First Year Student (April)

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Anselm Kiefer’s *Bohemia Lies By the Sea*

Profoundly complex and enigmatic, the work of German artist Anselm Kiefer consistently probes the traumatic memory of the Holocaust and World War Two era that forms the history of his nation. After the catastrophic consequences of the war, Germany was left psychically and culturally paralyzed from confronting and mourning the losses it suffered, especially the loss of Hitler as an ideal leader. Living in the midst of a society shocked by trauma, Kiefer confronts the “work of mourning” (*Trauerarbeit*) through aesthetics. Kiefer’s art is simultaneously marked by its place in relation to history and bound up with its place in a present shaped by the legacy of historical suffering.¹ Emblematic of the *Nachgeborenen*, or “those born after,” Kiefer’s work functions to explore Germany’s past while probing not only the fundamental question of what it means to be German, but also what it means to create in the aftermath of fascism and genocide.² In exploring the German identity and the identity of art itself, Kiefer draws from the nation’s history and culture, employing references to German literature, myth, art history, and philosophy to enrich the work’s meaning. While investigating questions about the German identity through engagement with the past, Kiefer also pushes viewers to form their own questions as they try to identify personally with his work, the meanings of which are characteristically enigmatic. In particular, Kiefer’s painting *Bohemia Lies by the Sea* invokes the viewer’s individual contemplation through its layered literary references encoded in its many layers of paint.

² Ibid., 7.
Anselm Kiefer was born in 1945 to non-Jewish parents in the town of Donaueschingen in Western Germany. The year of his birth unavoidably set his growth as a human being and as a painter alongside the growth of Germany in its postwar state. Early in his career he was considered a conceptual artist, but since his focus shifted to painting he has come to be regarded as a leader of Neo-Expressionism. Americans often perceive Kiefer as the figure of a lone ranger who fights individually to push through his nation’s collective repression of the fascist past. In actuality, Vergangenheitsbewältigung (“coming to terms with the past”) has been the chief theme of German intellectual life since the early 1960s, and as Kiefer’s work had started at the end of the decade, it was developed within this context.

Kiefer began his education at Albert-Ludwigs-Universität in Freiburg in 1965 as a law student, but soon turned the focus of his studies to art as a pupil of the painter Peter Dreher at the same university. His training as a painter was furthered at the Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Karlsruhe and then at the Staatliche Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, under Horst Antes and Joseph Beuys respectively. Upon meeting Beuys, history and myth became the main themes in Kiefer’s work as he sought through drawing to explore the layered way in which history unfolds from the center.

Although Kiefer is best known for his paintings that are immense in size and density (such as Bohemia Lies by the Sea, to be discussed later) his artistic versatility is more clearly exhibited when considering his early work. In 1969, toward the end of his time at the Art Academy in Karlsruhe, Kiefer traveled through France, Switzerland, and Italy to produce the

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4 Saltzman, Anselm Kiefer and Art after Auschwitz, 6.
photographic series *Occupations* (Fig. 1). Standing in front of historical monuments and lush landscapes, Kiefer photographed himself posing in the Hitler salute—a reenacting seen in Germany as taboo, and thus was highly provocative. Most of these photos showcase Kiefer saluting in an ironical way as he often stands in a subtly skewed manner or with a limp wrist. Kiefer included many of these photographs in two giant books reminiscent of scrapbooks, entitled *Heroic Symbols* and *For Genet*. Consisting of juxtaposed images, these books include Kiefer’s self-portraits of the Hitler salute in the form of both photographs and watercolors. In addition, these books contain watercolors of flowers and a wound-pierced sky interspersed with photographs of his studio, domestic interiors with women, building interiors, city exteriors, and military scenes. The series of images in which Kiefer personally explores Hitler’s character demonstrate his central concern with experiencing history as a prerequisite for understanding it.

Regarding these photos, Kiefer stated, “I do not identify with Hitler, but I have to reenact what [he] did just a little bit in order to understand the madness. That is why I make these attempts to become a fascist.” Of course, Kiefer’s personal attempt at coming to terms with German history in *Heroic Symbols* and *Genet* can be understood in a broader context in relation to the social movement facilitated by German film and television producers, playwrights, novelists, and students, all of whom were exasperated with the collective silence concerning the fascist past.

Kiefer’s *Occupations* photographs together with their related watercolors, as well as several larger paintings of 1970, were made in an art historical context in addition to simply a

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7 Ibid.
8 Ironically, Kiefer takes the name Heroic Symbols from an article of the same name in the February 1943 issue of the propaganda journal *Die Kunst im Deutschen Reich* (Art in the German Reich). This article exalts the power that the fine arts have in spreading the heroism of Germany’s past to the German people of the present.
10 Mann, "Kiefer, Anselm."
They reflect a communal turn among several German artists (such as Georg Baselitz, Jorg Immendorff, Markus Lupertz, and A. R. Penck) away from an interest in cool abstraction towards the use of figurative art with German subjects. These works of Kiefer’s also reflect Marcel Duchamp’s photographic self-portraits (Fig. 2) and the proto-Conceptual photographic self-portraits of Yves Klein, in turn comprising the beginnings of Conceptual art. Kiefer’s personal form of Conceptual art is lyrically conducted in his watercolors which emphasize the luminosity and fluidity that are characteristic of the medium.

