Anselm Kiefer takes South Florida

BY ANNE TACCHINO Special to The Miami Herald

South Florida is hosting a love affair with the German artist Anselm Kiefer, a relationship that is giving us a deep and powerful look at the work of one of the greats of contemporary art.

From the NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale to the Fort Lauderdale Museum of Art, there are more of Kiefer’s art, from the 1970s to the present, than anywhere else in the world, which is quite a feat for such a celebrated artist. Born at the end of World War II in Germany, Kiefer grew up in a destroyed land that had to grapple with an awful and traumatic past as it rebuilt itself. That horror, reflected in his work, can be dark, but it also hints at rebirth.

The scope and breadth of his often monumental art, and its context based in histories and mythologies, can be seen in just a few pieces on display in both exhibitions. The Fort Lauderdale museum is showing an array of works all from the Hall Art Foundation, which has never been shown in its entirety until now.

If you look at Kiefer’s artwork, you’ll notice a lot of grey and beige tones, as well as his huge acrylic masterpieces. The introduction to "Regeneration Series: Anselm Kiefer" from the Hall Collection consists of three towering glass vitrines encasing fallen angels, draped in images made of silks and white dresses, and incorporating all kinds of references to history, the Kabbalah, Teutonic mythology, and evil. These elements get to the essence of Kiefer’s complex work, according to director and chief curator Bonnie Clearwater, who curated this exhibit as part of broader programming connecting contemporary modern mythologies and the issue of regeneration in a post-WWII era.

Clearwater points out that these vitrines, unlike some of the massive paintings and installations, are enclosed, making them a little different; yet they invite introspection, as you can see your own reflection while taking in all the layers of meaning.

The next piece, a wall and a room of its own, is one of the most spectacular works in any collection, "Wintertree" (Winter Forest). It’s both a painting and a sculpture, with three trees painted on the canvas and attached, lush bushes and fake leaves in the foreground. Kiefer often reimagines the forest, adding a fascination of Germans and often evoked in fairy tales and hymns. Here, Clearwater underscores, the trees are just stranded, their leaves — and therefore the wood — chopped off in the image. The maker/breaker represents Adam and Eve’s — humans — expulsion from paradise.

And the teeth, they may be a reference to the Greek myth of Jason and the Argonauts. Clearwater says (or else, like the ads that Kiefer commonly uses in his art, it is a reference to the Holocaust). In Kiefer’s work, there is no escaping the past.

In the following rooms, we walk with Kiefer through his plumbing of the past. A gallery of woodcuts includes a large, two-part self-portrait in which the artist is surrounded by blackened sunflowers in a blackened landscape. In it, he appears to be pregnant.

The woodcuts are a nod to the place where Gutenberg invented the printing press — mechanization that allowed scenes from the Bible to be distributed on a mass scale. One woodcut is a college of faces of famous German philosophers, writers and musicians — seemingly

Kiefer did find some time for pleasure in his art, however. One group of small paintings from 1973 is a collection of landscapes that highlight the "sin and yan" of romantic composition, according to Clearwater. The sky and water are given equal space, and complement the land; they were dedicated to his wife and the blight of his soul.

But that shivering-marrying sky disappears in the final galleries, where Kiefer’s now trademark paintings can barely fit on a single wall. They soar like Wagnerian spaces, but conversely depict a vast, arid land; its paintings are so layered with acrylic paint that they have become sculpture. This is a bombarded universe, with sand and flies still smiling. Yet even here are signs of regrowth, as lines bumping lines from the central focal points that might well be newly filled hills.

Friedensreich Hicken, first planted in the Feria Cereza that bloomed from Messopostia to Egypt, and the finale of the exhibit is named after this ride of Western civilization. The "Feria Cereza" is so delirious it’s hard to see and so expertly crafted it truly must be seen in person; no internet or book imagery do this painting justice. It shows the remains of a brick factory in the desert, with thousands of those buildings forming a circuitous wall and pavement. On some bricks the names of ancient sites are written in a scrawled script, and alludes to a crumbling part of the wall. Blurred open might be the vestiges of a flight from officials or dust from the parched land. This could be the remnants of the beginnings of our civilised world, or more ominously the “end” of it in the eyes of German concentration camps. And of course, walls formed an integral part of the young Kiefer’s divided country. From every angle, this work will reveal something new and thought-provoking.

Travel south to Wynwood, and the latest Kiefer acquisition by the Nasjonals Collection gets its own room at the front of the space. Titled "Rising, Rising, Falling Down," you can literally smell that giant installation, made from ash, concrete stones and the remains of a demolished street in Paris, is somewhat contextual based on the story of Troy. It involves Kiefer’s interpretation of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s novel "Faust." That tale involves Faust falling in love with Helen of Troy, only to destroy everything around him in a fit of jealousy. The mass of broken concrete, rebar and scaffolding that cover the floor include a miniature battlefield. Failing from the ceiling are stacks of sunflowers, this time white, a symbol for a re-emerging life.

This piece was created between 2009 and 2012 and is impressive on its own. But when visitors continue to the back rooms, they find more Kiefer, first exhibited last year.

Back at the entrance installation, you do not get the disorienting feeling that this multi-universe Kiefer has created is both imploding and rejuvenating at the same time. His world could not have looked at a better time.

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