



Detail of Trinity by Anselm Kiefer

A Postscript to *The Palette of Anselm Kiefer* :
Kiefer at the Gagosian, NYC, Nov 6-Dec 18, 2010

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Much to our delight, just as our paper *The Palette of Anselm Kiefer: Witnessing Our Imperiled World* appeared in the ARAS online newsletter (*ARAS Connections* 2010, #4), synchronistically a remarkable show of Kiefer's current work opened at the Gagosian Gallery in New York City. A few of the pieces in this show so directly echo and extend our previous reflections about Kiefer's work that we've been irresistibly prompted to create this "postscript." We imagine that a number of you would be as excited as we are to see how Kiefer's work continues to evolve, how it encompasses and re-imagines the political, historical, mythic and spiritual themes in which he is so very well versed. We have not undertaken an overall review of the show, but have selected just a few pieces that deepen and develop the images we considered earlier. The show is no longer hanging, and it can be entered effectively only in present tense. So – here we go.

Leaving behind the rather bleak city-scape of rows of New York City warehouses on West 24th, the gallery visitor enters tall, opaque glass doors to face a large white wall on which Kiefer has hand-written, in his inimitable

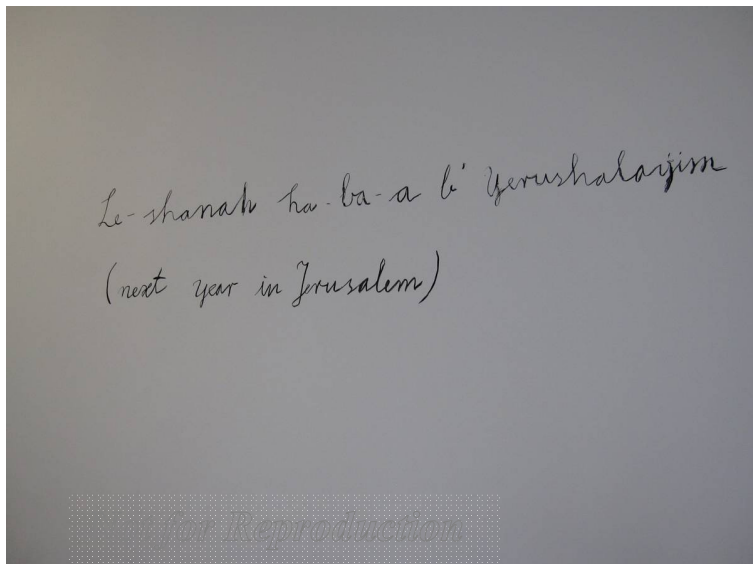


Figure 1 Title of the show

script, the title of this show: *Next Year in Jerusalem*. This title immediately summons the visitor to prayer that is rife with political intensity; it summons her to take a deep breath and enter into a state of being that is at one and the same

moment both sacred and profane, historical and eternal, intellectual and emotional, conscious and unconscious.

With this induction, the visitor walks down a stark, white-walled hallway



Figure 2 *The boxcar*

that opens into a huge warehouse expanse thickly populated by Kiefer's works – including numerous, very large three dimensional pieces encased in tall glass vitrines. An impressively large metal container,

reminiscent of a train car, is parked obstinately in the middle of these tall cases. In marked contrast to the visually accessible pieces throughout the rest of the exhibit, the boxcar encloses and makes only minimally visible an impressive number of enlarged photographs printed on rather ragged, large hanging sheets of lead.

In counterpoint to the glass vitrines and the massive boxcar, the warehouse walls present numerous complex paintings built out of paint, earth, branches, hair, constructed objects, snake skin – the variety of raw materials that inhabit Kiefer's images. Even before one begins to focus on a particular image, it is hard not to feel bombarded by the enormous scale of the works and how very

many of them there are here. This impact is not irrelevant; Kiefer's work is inherently about bombardment and our human relationship to the forces of destruction and creation that express themselves in warfare as well as in transcendent images of the divine.

Taking only a few steps forward, one is faced with an image that quickly grounds these feelings historically. We see in the open doors of the boxcar, a large photograph



Figure 3 *The boxcar*

of a young man in an SS uniform with his arm raised in the *Sieg Heil*. In our previous review, we mentioned that as an art student Kiefer took a series of photographs of himself in this pose, in various sites of Nazi occupation. He was determined to bring about an awareness of the madness personified by the Nazis and the madness and violence within history.