One such watercolor of 1970, Winter Landscape, (Fig. 3) anthropomorphically depicts a large disembodied head of a woman fused with the sky. Blood drips out of her wounded neck in a ribbon that connects the sky and the snow-covered earth. This scene in which the expansive landscape (depicted in a deep perspective) and a wounded human being become molded into one unavoidably evokes the mood of the wounds of World War II—wounds that still stain through the blanketing of snow and time. As Kiefer has thematized the concrete trace of historical wounding from the beginning of his career, the unnamed victims of Germany’s history are considered to be represented in the beheaded figure. This painting’s historicizing of melancholia and tragedy in terms of the post-war, post-Holocaust present is fundamentally characteristic of Kiefer’s art, and thus is a significant theme to consider when contemplating any of Kiefer’s work. Interestingly, another legitimate interpretation of the poem suggests that the figure in Kiefer’s painting may in fact be a self-portrait.

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14 Saltzman, Anselm Kiefer and Art after Auschwitz, 8.
16 Ibid., 22.
17 Saltzman, Anselm Kiefer and Art after Auschwitz, 81.
18 Ibid., 92.
painting can be construed essentially support that the meaning of Kiefer’s work is particularly up to the viewer’s personal interpretation, in turn necessitating the total engagement of the viewer.

As much as Kiefer’s work is shaped by its exploration of the legacy of historical trauma, it is also equally shaped by rich philosophical, mythological, and literary references. Kiefer once stated, “One always wants to be someone else. I myself would like to be a poet, and use nothing but a pen. But that’s not how it is.” Perhaps Kiefer’s precise profession was not that of a poet, but his work certainly possesses a distinct poetic quality created by the multiple layers of thinkers, authors, and poets from whom he draws inspiration. Much of Kiefer’s art in particular quotes the Jewish poet Paul Celan, whose work reflects a deeply personal connection to the Holocaust; although the poet survived the trauma of the Romanian labor camps, his parents tragically lost their lives in a German concentration camp. Kiefer and Celan maintained a relationship unique in its longevity and depth; in fact, Celan is considered responsible for enabling Kiefer to confront memories of the Holocaust by helping him escape the ties of ambivalent feelings towards the Third Reich. For more than twenty five years, Celan’s writings have permeated Kiefer’s work and have guided his artistic metamorphoses. In particular, Celan’s well-known poem “Death Fugue” influenced much of Kiefer’s work through its lyrical and haunting depiction of life in the concentration camps from a Jewish perspective. Kiefer was so struck by the poem that in 1981 he created an entire series of landscapes devoted to it.

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20 The list of Kiefer’s inspirations includes but is not limited to Rilke, Jean Genet, Huysmans, Richard Wagner, Stefan George, Hans Henny Jahnn, Robert Musil, Theodor Storm, Nikolaus Lenau, Adalbert Stifter, Josef Weinheber, Richard Dehmel, Nietzsche, Jung, Heidegger, Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx, Walter Benjamin, Ingeborg Bachmann, and Paul Celan.
22 This series of landscapes specifically focused on the dichotomy between the allegorical figures Margarete and Shulamith, who embody different ideals of “spouse”: Margarete simultaneously
4) Some scholars believe that “Death Fugue” also served as inspiration for Winter Landscape due to their similarities both in content and in the tone through which the subject is rendered in each.

Paul Celan’s work comprises only part of the multiple strata of references employed in Kiefer’s art. As the act of quotation, whether direct or indirect, links the space between past and present, the echoing effect created by such quotation elegantly emulates the concept of memory. Powerfully enigmatic, Kiefer’s painting Bohemia Lies by the Sea (Fig. 5) particularly achieves such an effect by quoting a poem of the same title by Ingeborg Bachmann, a German poet whose influence on Kiefer was just as potent as Celan’s. In fact, much of Celan’s and Bachmann’s work is inspired by each other as a result of the troubled love affair that lasted between the two poets over the span of twelve years. Bachmann quotes Celan in her poem Bohemia Lies by the Sea, in addition to quoting Shakespeare, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein. Thus, when Kiefer inscribes the title of Bachmann’s poem on his painting, he in turn quotes these other figures as well as the influences from whom these figures derived their own inspiration. This creates a complex layering of infinite images within images, an effect that Kiefer employs to echo the concept of memory. This memory is not only emblematic of a collective German identity from the perspective of the Nachgeboren, but also becomes tangible to any viewer as he or she grasps at the threads of all humankind which Kiefer encodes in the complex layers of his painting.

represents a German figure and the Christian figure of Mary, while Shulamith represents the Jewish figure in the Song of Songs.

