, it opens doors. Alchemy is something you can’t explain exactly but you see there is something. It gets spiritual.” His Alchemists seem, in part, a self-portrait. “I’m a man of the Earth but also — here” — he points upwards, to heaven. Art, like alchemy, is transubstantiation, matter to spirit.

Le Alchimiste marks a hat-trick for Kiefer, the third dazzling recent installation in dialogue with iconic Italian buildings: the blackened war paintings at Palazzo Ducale for the 2022 Venice biennale; the

baroque falling angels at Palazzo Strozzi, Florence (2024); and now this intent engagement with Milan's Hall of Caryatids. Picasso displayed "Guernica" here in 1953. For Kiefer, whose oeuvre similarly turns on destruction and regeneration, the precious 46-metre-long room is — although he "wasn't allowed a nail in the wall" — the perfect arena.

Kiefer, born two years after bombs fell on Palazzo Reale, grew up in war-ravaged Germany and believes that "we are constructed wrong. Man has a poor mental construction." His Alchemists celebrates the illumination of knowledge, but its rich earth-to-heaven, gold/black tonality evokes too the fear, darkness, injustice, sheer brutality in Renaissance society.

Milanese aristocrat "Caterina Sforza" — "she looks a little like a man, no?" — in Kiefer's frontal portrayal is a pitiless warrior, brandishing branches like weapons; she led armies, and had her enemies hideously killed; her scientific experiments — opium as an anaesthetic, elixirs for longevity — probably aimed at enhancing her power.

Kiefer's rendering of Milanese aristocrat/warrior Caterina Sforza and . . .

. . . French mineralogist Martine de Bertereau © Photographed by Nina Slavcheva

Pioneering French mineralogist “Martine de Bertereau”, who prospected for mines from Hungary to, apparently, Bolivia, is reduced to a mere gold outline under the weight of a gleaming stone; charged with necromancy, she languished and died imprisoned in Vincennes in the 1640s.

Despite the female alchemists’ often hard fates, Kiefer’s engrossing resurrection of original, thinking women seems to me the most joyous of his 2020s Italian trio of exhibitions. “No! I had fun in Venice,” he replies, stressing the word “light” as he reels off that show’s lengthy title “Questi scritti, quando verranno bruciati, daranno finalmente un po’ di luce” (“These writings, when burned, will finally cast a little light”). The Venice piece is back in his studio — “I’m redoing the roof.” He winks at the curators trailing us: “I shall give it to a museum — if someone wants it.”

Kiefer is in ebullient mood. Having finished his Alchemists, he is painting nymphs, for an autumn exhibition in London: “There are nymphs of the wind, storms, air. Art history is full of nymphs and now I continue that. I’ve stopped drinking and smoking. I have 20 more years at least.”

And the future of Le Alchimiste? Could it remain permanently in Milan, in poignant dialogue with the Hall of Caryatids' palimpsest of nobility and decay? "Yes!" he says, grabbing my arm with a conniving chuckle. "Write that they should take it forever!"

To September 27, palazzorealemilano.it