In this show, housing these photographs in an oppressive boxcar underscores Kiefer's insistence that we look directly at – and do not forget - the reality of the Nazi agenda to exterminate the Jews and rule the world, and that in so doing we look directly at man's ruthless drive for domination. An inescapable sense moves into one's soul, a sense of the treacherous and tragic potential that

can emerge from man's drive to "reign." As we walk around the boxcar, we discover that it is filled with a countless number of these enlarged photographs,



Figure 4 *The boxcar*

some only recently rediscovered by the artist. They are printed on massive lead sheets hung so closely to one another that the viewer can catch only glimpses of a very few of the

images. Kiefer's work frequently addresses or alludes to the essential role of memory – and its fragile, politically and psychologically vulnerable essence. Here, in the boxcar, much of what has been "documented" is inaccessible. He is apparently insisting with continued determination that we devote ourselves to awakening memory and that we directly face historically enacted madness and violence. Yet we are not only faced with these memories, but also we are left with the necessity to mourn the innumerable and unfathomable atrocities that we cannot explicitly remember. This compels us to enter realms of the unknown, to engage the unconscious.

This confrontation with the unknown is repeated through the numerous, enormous paintings in this show that challenge the viewer to walk into the depths of mysterious forests. Analytically, we often find that the depths

of the forest, like the depths of the ocean, symbolically carry a sense of the vast unknown

expanses of the unconscious.

Uncharted and unknown, these realms are not only potentially dangerous but are also charged with transformative



Figure 5 *Trinity*

energies. The paradoxical nature of these archetypal realms, symbolized here as the forest, is palpably rendered in the piece titled *Trinity*. Many of the images



Figure 6 *Trinity (detail)*

that are thematic in Kiefer's work are woven into this painting. This forest depicts the natural world but allows us to see through into a deeper dimension. The trees look uncannily strong; starkly black, they appear to be ravaged by fire that remains as embers in the background. Again we see references to both the German and the Jewish soul in the presence of golden and black hair woven

into the dried bramble and ferns in the foreground. These references to the stories of Margareta and Shulamith, which we discussed in our previous paper, remind us again of the Holocaust. The landscape is cold ashen white, frozen but alive with fire and infused with the ash and smoke of incinerated flesh transformed into the delicate presence of spirit. The foreground is layered with the presence of ferns.

The primal nature of the ferns and their deep associations in both ancient and Christian mythologies with secret knowledge and devilish forces make them a provocative image. As we noted in our previous article, ferns “. . . speak of the eternal cycle of creation and destruction, the glorious appearance of new life and the sorrowful arrival of death.” They symbolize the viable presence of a healthy narcissism: a



Figure 7 *Trinity (detail)*

capacity for empathy, humor, creativity, a sense of transience, wisdom, and a deep appreciation of relatedness. These vulnerable yet resilient plants appear in marked contrast to the rigidly defended narcissistic structures imaged in this current show as the boxcar, analogous to the bunkers in *Monumenta*. Again, as noted in our earlier piece, we see defensive narcissism ,specifically alpha narcissism (which we have defined as “omnipotence and exhibitionism...fueled by aggression rooted in the archetype of destruction”), as having quite a tenacious

grip on our American character structure. It is daunting to address the terrifying force of destruction that underlies this trenchant narcissism, individually and nationally, yet it is by facing it that we can



Figure 8 Danae

the dead and ashen stars of “Falling Stars” and the dried but still fertile sunflower seeds of “Sol Invictus,” is redeveloped in a number of intriguing works. In “Danae” a single tall and looming sunflower alludes to the presence of Zeus, whose seeds fall like

develop a conscious and responsible relationship to this force. Kiefer’s work is an inspiration in this regard since it repeatedly and boldly attempts to do just this.

