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### WCMA BLOG

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## A Chat with Lisa Dorin about WCMA's Early Kiefer Show

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In Blog, Exhibitions



*Deputy Director of Curatorial Affairs, Lisa Dorin, WCMA staff, and Williams students with Anselm Kiefer.*

Q: Lisa, what can you tell us about the relationship between the *Early Anselm Kiefer* show and MASS MoCA's long-term Kiefer installation from the Hall collection? How did WCMA's exhibition come about?

A: We've had a history of collaboration with MASS MoCA. The most recent one was the Sol LeWitt exhibition. During the period that MASS MoCA's LeWitt project was unfolding there, we organized a compendium exhibition called *The Well-Tempered Grid*, curated by Williams professor of art history Mark Haxthausen, also dealing with Sol LeWitt's wall drawings. That was a really great collaboration, and this provided an opportunity to try it again. MASS MoCA had been working with the Hall Foundation for a number of years. But it was actually not that long ago that the idea [for our show] came about, and we were very fortunate that we had gallery space available to be able to accommodate the show with very little lead time. The works that we are showing are primarily intimately-scaled works on paper and hand-made books that require the kind of smaller, climate-controlled gallery spaces that we offer. MASS MoCA only has a few spaces that would be able to accommodate this work. So it allowed us to do something that complemented and contextualized their major installations.

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*Installation view of Early Anselm Kiefer. Photo by Arthur Evans.*

Q: You mentioned books and some other printed matter. Are there other sorts of work that the show presents that we won't see over at MASS MoCA?

A: Pretty much everything that you see here you won't really see there. We're showing very early work starting from 1969 when Kiefer was still a student and then going through about 1982, so it's much earlier than what is on view at MASS MoCA, which is more nineties to mid 2000s. I think the two shows complement one another in that you see here the seeds that led to the work at MASS MoCA. You see how Kiefer starts to develop his signature mode of working. At MASS MoCA, you'll see what he's best known for, these kinds of large-scale installations and larger configurations of paintings, and here you see a much more intimate view of him as an artist, his trajectory, and the threads that would get pulled forward. We've got watercolors from about 1973 to 1981 and 1982 and some of his very first forays into oil painting. For example, *Ich du*, which means "I you," is a piece in eleven parts from 1971. You really see how he's beginning to work with oil paint and how he's working through text and image in that piece. It's a real transitional moment. It's rarely been shown. It's been in private hands for a very long time, and I think the last time it was shown was 1981. So we're very fortunate to be able to show that piece.

Q: So that's a work from the Hall collection, correct?

A: Yes, everything in our show is from the Hall collection with the exception of nine books, which Kiefer selected from his own holdings. There is a book that comes from Kiefer's studio that was completed just recently in 2013, but it relates thematically to all of the earlier material. It's called *The Rhine*, which is a subject he's dealt with throughout his entire career, and it's a book of woodcuts. So it relates directly to the early woodcuts we're showing and the books that incorporate woodcuts.

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Q: How did this relationship with the Hall Art Foundation and collection come about?

A: The relationship developed initially between MASS MoCA and the Halls, and the conversation has been going on for years. The Hall Foundation is set up to promote and disseminate the works of the artists in the collection through exhibitions and other projects. The Halls collect work by certain artists in great depth. Anselm Kiefer is one of those artists. They have also amassed the work of George Baselitz, Franz West, Andy Warhol, and others. Part of the Foundation's mission is to have the work travel, to be seen. They lend it very generously, and they've set up their own semi-public space in Vermont to show a number of the works that they own. But I think with the particular grouping of works on view at MASS MoCA, the Halls did not have an appropriate place to show it. MASS MoCA is very open to, as they've done with the Sol LeWitt, doing these long-term partnerships with other institutions. So I think it was beneficial for both institutions to be able to get the work out there to a public that wouldn't otherwise be able to see it. There may be more nuances of which I am unaware, but that's my understanding. There were always just the three installations at MASS MoCA. But as they were developing the project, it became clear that the Halls also had this other early material, the books and the watercolors and such. MASS MoCA wanted to show it, and had they an appropriate gallery available to show it at the time, they likely would have, but, at that moment, they didn't. So their Deputy Director Larry Smallwood and I just got to talking and thought, "Wow, this could be a really great opportunity for the two museums to work together." So that's how it came about, somewhat organically and very recently.

Q: Where do the two shows overlap? You've spoken a bit about this in terms of the themes, but are there other ways in which you see the two shows overlapping?

