
LEISURE & ARTS

A New Art Partnership

BY LEE ROSENBAUM


Touring “a new model for museum alliances,” the
Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, or MASS
MoCA—the cutting-edge contemporary-art institution in
the Berkshires—recently opened a 10,000-square-foot pavilion
on its sprawling campus for the long-term display of three
monumental, challenging works by the German artist Anselm
Kiefer. The result is an intellectually meaty, emotionally
powerful and visually riveting experience.

All the art comes from the
5,000-work collection of
megacollector Andrew Hall, a
famously astute commodities
trader in oil and natural gas,
and his wife, Christine. The Halls also
provided the pavilion’s design
plans and paid some $2 million
to $3 million to realize the pro-
ject, which included renovating
and expanding an unused water
cistern on MASS MoCA’s repu-
purposed industrial site and making
improvements to the adjacent
grounds. They will also assume
the pavilion’s annual operating
costs for the duration of the re-
newable 15-year loan agreement.

This ambitious collaboration of
a collecting couple, an artist and
museum director Joseph Thomp-
som originated in a land-use dis-
pute: The Halls had installed a
provocative piece of lawn sculp-
ture at their Southport, Conn.,
house, in a historic district. It was
one of the pieces now in North
Adams: “Étroits sont les Vais-
seaux” (“Narrow Are the Vess-
s”), an 82-foot-long, wavelike
jumble of cast-concrete layers,
with exposed, rusty rebar spikes
jutting from its crumbling edges.

Lacking appreciation for this
bulky hulk, the local authorities
won a protracted court battle to
have it removed. It was later at
MASS MoCA in an arresting ex-
hibition of Hall-owned Kiefer’s,
which occasioned the conversa-
tion between the collectors and
Mr. Thompson to create a Hall
hall.

All three works communicate
a sense of desolation and erot-
icism, spiked with dark humor.
“Les Femmes de la Révolution”
(“The Women of the Revolu-
tion”), 1992/2013, is a slightly
off-kilter lineup of two rows of
ghostly dark gray beds, covered
by rumpled, mottled bed sheets
that are fashioned from lead.
A large-scale lead panel at the far
end of the piece displays a
blown-up photograph of the
young Mr. Kiefer walking away
down an endless stream, con-
tinuing the viewer's own journey.

Affixed to the wall behind
each bed are names of women
who figured in the history of the
French Revolution. Each bed is
indented in the center, as if from
the impression of a woman's
body—a reflection of Mr. Kiefer’s
preoccupations with the inter-
section of political and personal
histories. Various fluids and de-
tritus—stones, leaves, wires—are
deposited in each bed's cavity.
The effect is that of long-forgot-
ten graves in a neglected ceme-
tery.

The third work, “Velimir Chle-
bnikov” (2004), immerses view-
ers in 30 forbidding seascapes,
installed on two facing walls ins-
ide a 1,500-square-foot steel pa-
vilion within the Kiefer installa-
tion. These dark, thickly painted
canvases are collaged with vari-
ous objects, including dried sun-
flower stalks, gloves and Mr.
Kiefer’s three-dimensional mod-
els of ghostly battleships that
seem hopelessly overmatched by
the rolling waters.

Like the other two works in
the Kiefer pavilion, this maritime
maelstrom evokes not only war-
fare but also, incongruously,
lovemaking. The names of lovers
from Greek myth are scrawled on
certain paintings. The recurring
spurts of white paint on the sea-
capes have been called “semen-
like.”

The concrete wreckage of
“Étroits” was, surprisingly, in-
spired by a love poem. When I
arrived at the installation, the
artist, with one arm in a sling,
was wielding a black crayon
while perched high above
“Étroits” on a mechanical lift,
writing an excerpt from the
French poem by Saint-John
Perse from which the sculpture
gets its title. In English transla-
tion, the excerpt reads: “One
same wave throughout the
world, one wave since Troy rolls
its haunch towards us”—again,
a conflation of love (Helen of Troy)
and war ( Trojan). While the con-
crete ruin suggests the bombed
ruin of Mr. Kiefer’s postwar
Germany, its wavy surfaces,
which roll toward the viewer, are
smooth as a lover’s “haunch.”

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Like "Étroits," the other two Kiefer works on view were inspired by the artist's eclectic readings. "Les Femmes de la Révolution" draws upon an identically titled 1854 study. "Velimir Chlebnikov" derives from an essay in which the eponymous Russian poet, Futurist and mathematical theorist propounded a "new doctrine of war" based on his calculations (some of which are scrawled on the paintings) that "naval battles recur every 317 years."

Now living in Paris, Mr. Kiefer didn't set eyes on the North Adams installation until a few hours before the press preview. His numerous last-minute interventions included brushing to the floor some loose gravel from "Étroits," whereupon he pointed to this untidy miniature avalanche and admonished, "No housekeeping!" He likes his works to crumble, weather and deteriorate, all of which stops when they are acquired by preservation-minded collectors and museums.

The artist also instigated some last-minute rearrangements of a small, revelatory companion exhibition at the nearby Williams College Museum of Art. On view through Dec. 22, that show consists of books (containing drawings, woodcuts and photographs) and paintings (including atypically lyrical watercolors) on loan from the Hall Collection and the Kiefer Studio. From early in Mr. Kiefer's career, they already addressed the themes of love, war, myth and Germany's Nazi past that remain his touchstones.

Because the new MASS MoCA pavilion lacks climate control (except for the paintings), the Kiefer installation will close on Nov. 15, reopening in April. Subject to MASS MoCA's approval, Mr. Hall hopes to install one or two monumental non-Kiefers on the pavilion's grounds next summer—Franz West's "Les Pommes d'Adam" (2007) and Carl Andre's "Cascade" (1984). He says that he may eventually rotate art from the pavilion, substituting other pieces from his holdings. "But realistically," the 62-year-old collector told me, "the 80-ton wave ['Étroits'] and the 'Chlebnikov' pavilion are not going anywhere in my lifetime."

This marks the second time that MASS MoCA has given over one of its unused buildings to a long-term, in-depth display of works by a single artist. The first was a retrospective from multiple lenders of some 105 vibrantly colorful, large-scale wall drawings by Sol LeWitt, which opened in 2006, to remain for at least 25 years.

An Anselm Kiefer show at MASS MoCA curated by the works' owner.

Mr. Thompson has no misgivings about essentially relinquishing a portion of MASS MoCA's property and curatorial control to a private collector, who could theoretically capitalize on the imprimitur of the museum if he decides to sell works from his collection to benefit himself or his Hall Art Foundation. (Mr. Hall told me that's "extremely unlikely.")

"I like the idea of having multiple points of view, each unfolding in its own space," Mr. Thompson said. He hopes to "partner with other collectors" to develop more of the unused industrial buildings on campus.

"If you can get all the benefits of having great core collections here, and none of the liabilities," he said with a smile, "that's a beautiful thing."