

# REVITALIZING THE PAST

NSU Art Museum's upcoming exhibition series "Regeneration" explores how destruction can give way to beauty.

BY TOM AUSTIN

**REFRESHED AND RENEWED** NSU Art Museum's upcoming series, "Regeneration," will feature pieces by German artist Anselm Kiefer, including *Die Kunst Geht Knapp Nicht Unter*, 1975, and *Wege der Weltweisheit: die Hermannsschlacht*, 1978.



**O**n a bright and positively perky Fort Lauderdale afternoon, Bonnie Clearwater, director and chief curator of the NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale, is contemplating Anselm Kiefer's 2010 *Winterwald*, or *Winter Forest*, a depiction of a dark German forest lost in the destructive horror of winter. The oil, emulsion, acrylic and shellac painting, incorporating ash, thorn bushes, synthetic teeth and snakeskin, is one of Clearwater's favorite Kiefer works.

"I've always been fascinated by the idea of destruction and regeneration, and *Winterwald* is so impactful," she says. "Kiefer was part of the first generation of German artists to confront the legacy of Nazism, the trauma of trying to move forward after the Holocaust and all that went on during World War II."

Kiefer, who studied with Joseph Beuys at the Dusseldorf Art Academy, was born in 1945—just missing the full brunt of WWII—in Donaueschingen, Germany. Since 1993, he has lived in France, where he has earned such career highlights as a solo showing at New York's Museum of Modern Art. The new Clearwater-curated "Regeneration Series: Anselm Kiefer from the Hall Collection," will launch other NSU Art Museum exhibitions exploring artistic rebirth after WWII.

On view from November 29, 2016 through August 27, 2017, "Regeneration" entails a wide selection of Kiefer's work, including 50 artist books created by him. A highlight is 1969's "Fur Jean Genet" (For Jean Genet), an exploration of Genet's notion that "fascism is theater." Within the artist book, Kiefer interrogates his own life—and collective guilt—as a German. The book encompasses staged self-portraits of Kiefer in a military uniform, performing the official Nazi salute at European monuments and in his studio.

Many of the watercolors in "Regeneration" are classically beautiful pieces, such as 1981's *Heliogabal*, a watercolor, gouache and ink on paper with the image of a weakening sun framing a lone boat on a river. The title is a reference to Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus (218-222), known posthumously as Elagabalus (or Heliogabalus).

Kiefer is known for epic, heroically sized canvases, and the exhibition features the nearly 13-square-foot oil, acrylic and shellac on canvas painting *Air-Battle of England*, a 1988 piece with two lead fighter-type planes circling the surface of the canvas in an ominous ready-to-fight fashion.

An inscribed glass and steel vitrine entitled *Die Schechina* (2010) features a painted resin wedding gown-style dress with numbered glass discs floating above

it like other-worldly bubbles. *Die Schechina* ties into the Temple of Jerusalem and shekinah, the Hebrew idea of a dwelling in the presence of God. Shekinah is manifested in the form of a divine bride, the female personification of God, wandering the Earth until the Messiah emerges and she can return to heaven.

In a nihilistic age when nothing much matters, particularly in contemporary art, Kiefer's work is old-fashioned Art-with-a-capital-A, groaning with symbolism and meaning. Another one of Clearwater's favored Kiefer pieces is 2009's *The Fertile Crescent*, a painting radiating "the power of ancient myth." The title of the acrylic, oil, shellac and sand on canvas piece refers to the ancient Mesopotamia landscape, a rich crescent-shaped strip of land associated with the Garden of Eden.

The "Regeneration Series: Anselm Kiefer from the Hall Collection" exhibition is drawn from the Kiefer collection at the Hall Art Foundation. Art collectors Andrew and Christine Hall also have work by such artists as Joseph Beuys and Malcolm Morley. The foundation has an exhibition space in Reading, Vermont, as well as a long-term Kiefer installation at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, Massachusetts.

As part of the NSU Art Museum's "Regeneration Exhibition Series," another new exhibition—"Human Animals: The Art of Cobra"—will be on view from July 9, 2017 to September 10, 2017, overlapping Kiefer's. Cobra was a European avant-garde movement (1948-1951) named after the respective home cities—Copenhagen, Brussels, Amsterdam—of Cobra artists. The NSU Art Museum's Golda and Meyer Marks Cobra Collection is America's largest Cobra collection, with much of the work using animal imagery to critique "civilization" in the aftermath of World War II. "Human Animals" will be Clearwater's third Cobra exhibition since taking over at the NSU Art Museum in 2013. "Our Cobra collection establishes connections to so many post-war artists, including Kiefer," she says.

Clearwater has mounted several "unofficial" Regeneration exhibitions at NSU Art Museum, including the recent "Bellissima: Italy and High Fashion 1945-1968." Given the importance of World War II to artists, she envisions many more "Regeneration Exhibition Series" possibilities, such as the work of Malcolm Morley, who survived the London Blitz as a young boy.

Kiefer will forever be chewing on his aesthetic terrain, World War II. "In his studio," Clearwater says, "I asked if the aftermath of World War II was still traumatic for him. Kiefer is in his 70s now, but he immediately told me, 'Every day, that war is with me.'" ■





Anselm Kiefer's *Die Schechina*, 2010.