

ANSELM KIEFER

The Woodcuts

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Anselm Kiefer

The Woodcuts

18 March to 19 June 2016

Anselm Kiefer is one of the most important artists of the present era. And to mark his 70th birthday, the Albertina is showing over 35 monumental woodcut masterpieces in a first-ever comprehensive retrospective. This exhibition presents important series and thematic groups by Kiefer such as *The Paths of World Wisdom: Hermann's Battle*, the *Rhine* pictures, and *Brünhilde - Grane*, all of which bear witness to the artist's intense interest in German history, cultural history, and mythologies.

Anselm Kiefer is possibly our era's greatest metaphysician, unique in his particular devotion to the existential questions of humankind. While his view of history - particularly of German history - gives him cause for despair, he ultimately managed to make peace with the contradictory nature of human beings by reading works by the great mystics and the protagonists of the Enlightenment. In his oeuvre, John of the Cross has a place equal to that of Immanuel Kant, and the Jewish Kabbalah also receives attention - as does the mystical and poetic world of English philosopher Robert Fludd. Francisco de Quevedo y Villegas, Pierre Corneille, Paul Celan, and Ingeborg Bachmann likewise belong to the German artist's personal cosmos. In Kiefer's inclusion of his own self as a theme in his pictorial world beginning in the 1990s, after many years of travelling to the Middle East and to Asia, he formulates experiences that go beyond the realm of the empirical. As a standing or prone nude, Kiefer depicts himself in a harmonious relationship with the universe, in the firm belief that "we are the membrane between the macrocosm and the microcosm".

These more recent works, created during the 1990s, continue the iconography of the fatal in German history and its mythologisation that can be seen in earlier works by the artist. The tragedy and the irrelevance of everything great are the themes of Kiefer's anti-heroic woodcuts, the monumental formats of which cause the motivic metaphors of downfall to seemingly weigh all the heavier.

The woodcut collages illustrate Kiefer's unbridled experimentation with content as well as with technique. Numerous steps, often extending over periods of years, are involved in the revision of pre-existing works. Woodcuts have been a focus of Kiefer since the 1970s. It was in 1974 that he first explored the possibilities of relief printing: several portraits were realised as hand prints, which he later on developed into important elements of his monumental compositions.

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Much like in his paintings and his installations, he relies on intuition when creating his woodcut collages - mixing prints from various decades, adding paint to them, and ultimately creating unique works.

A broad range of materials is employed. The pictures are worked on and worked over layer-by-layer in a collage technique specific to the artist. Kiefer uses shellac to lend the works a hue that gives the impression of something old and yellowed, thus underlining the historic nature of their content. As a whole, these processes enable him to invest his works with associations and interpretations. Not reproduction, but the “remixing” of materials, themes, ideas, and pictorial compositions stands in the foreground.

Despite their substantive and formal independence, the woodcuts resonate with other groups of works by Kiefer, including paintings and objects. But by virtue of their special materiality and the particular artistic approach that results, they transport a quality all their own—one that diverges from the gigantic collages and objects. The numerous reworkings and the unique materials that go into every woodcut by Anselm Kiefer thus make each of these creations a unique statement in and of itself, though all of them still remain formally interlinked with his pictorial worlds on multiple levels.

Wall texts

BRÜNHILDE – GRANE

The subject matter of *Brünhilde – Grane* goes back to a story in the medieval heroic epic *The Song of the Nibelungs*. Brünhilde's horse, Grane, is the only faithful companion of the heroine, who is beset by intrigues. In order to escape the curse of the ring forged from the stolen Rhine gold, Brünhilde volunteers to die by fire; her steadfast horse carries her into the flames.

The Song of the Nibelungs was instrumentalized in the Third Reich to glorify “Germanic virtues” and nationalist ideas. Richard Wagner, who in the mid-nineteenth century composed the four-part opera cycle *The Ring of the Nibelung*, was appropriated by the National Socialist regime and exploited for its cultic ideas. After World War II, *The Song of the Nibelungs* was tabooed for a long time and was only gradually rehabilitated.