A: Themes, for sure, mining history, culture and myth, but also stylistic modes of working. In 1969, Kiefer's making these handmade books using photographs, often photos of himself, as well as the landscape around him. There is a very large-scale black and white photo depicting the artist from behind in a barren landscape in the MASS MoCA show that recalls many of the images in the books we are showing and nods to the performative work he was doing early on. Looking at the small oil paintings that we have on view, particularly the diminutive landscapes, you can see the beginnings of what would become the room of wall-to-wall seascape paintings at MASS MoCA. For me, the eye-opening thing is not so much the links between the two shows, although that is definitely there, but I think that our show provides you with an Anselm Kiefer that you don't really expect. So you'll go to MASS MoCA and see this kind of grand experience, among his greatest or grandest efforts, and then you come here and you see [something] much more intimate. You see an artist working things out in a way, someone in the process of becoming an artist, and there you see where that process led.

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Q: How do you see Kiefer's training with Joseph Beuys as impacting some of the works on view? Or do you?

A: That's a really good question. I sort of always lumped Kiefer with Beuys in my mind in terms of thinking about their relationship to myth, particularly the mythmaking around the artist himself. That's something that Beuys embodies completely. I think what this show has actually taught me is where Kiefer departs from Beuys. Myth *is* very important, and it comes up again and again in his work, but there's a criticality to how Kiefer addresses that that I don't see as much in Beuys. As a student, Kiefer is making this incredibly controversial work where he is performing the Hitler salute in different iconic locations and documenting it in these books. The work is wholeheartedly rejected by everybody in Dusseldorf at the Academy—everybody is saying "This is not art"—, but Beuys really responds to it and encourages him to keep doing it. In that way, I think Beuys was a kind of a vehicle for Kiefer to find his way and continue.

Q: In your mind, does Kiefer walk a slippery slope in terms of his presentation of nationalistic, Germanic imagery? You talked about him being controversial early on. I'm not sure if that's what you were referring to or not . . .

A: Yes definitely. When you walk into our show, the very first thing you see is a giant painted self-portrait of him doing the Hitler salute from 1969-70. It's related to one of his best known books called *Für Jean Genet*. The book is displayed right next to the painting. He was going around to all of these different sites throughout Europe and Germany, major sites, and asking strangers to take his photograph. When they took the camera and took the photograph, he would do the [Nazi] salute, which was illegal to do in Germany at the time. So he was clearly being provocative in that project. We had two visitors who came back to the office the day the show opened to ask me to come out and talk to them about why there were these images of someone doing the Nazi salute. Taken at first glance, one can't be sure of the context or the message. What I said to the visitors, and what I think is important about those works, is that he's adopting the posture, not because he aligns himself with Nazi philosophy but because he's questioning "Is it good enough just to make this illegal? Can making a gesture against the law erase the past? Are we just supposed to move on and forget?" He has said, himself, being born in 1945, he wasn't alive during the war. So, for that very reason, he can't really say what he would have done, how he would have acted, had he been there. But he doesn't get off the hook because he wasn't there; he is implicated. In fact, we're all implicated. By pushing that button, he's bound to get intense reactions, usually negative. I guess that could be seen as a slippery slope. But I see it more as provoking further thought, further discussion. Not everybody wants to have that conversation, but it needs to be had.

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*Anselm Kiefer, Heroische Sinnbilder, 1969, black and white photographs, watercolors on paper, and graphite on bound cardboard (14 pages). Private collection © Anselm Kiefer.*

*Installation photo by Arthur Evans.*

Q: Is there a danger that some may see his work as embracing those myths? Are you afraid that some of WCMA's viewers may not see a distinction between Kiefer's appropriations of this imagery and Nazism's use of it?

A: Of course. I think those visitors were ready to make that assumption. But they came away saying that they felt Kiefer was the most important artist of his time and that the MASS MoCA installation, which they had also just seen, should be at the Museum of Modern Art so that even more people could see it! WCMA is a place where we can take on these kinds of tough issues. Maybe, this is because of our position on a liberal arts campus where intellectual inquiry and debate is so much a part of the fabric. We had an exhibition some years ago that was part of a Berkshire-wide collaboration, the Summer of Vienna. Our exhibition, *Prelude to a Nightmare*, focused on the years that Hitler spent in Vienna when he was trying to become an artist and the sorts of influences that he was seeing at the time. Some of his own artwork was on view in the exhibition. That was an incredibly difficult and thought-provoking show, and we expected a lot of outrage from the public that never really materialized. I think that if you contextualize things in the right way and you give the public space to understand where [some of the pieces are] coming from and why, they are able to embrace those kinds of complex ideas.

Q: Thank you, Lisa!

—Jane R. Becker  
WCMA blog writer