

# HALL

ART FOUNDATION

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## The Berkshire Eagle NEWS

### Art collector Andrew Hall discusses Anselm Kiefer exhibit at Mass MoCA

By Charles Bonenti, Special to The Eagle

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NORTH ADAMS -- When a spat with neighbors over the appearance of slabs of concrete on the front lawn of their Connecticut home developed into a lawsuit and a court order in 2007 to remove the offending construction, art collectors Andrew and Christine Hall first loaned, then decided to create a home at Mass MoCA,

for the massive artwork by German artist Anselm Kiefer called "Narrow Are The Vessels." That piece and others by Kiefer will go on display here this weekend in a 15-year installation financed by the Halls through their Hall Art Foundation based in Reading, Vt.

Andrew Hall, 62, born in Great Britain, educated at Oxford and now the CEO of Philbro, the commodities trading unit of Occidental Petroleum Corp., talked with The Eagle in an email interview about why and how he and his wife collect art, Kiefer in particular, and what they hope to achieve through their project at Mass MoCA.



Mass MoCA Director Joseph Thompson leads a press tour of the new exhibit in the Anselm Kiefer Hall Art Foundation on the Mass MoCA campus on Thursday. (Gillian Jones / New England Newspapers)

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Q: Art News magazine in July listed you and your wife Christine among the world's top 200 art collectors, along with others like Ronald Lauder, Eli Broad and Alice Walton. You are a commodities trader with a degree in chemistry. When and how did you become interested in buying art?

A: I bought my first work of art in 1979. I was living in Paris learning (business) French. My Berlitz teacher thought I was only interested in talking about art. We went to galleries and artists' studios together and I ended up buying a few things. Prior to that I had been interested in art -- looking at it in museums -- but the idea of buying it had never occurred to me.

Q: Would you describe your collecting style? You focus on contemporary German art. Is it a matter of responding to particular works by particular artists like Anselm Kiefer, or do you have a broader agenda?

A: Eclectic, recondite. We are "overweight" [in] Germany, but it is not our sole focus by any means. For me the initial response to a work and/or artist is visceral; the cerebral part comes later. I think for a lot of collectors today it's the other way around. Having said that, I am attracted to great artists who, for whatever reason, are slightly off the radar screen. The art world has become very fashion driven. I try not to get caught up in all the hype. I am more interested in collecting works by someone who has a solid record of museum shows over many years than chasing the latest fad.

Q: What other artists besides Kiefer do you collect to the same or maybe greater extent?

A: Artschwager, Baselitz, Beuys, Immendorff, Morley, Penck, Warhol, West and some more besides.

Q: What is it you respond to and consider significant in Kiefer's work that's led you to underwrite this 15-year installation at Mass MoCA?

A: Kiefer's work deals with some weighty issues yet it is also very approachable -- it is visually compelling. It engages people who know nothing about art or Kiefer. But there is also a whole back story to each work if you care to inform yourself about it. So you can respond to it on various levels. Within the art world people love it or hate it. For example, a few years ago I was accosted at an art event by someone who told me I was wrong to be collecting the work of such a cynical artist. Shortly after that I met a lady at another art function -- with an academic connection to the world of art -- whose son was named Anselm in his honor. It is hard to be indifferent about this work, which is a good thing. So much art today is anodyne or overly elliptical and leaves the viewer cold. Alternatively, at the other end of the spectrum, it can be a gimmicky one liner. For me good art has to evoke a response, to engage the viewer but also provoke one's curiosity to see and learn more about what is going on.



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Q: What aspects of Kiefer's career does the Mass MoCA installation focus upon? Is it meant to be a survey? To highlight pieces too big to be shown elsewhere? How were the artworks chosen?

A: This is not a survey. These are works that happen to be in our collection, although the selection of this particular group was made with a view to achieving a certain coherence. I suppose the emphasis here is more on the sculptural aspects of Kiefer's work although of course the pavilion does hold a suite of 30 paintings, each one of which is a great work of art. It's certainly true that the scale of these works is such that they would be hard to display in a domestic situation or for that matter your average gallery space.

Q: Have you and the artists you collect become friends or do you work mainly through dealers and other advisers?

A: We do not use advisers. We work with dealers and talk from time to time with curators and other collectors. We have got to know some of the artists we collect.

Q: How do you and you wife make decisions about what to collect?

A:

Ready, fire, aim.

Q: Director Joe Thompson describes the kind of partnership you (and the Hall Foundation) have with Mass MoCA as a prototype for other major collectors who want their artworks to be shown publicly without having to build their own museums. Would you agree with that? What led you to Mass MoCA and what are the advantages in this approach?

A: Well, actually, we did design and build a museum, albeit on top of an old water cistern on the Mass MoCA campus. But Mass MoCA will run it with their people and we are at a location where other great art is shown which generates a two way synergy. We were introduced to Mass MoCA by Jock Reynolds, director of the Yale Art Museum. We were very impressed with what we saw. We are also incredibly impressed with Joe's dedication and vision and were delighted and honored to become part of it.

Q: Finally, what do you hope viewers will take away from their experience of Kiefer's work at Mass MoCA over the next 15 years?

A: After we did a temporary Kiefer show at Mass MoCA a few years ago, we would bump into odd people who spoke of this extraordinarily moving art they had seen on a visit there. They would ask if we had heard of the artist --Anselm Kiefer? That was gratifying. I hope lots of people will be introduced to his art and be moved by it to seek out similar experiences.