WAYS OF WORLDLY WISDOM: THE BATTLE OF HERMANN

Anselm Kiefer had come across Jesuit father Bernhard Jansen's history *Ways of Worldly Wisdom* of 1924 in a library and borrowed its title. The *Battle of Hermann* (*Battle of the Teutoburg Forest*) took place in 9 AD. In the Teutoburg Forest, Roman legions led by Varus encountered the Teutons led by Arminius, who emerged victorious from the battle. German historians later referred to Arminius as Hermann, and he became one of Germany's most important heroes. Especially in the nineteenth century, the Battle of Hermann was interpreted as a symbol of national freedom, and the forest became the site of the founding of German history. Many historical and mythical events are associated with this place – not just the Battle of Hermann, but also *The Song of the Nibelungs*.

The woodcut portraits of representatives of German history and culture are based on historical publications from the National Socialist era. The portraits depict writers, such as Heinrich von Kleist; philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant; important figures from German history, such as Otto von Bismarck; and propaganda heroes, such as Horst Wessel, whom the Nazis had stylized as a martyr. In this way, Kiefer unmasks these figures' appropriation by the National Socialists as propagandistic distortion.

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THE RHINE

For centuries, the Rhine has been considered a national symbol of Germany and at the same time delineates the political and cultural border with France. Particularly during the epoch of Romanticism and its sentimental idealization of nature, an enthusiastic fascination for the Rhine valley developed, fired not only by numerous travel reports by such writers as Friedrich Hölderlin, Heinrich Heine, and Lord Byron, but also by the paintings of William Turner. With his opera cycle *The Ring of the Nibelung*, which is set on the Rhine, Richard Wagner paid a musical tribute to this “Rhenish Romanticism”. Kiefer, however, also concentrates on the political and martial challenges that have always been associated with the Rhine. In this group of works, a built culture – which also encompasses bunkers and National Socialist buildings – is combined with a nature laden with cultural meaning. Germany’s complex history is reflected in these pictorial motifs.

On architecture

In the *Rhine* series, Kiefer frequently combines the depiction of the Rhine landscape with architecture. For its military and stately buildings, the German Reich employed the architects favored by Hitler: Paul Ludwig Troost; the future NS Minister of Armaments, Albert Speer; and Speer’s protégé Wilhelm Kreis. The buildings depicted quote designs for the new Museum District in Berlin and the military fortifications of two historic defense lines: the Atlantic Wall was built by the German regime from 1942 onward along Europe’s northwest coast as a protection against an Allied invasion, whereas the Maginot Line had been built by France from 1930 onward along its eastern borders, between the Mediterranean and the Belgian frontier. It was named after Defense Minister André Maginot.

Citation

I grew up on the Rhine, the border river. But even then it was not just a geographical border. When I think back today, there are roots that trail off at the threshold to the prohibited area, the area that, in a wondrous way, is always empty due to the incongruence between desire and fulfillment. As a child, of course, I still had no idea of that country called France. There were the rows of poplars, the beginnings of roads. But, for me, behind this lay an empty, uninhabited area, which would have to be filled up at a later point.

Anselm Kiefer

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MADAME DE STAËL: GERMANY

In the nineteenth century, the book *De l'Allemagne (About Germany)*, written by the French author Germaine de Staël after her journey to Germany, fundamentally influenced the French public's view of the country. When first published in 1810, the book was immediately banned by Napoleon, for it described an idealized Germany that was in contrast to Napoleon's militarist, centralist and dictatorially governed France of those years. After 1815, the image of a country of music and literature lovers, philosophy enthusiasts, and regional diversity designed by Madame de Staël would impact on the way in which the educated classes in France perceived Germany for decades. Germany's reputation as a "land of poets and thinkers" goes back to *De l'Allemagne*.