23 Zelizer, Visual Culture and the Holocaust, 75.
24 Saltzman, Anselm Kiefer and Art After Auschwitz, 71.
25 Lauterwein, Anselm Kiefer/Paul Celan: Myth, Mourning and Memory, 15.
26 Ibid., 180, 187.
27 Ibid., 181.
Piecing together an interpretation of the ambiguous meaning of the painting *Bohemia Lies by the Sea* requires one to consider in greater detail its outermost layer of inspiration, Bachmann and her poem itself. Born in Austria, Bachmann was the daughter of a teacher who became a member of the National Socialist Party, and it is a result of this background that she was able to depict so clearly in her poetry the psychological rift that tore her generation. Kiefer esteems Bachmann to be a ‘monolith’ of German poetry, regarding her even more dearly than he does Celan.\(^{28}\) *Bohemia Lies by the Sea* is the first work of many that Kiefer devoted to her. Bachmann wrote the poem in 1965 after enduring a bout of serious depression, from which she recovered by reading Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, a play whose happy conclusion stems from a journey to Bohemia. In reading the play, Bachmann was struck by a phrase that she took to symbolize her personal recovery: the line ‘Bohemia. A desert country by the sea.’ In her poem, she expresses the longing for the utopian construct of Bohemia.\(^{29}\) Of course, as with any utopia, this desire is unattainable—the former kingdom of Bohemia, landlocked in Central Europe, can never lie by the sea.\(^{30}\) Bachmann stated a few months before her death that the poem is meant “for all mankind, because it is the land of their hopes they will never reach.”\(^ {31}\) Despite this seemingly despondent attitude, one of the most important lines in the poem is “I’m not lost,” a line that implicitly can never be hopeless. Perhaps each individual’s personal form of Bohemia is unattainable, but the human condition is such that we keep hoping nevertheless.

Returning back to Kiefer’s *Bohemia Lies by the Sea*, one can more fully understand how the artist conveys multiple layers of meaning in the painting by considering the very form of the

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\(^{28}\) Ibid., 180.

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 187.


\(^{31}\) Lauterwein, *Anselm Kiefer/Paul Celan: Myth, Mourning and Memory*, 187.
work itself. Made of oil, emulsion, shellac, charcoal, and powdered paint on burlap, the painting is colossal in size: it is greater than six feet tall, and its length spans more than eighteen feet across. If its enormous size alone were not enough to seize the viewer’s attention, its strategic placement on a wall entirely to itself in an open, huge room of contemporary art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art is certainly enough to elicit a reaction from the viewer. One cannot help but feel awe when standing in the painting’s monumental presence. Although Kiefer likely did not have control over its attention-grabbing placement, his choice to utilize such a large canvas certainly demands that the viewer contemplate its meaning, not necessarily in the context of Germany’s past, but at least in relation to the viewer’s own personal identity. The painting portrays a vast field bisected by a rutted road receding in dramatically deep perspective towards a high horizon line. Interestingly, this composition has often been compared to Van Gogh’s *Crows over a Wheat Field* (Fig. 6). In Kiefer’s painting, the field is covered with poppies depicted in a manner consistent with its deep perspective. Representing remembrance and forgetting, the orange and pink poppy flowers embody the only bright colors in the painting, as the rest of the piece is rendered in analogous shades of green, blue, and gray, whose hues almost feel bleak. The spurts of color in the poppies seem to embody the hope that never truly leaves even within the midst of the knowledge that a utopian ideal, by definition, can never be achieved. The color in the painting is by no means luminous, nor is the field that forms its subject matter particularly visually appealing. If this is the case, what makes the painting so striking, other than its size? The painting grabs the viewer not by its aesthetic beauty, but by the physicality of its extremely thick, unbalanced, jagged layers of paint and material that project off the canvas—layers heavy both in meaning and in the actual density of their application. The textured coatings

33 Lauterwein, *Anselm Kiefer/Paul Celan: Myth, Mourning and Memory*, 146.
embody a lyrical quality that reads much like the poetry that Kiefer encodes in the painting’s very layers. In other words, the complexity of the painting’s palpable surface figuratively enfolds the viewer within it. Perhaps the most succinct way to describe the intense intrigue of *Bohemia Lies by the Sea* is this: if its outer surface is so complex, one can only imagine the depth that lies within. In the act of creating the painting, Kiefer explores his own questions of the German identity, yet, the painting’s purpose is so much higher; once created, the work exists as an infinite being in itself that, through the enigmatic layers of its echoing memory, leads the viewer to explore the very identity of humanity. After all, to be human is to question.
Images


Bibliography


