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Dark symbolism defines 'Early Anselm Kiefer' at WCMA

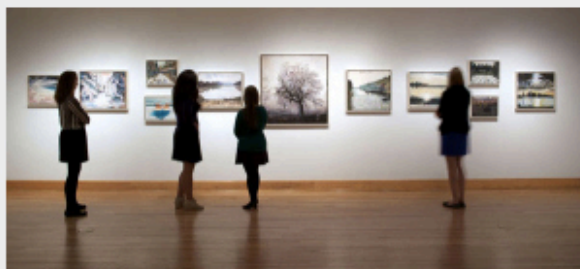
NOVEMBER 13, 2013 by Aglaia Ho, Contributing Writer

The past and present of German culture collides in *Early Anselm Kiefer* at the Williams College Museum of Art (WCMA). Featuring the work of German contemporary artist Anselm Kiefer, this collection displays some of Kiefer's early and rarely seen works. While this installation presents a variety of Kiefer's works from photographs, woodcuts, paintings and watercolors, it also captures the true

Kiefer through connecting themes evident in all of the works. This unique exhibit is affiliated with and an extension of MassMOCA's long-term Anselm Kiefer show.

Kiefer, born in Germany in 1945, is most well known for his artistic portrayals of German culture and history. His work touches on the themes of how historical events can define a culture. Kiefer focuses particularly on Germany's dark past especially the Third Reich during World War II and its effect on the decay of German culture.

The Early Anselm Kiefer exhibit is housed in two adjoining galleries, the Faison Gallery and Bloedel Gallery located on the first floor of the WCMA. The first gallery features solely paintings, including the oil paintings that first brought Kiefer into international fame, created during the late '60s through the early '80s. Many of these works are direct critiques on Germany's role during World War II and take inspiration from literature, mythology and even operas. Kiefer's references often draw analogies between what is being depicted and what occurred in Germany's past.



Observers of the Anselm Kiefer exhibition at WCMA, looking onto some of the German artist's early and rarely seen works. Photo courtesy of WCMA.

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One of the first paintings in the room is based off Richard Wagner's opera *The Ring of Dibelung*. This painting, entitled *Bruenhildes Tod* (Bruenhilde's Death), depicts the suicide of the Bruenhilde, a Valkyrie, as she kills herself in a funeral pyre. Kiefer draws the connection of how Wagner's opera is a key aspect of German culture and reflects the German sense of nationality and heroism during World War II. The combination of crude figures and shapes mixed with the intensity of red and orange colors helps Kiefer show the lamentation of the loss of true culture. Contrasted with the dark night sky, this becomes a terrifying, yet powerful scene of destruction.

Other works such as *Für Jean Genet* (For Jean Genet) is a much more evident reference to the Third Reich. This piece is dedicated to Jean Genet, a French writer, who famously stated, "Fascism is theater." In this self-portrait of Kiefer, he depicts himself in military uniform with one arm extended in the Nazi salute. Although Kiefer was born near the end of World War II and barely experienced it directly, he can still play the role of one who was more directly involved with German actions during the war. This portrait represents Kiefer's individual struggle with the past. He feels somewhat responsible for the tragedies that have occurred although he was not directly involved.

Additionally, the works also reflect various styles. While Kiefer's paintings do reflect an overall contemporary style, this collection showcases his experimentation and journey through different personal styles. Some of Kiefer's paintings, such as those in his *Ich-Du* (I-you) which is a series of 11 paintings that bridges together past and present through landscapes and references to Kiefer's own life, utilizes a neater and more technical style. Others are more abstract like *Engel mit Palette* (Angel with Palette) and focuses on creating interesting physical textures using paint.

The second room of the gallery demonstrates a greater variety of styles and works of Kiefer. This room features many of Kiefer's early books and collections. Because the actual books could not be presented for the public to sift through, the exhibit provides abridged printed copies. While this helps to give insight into Kiefer's work, it felt somewhat inadequate and underwhelming. Something is lost when looking at a reproduction.

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The highlights of this room are really Kiefer's woodcuts. These woodcuts represent German culture and nationalism since German artists made this medium famous. Not only do Kiefer's woodcuts possess fine and precise details, he applies them in a novel way. His collection of woodcuts features portraits of poets, novelists and historical figures. He uses woodcuts to symbolically present these figures as stiff and "wooden" and indirectly blames nationalism for leading to the development of the Third Reich. Kiefer's work truly embraces this idea. Faces fade and fuse into trees in each woodcut. Many of the details on each face is exaggerated and cut deeply in order to embody the bark of trees.

One cannot leave the second gallery without noticing *Bruehilde-Grane*, another incredible woodcut. This is one of the largest works in the gallery and is another reference to Wagner's opera. It portrays Bruehilde's horse standing in the flames. This intricate piece is relatively dark in theme, presenting destruction and suffering. The horse's bony skeleton is visible underneath its skin and the use of red shellac on the paper intensifies the idea of death and decay.

Kiefer's work is often significant in meaning. However, WCMA presents these works untitled without descriptions except for a paper guide that gives minimal details. Labels would have certainly enhanced the experience. Without some guidance, it is relatively easy to look at Kiefer's work for only its aesthetic value. This is of the utmost importance because the beauty of Kiefer's work rests mostly on its powerful meaning.

Early Anselm Kiefer will be featured at WCMA through Dec. 23.