Moreover, *De l'Allemagne* introduced the publication of a number of travel reports describing the Rhine as a linear national border between Germany and France. The book can be seen as the beginning of a revised perception of the border that would soon also be adopted by German travelers. De Staël's work substantially contributed to a rapprochement between the two cultures that was marked by mutual interest.

Madame de Staël's treatise also lent its name to the exhibition at the Louvre in 2013 for which Anselm Kiefer created an extensive group of works entitled *The Rhine*.

THE RHINEMAIDENS

In *The Rhinegold*, the first part of Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung*, Woglinde, Wellgunde, and Flosshilde appear as the guardians of the gold hidden in the Rhine. Having fought for the Rhine maidens' love in vain, dwarf-king Alberich steals the treasure and forges a ring from it. The renunciation of love and the gold from the Rhine, now forged into a ring, lend him great power. The ring passes into the possession of Wotan, the king of the gods, who uses it as a payment for his castle of Valhalla. The Rhine maidens try to retrieve the ring, yet without success. Only in the final part of the myth does Brünhilde manage to return the ring to the three guardians, so that they would be able dissolve it and give the "pure" gold back to the river.

In his Rhinegold works, Anselm Kiefer combines the central motif of the Rhine with female nudes. The confining vertical bars in the form of monumental trees have disappeared. The Rhine maidens are viewed from close up as keepers of the Rhine gold, with the words *Die Reintöchter* (a play on words with the German terms *Rhein* for *Rhine* and *rein* for *pure*) inscribed in the sky. By eliminating this one letter from the word *Rhein*, Kiefer refers to a line in the poem *The Rhine* by Friedrich Hölderlin: *ein Rätsel ist Reinentprungenes (Pure source is a riddle)*. At the same time, the lacking *h* might also refer to another type of purity: the "purity" of the fools and unwise heroes, whose fate it is to go in search of the Rhine gold and fail in their desire to find it, reverberates in the works Kiefer created for the Bayreuth Festival in the Wagner Year in 2013.

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FOR ROBERT FLUDD

Since the nineties, Anselm Kiefer has been preoccupied with the treatises of Robert Fludd, an English scholar of the Renaissance. The latter's observations, harking back as far as Plato, are based on the assumption of a fundamental analogy between microcosm (the human body) and macrocosm (the universe).

In the woodcut *for Robert Fludd*, a male figure – Kiefer's self-portrait – has been turned upside down, with a giant, apparently dried-out black sunflower looming over it. A multi-layered symbol, the sunflower also represents the south of France and pays homage to Vincent van Gogh.

The titles *I Hold All Indias in My Hand* and *Traigo todas las Indias en mi mano* are borrowed from a seventeenth-century poem by the Spanish writer Francisco de Quevedo y Villegas, with the upright standing male figure also representing the artist's self-portrait. The figure is surrounded by a geographical sketch of the countries that once formed the East and West Indies.

THAT OBSCURE CLARITY THAT FALLS FROM THE STARS

Kiefer borrowed the title *Cette obscure clarté qui tombe des étoiles* (*That Obscure Clarity that Falls from the Stars*), which he inscribed along the woodcut's upper margin, from the play *Le Cid*, written in 1636 by the French dramatist Pierre Corneille. Within Corneille's play, the combination of seemingly contradictory elements (obscure clarity) contained in this quote stands for the tension felt in the face of an imminent fight of the protagonist Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar alias El Cid, a knight of the Reconquista, who became a national hero in the modern age.

In Kiefer's woodcut, the tension between light and dark alluded to in Corneille's play is reflected in the complex symbol of the sunflower. The picture's light-colored surface is almost completely dotted with dark sunflower seeds, which seem to precipitate from the sky onto the wavy furrows of a landscape like black rain.

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THE STARRY SKY ABOVE ME AND THE MORAL LAW WITHIN ME

The title *The Starry Sky Above Me and the Moral Law Within Me*, a quotation from Immanuel Kant, first appeared in Kiefer's work in 1980, when it was used for a photograph reworked in acrylic and emulsion. With his statement, the German philosopher relates the external, physically perceptible world to morals as part of man's inner nature and brings both concepts together in human consciousness. But different from the predetermined laws of nature, human nature is characterized by the phenomenon of man's free will. For Kant, the development of a well-ordered co-existence resulting from a freedom of decision based on reason is just as great a miracle as is the complexity of natural laws.