In the density and intensity of the Gagosian show, one is required to actively interact with the work, since myriad reflections, one’s own and those of everything around one, are seen on and through each piece. In the midst of these multiple reflections, Kiefer’s theme of “falling,” as seen in



Figure 9 Danae (detail)

the golden rain in order to impregnate the maiden. The shimmering golden seeds fall upon the open pages of lead books that, we sense, tell many versions of Danae's story. In the work titled "rising, rising, falling down" resin coated sunflowers hang from the heavens, once again unifying ascent and descent, "as above, so below." In "The Red Sea", three chairs, precariously perched on a tilting



Figure 10 *rising, rising, falling down*



Figure 11 *The Red Sea*

glass ceiling, tip towards the descent of the Trinity that is occurring in the nearby work *Jeremiah, Baruch*. There, two of three chairs are perched on separate ceilings covered with debris, and the third has fallen into the chaos of historical violence below. In each of these works, Kiefer envisions a collapse of the opposition between the big world and the small, the heavens and the earth, the spiritual and the material. We experience such a collapse as the

enlivening appearance of the transcendent function, as the entrance into an

activation of the ego-Self dialogue that has the potential of forging a differentiated unity within psyche.



Figure 12 *Jeremiah, Baruch*
(detail)



Figure 13 *Jeremiah, Baruch*

The dynamism of the transcendent function that transits the ego-Self axis pervades Kiefer's multi-layered image that is a shocking and powerful development of the image of *Shevirat Ha-kalem, The Breaking of the Vessels*, considered in our previous paper. Whereas in that installation, large sheets of glass fell from stacks of huge leaden books to shatter upon the floor, here (in *die Sefiroth/Shekhinah*) jagged sheets of glass, violently embedded in a French wedding dress, have broken and fallen upon the floor into shards. In this image, the Kabbalistic tree of life with the differentiated sefiroth, rise out of, are deeply rooted in, a woman's dress, as if this holiest of dynamisms is rooted in the



Figure 14 *die Sefiroth / Shekhinah*

meaning emphasized by the image of Tikkun, discussed just below.) This suggestion that the dynamism of the tree of life is rooted in polarity, and is itself polar, echoes our analytic experience that the transcendent function arises in the dialogue between the ego and the Self, in the dynamism of the relationship *between*. In the midst of Kiefer's exegesis on these theological and archetypal themes, he

feminine. Indeed, this installation is titled *Shekhinah*. In Kabbalah, Shekhinah is the feminine presence of God. Yet in Kiefer's way, this image in addition suggests implicitly that the tree of life is also rooted in a coniunctio, in a union of opposites, since the wedding dress suggests the imminent arrival of a marriage, i.e. a union of the feminine and masculine and in this sense, also, of the "above" and "below." (We'll see this implicit



Figure 15 *die Sefiroth / Shekhinah (detail)*



Figure 16 *Tikkum*

simultaneously evokes a chilling confrontation with the stark historical reality of the extraordinary vulnerability of the feminine – and the coniunctio - in our world: the haunting, cruelly penetrated, bodiless dress prompts fantasies of the innumerable moments of joy, the countless moments of celebration that were summarily erased in the ruthless atrocities of WWII – as they are in all wars.

It is not accidental that Kiefer has placed an image of Tikkun close by this

evocative image of Shekhinah.

Tikkun, meaning repair in Kabbalah, is the process of recreating God's wholeness out of the broken world that emerged during creation. In Kabbalah, prayer and kindness activate Tikkun. This is not unlike the process of individuation as Jungians understand it, wherein wholeness emerges as a synthesis, as a marriage, of opposites. It is not irrelevant that



Figure 17 *Tikkum (detail) and Shekhinah*

Kiefer has written two titles of this work, *Tikkum* and *Hieros Gamos/The Sacred Marriage* on opposite sides of this vitrine. He represents this marriage as two interlocked spheres created out of pounded metals, hanging tenuously from a wire stretched between two rods rooted in a single rough stone. It is not irrelevant that as we stand on the gallery floor, we can simultaneously see this image overlay the *Shekinah* that is standing nearby. Here we subtly experience a moment when Tikkun may enter our broken world.

This moment is also aptly expressed in the show's title "Next Year in Jerusalem," which invokes a heartfelt refrain from the Passover prayers that call for renewal and reunification of home and self. Kiefer's work suggest that this possibility is hard-won; that it lies in a determination to turn towards and endure the agonizing pain in our world. The force of these works encourages us each to nurture our individual capacity to navigate the darkness and depths as well as the lightness and heights of our lives. At the same time, it encourages us to face and address the prevailing narcissism of our American character structure.