

# HALL

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Michel, Karen. "Kiefer's Bleak Horrors Of War Fill An Entire Building," *National Public Radio*, 23 November 2013.



## Kiefer's Bleak Horrors Of War Fill An Entire Building

by KAREN MICHEL

November 23, 2013 7:35 AM

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Anselm Kiefer's *Velimir Chlebnikov*, a series of 30 paintings devoted to the Russian philosopher who posited that war is inevitable, is on display at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art.

MASS MoCA

Anselm Kiefer was born in 1945, in the Black Forest of southwest Germany, just as the Third Reich was collapsing.

"I was born in ruins, and for me, ruins are something positive," Kiefer says. "Because what you see as a child is positive, you know? And they are positive because they are the beginning of something new."

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That history is always present in Kiefer's sculptures and paintings. One of the major figures in post-World War II German art, Kiefer has works in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Tate Modern, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the National Gallery of Australia, among many others.



*Narrow are the Vessels* is made of concrete, rebar and rubble. Neighbors objected to the work when the owners, Andy and Christine Hall, displayed it in their front yard.

MASS MoCA

Now he's one of only two artists to have a building dedicated to his work at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art.

## The Conflict That Brought Kiefer To MASS MoCA

The works in Kiefer's pavilion focus on war and its aftermath. The first piece is an 82-foot-long undulating sculpture of concrete, rebar and rubble that falls and builds to lap at the viewer's feet. Titled *Narrow Are the Vessels*, it arrived at MASS MoCA through a dispute.

Like the other two works on view in the pavilion, the sculpture is from the collection of Christine and Andy Hall. The couple lives in a historic district, where they first installed the expensive, 80-ton piece of rubble.

The neighbors weren't happy with the new display on the Hall's front lawn, so they appealed to the town's historic commission.

"They took the position that this work of art was a structure, and we took the view that it wasn't a structure, it was a work of art," Andy Hall says.

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*The Women of the Revolution* is both sensual and full of foreboding.

MASS MoCA

That didn't go well. Three years later, instead of continuing the fight, Hall approached MASS MoCA Director Joe Thompson.

Thompson mounted a temporary exhibition, but Hall, who has an art foundation, suggested doing more: Transform one of the buildings on the MASS MoCA campus to house three large works from among the hundred or so Kiefers in the Halls' collection, and show them with a 15-year renewable lease.

Thompson says the museum gets the benefits of the Kiefer collection and none of the liabilities.

"The Hall Art Foundation is taking care of these Kiefers," he says. "They're paying for the heat, light, power, the security, that's their responsibility, not ours. That's just the greatest possible model in the world."

### A Reminder That War Comes Back

For viewers, the good news is that instead of selling the work or keeping it in storage, the Halls decided to have it shown to the public — unusual at a time when institutions and other collectors are selling works to other private collections. It's a bright sign that

offsets Kiefer's generally glum work.

"Kiefer's a poet of war and destruction and his outlook is bleak," Thompson says. "I think he's cynical about human nature and where it ends up."

That cynicism is evident in the other two large works in the building at MASS MoCA. One of them, *Women of the Revolution*, is composed of more than 20 metal single bed frames, each draped with a lead sheet, an effect that's both sensual and foreboding. In each bed is an indentation, as if left by a former inhabitant, filled with liquid.

The third installation, *Velimir Chlebnikov*, is a series of Kiefer's paintings devoted to the Russian philosopher who posited that war is inevitable. For Kiefer, images of a war-pocked Germany remain vivid.

"I'm able to imagine that, you know? I'm able to imagine such a horrible, horrible time," Kiefer says. "It can come back. It can come back every time."

Visitors can see Kiefer's imaginings at MASS MoCA through Dec. 2, after which viewings will be appointment-only until April. They can also visit another Hall Foundation-sponsored show of the artist's earlier, smaller works at the nearby Williams College of Art.

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### Transcript

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SCOTT SIMON, HOST:

The work of Anselm Kiefer helped define post-World War II German art. His painting and his sculpture look unflinchingly at war and its aftermath. Now, his work is already in the collection of some of the world's top museums - the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Tate Modern. And now he's one of only two artists to have an entire building dedicated to his work at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. Karen Michel has the story.

KAREN MICHEL, BYLINE: Anselm Kiefer was born in 1945 in a cellar of a hospital in the Black Forest.

ANSELM KIEFER: I was born in ruins, and for me, ruins are something positive. Because what you see as a child is positive, you know? And they are positive because they are the beginning of something new.

MICHEL: That history is always present in Kiefer's work. Take the first piece in the pavilion at Mass MOCA - an 82-foot-long undulating work of concrete and rebar and rubble that falls and builds to lap at the viewer's feet. Like everything on view here, the sculpture is from the collection of Christine and Andy Hall. He says this 80-ton piece of expensive rubble came to Mass MOCA because of a dispute. The couple lived in a historic district; the neighbors weren't happy with the new display on the hall's front lawn and took it to their town's historic commission.

MICHEL: That didn't go well. And three years later, instead of keeping up the fight, Hall, who has an art foundation, approached Joe Thompson, the director of Mass MOCA. Thompson mounted a temporary exhibition but Hall suggested doing more; transforming one of the buildings on the Mass MOCA campus to house three large works from among the hundred or so Kiefers in his collection, and showing them with a 15-year renewable lease. Thompson says the cost to the museum was nothing.

JOE THOMPSON: Well, there is that.

MICHEL: Mass MOCA, unlike most museums, keeps work up for a year or so at a time and has only one other permanent installation, of the work of Sol Lewitt. Thompson likes the mix of upcoming artists showing their work temporarily and having permanent work by major artists, too.



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THOMPSON: I think that if you can find a way to have all the benefits and dividends of these long-term collections within your midst but none of liabilities, because in these situations they're carried by other people - the Hall Foundation is taking care of these Kiefers. They're paying for heat, light, power, the security. That's their responsibility, not ours. That's the greatest possible model in the world.

MICHEL: For viewers, the good news is that instead of selling the work or keeping it in storage, the Halls decided to have it shown to the public - unusual at a time where institutions and other collectors are selling off work to other private collections. It's a bright sign that offsets Kiefer's generally glum work.

THOMPSON: Kiefer's a poet of war and destruction and his outlook is bleak, and I think he's cynical about human nature and where it ends up.

MICHEL: That's certainly evident in the other two large works in the building at Mass MOCA. One of them, "Women of the Revolution," is composed of more than 20 metal single bed frames, each draped with a lead sheet - an effect that's both sensual and foreboding. In each there is an indentation, as if left by the former inhabitant, and filled with liquid. The third installation is a series of paintings devoted to a Russian philosopher who posited that war is inevitable. The notion is not so far-fetched. For Anselm Kiefer, images of a war-pocked Germany remain vivid.

KIEFER: I am able to imagine that, you know. I am able to imagine such a horrible time, you know, and it can come back. It could come back every time.

MICHEL: You think it could?

KIEFER: It could come back, yes, sure.

MICHEL: For now, visitors can make an appointment to see Kiefer's imaginings at Mass MOCA - the unheated building is cold in the winter. They can also visit another Hall Foundation-sponsored show of the artists' earlier, smaller works nearby at the Williams College Museum of Art.

For NPR News, I'm Karen Michel.

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