In Kiefer's work, a man – the artist himself – lies beneath the infinite expanse of a starry sky. In the image, the quote from Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* and the English scholar Robert Fludd's microcosm-macrocosm analogy merge. According to Fludd, each plant on earth has its analogy in the sky in the form of a star. In his natural philosophy, macrocosm, i.e., the universe, is reflected in microcosm – the human being and its terrestrial environment. Everything that happens on the one level has its correspondence on the other.

HORTUS CONCLUSUS

In medieval iconography, such as in Martin Schongauer's *Madonna of the Rose Garden*, the Virgin Mary and the Child were often depicted in a *hortus conclusus* (Latin for "enclosed garden"), which can be interpreted as a metaphor for the paradisiacal garden. The term generally describes secluded and secret gardens surrounded by tall walls or hedges. Primarily in the Middle Ages, they served as private sanctuaries for contemplation and meditation.

Kiefer has depicted himself lying on the ground underneath sunflowers in a yoga posture called *Savasana* (*Corpse Pose*). The aim of this rest position is to release tension from body and mind and connect the floating body with the earth and cosmos. At the same time, Kiefer refers to the idea of a constant exchange between microcosm (the human being) and macrocosm (the universe), which can be traced back to Plato and was revived by the English philosopher Robert Fludd in the Renaissance.

Biography of the artist

- 1945 Born in Donaueschingen, Baden-Württemberg, on March 8
- 1966–1970 Studies under Peter Dreher and Horst Antes at the Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste, Freiburg im Breisgau and Karlsruhe
- from 1970 Kiefer lives and works in a former schoolhouse near Buchen in the Odenwald region. Exchange with Joseph Beuys
- 1974 He prints his first woodcuts and integrates them into his artist books *Das deutsche Volksgesicht Kohle für 2000 Jahre* [The Face of the German People. Coal for 2000 Years] and *Der Nibelungen Leid* [The Sorrow of the Nibelungen].
- 1976–1980 He begins working on his series of woodcuts Ways of Worldly Wisdom: The Battle of Hermann.
- 1977–1979 The first woodcuts devoted to the theme of Richard Wagner's Nibelung cycle are produced.
- 1980 Anselm Kiefer and Georg Baselitz exhibit in the West German Pavilion at the 39th Venice Biennale. The works provoke a controversy over "German motifs" in art after 1945.
- 1982 Kiefer prints the first woodblocks of the group of work The Rhine.
- 1984 His first comprehensive solo exhibition at the Düsseldorf Kunsthalle is subsequently also presented at the Musée d'Art modern de la Ville de Paris and the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.
- 1987–1989 A travelling exhibition through the USA, with stopovers at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, brings international success.
- 1991–1993 Kiefer travels to Asia, Australia, and South America. Relocating his studio to Southern France, he moves into the abandoned silk spinning factory of La Ribaute in Barjac.

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- 1996 He produces the series of woodcuts *I Hold All Indias in my Hand* and simultaneously begins work on a new serie, a tribute to the English philosopher Robert Fludd.
- 2007 In addition to his studio in Barjac, Kiefer establishes studios in Paris and in Croissy (east of Paris). He has large-scale solo exhibitions at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, and at the Grand Palais in Paris. Three of his works are acquired for the Louvre's collection.
- 2008 He is awarded the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade at the Frankfurt Book Fair.
- 2011 In New York he is honored with the Leo Baeck Medal for his efforts in German-Jewish reconciliation.
- 2014 The Royal Academy of Arts, London presents a retrospective of his work.
- 2015–2016 The Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris presents an overview of Kiefer's artist books produced between 1969 and 2015. At the same time, the Centre Pompidou and the Albertina, Vienna devote major exhibitions to the Artist.