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New Anselm Kiefer Building Opens at MASS MoCA

by Gregory Volk



Anselm Kiefer, *Étroits sont les Vaisseaux* (Narrow are the Vessels.) 2002, an 82-foot long sculpture made of cast concrete, exposed rebar, and lead.



Formerly displayed on a Connecticut waterfront estate, a major work by Anselm Kiefer is now on view at a Massachusetts museum, where it will remain for over a decade.

Several years ago, Kiefer's *Étroits sont les Vaisseaux* (Narrow Are the Vessels, 2002), an 82-foot-long, wavelike sculpture made of cast concrete, exposed rebar, lead and earth, caused a legal uproar in the historic Southport District of Fairfield, Conn. Acquired by collectors Andrew and Christine Hall and displayed on the grounds of their home (behind a hedge, and barely visible to passersby), this work was deemed by the town's Historic District Commission to be a structure, not an artwork. As such, it required a "certificate of appropriateness." Legal battles ensued, and the courts eventually sided with the commission, forcing the Halls to remove the sculpture. Connecticut's loss was Massachusetts's gain: the Halls placed Kiefer's sculpture on extended loan to MASS MoCA, in North Adams, where it was exhibited in 2007-08.

Now, Kiefer's sculpture is again on view at the same museum, along with two other important works by the artist from the Halls' ample collection, in a specially renovated, 10,000-square-foot building atop an old water cistern, designed and maintained by the Hall Art Foundation. This exhibition, a long-term partnership between the museum and the Halls, will be up for at least 15 years. The public can encounter Kiefer's willfully rough, probing works in a particularly apt setting: a complex of 19th-century factory buildings, some restored and others decaying. This partnership could well serve as a template for other ambitious museums with limited resources.

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Étroits sont les Vaisseaux looks great in the renovated building, hardly the monstrosity that so riled the fastidious Historic District Commission. Yes, it has the jagged look of rubble, of a torn-up road or a part of a building after a natural disaster or war, but it also undulates through the space and is surprisingly sensual as it fuses order and entropy. Separated from this work by a long wall is *The Women of the Revolution (Les Femmes de la Revolution)*, 1992/2013. Indented as if a body had been lying there, lead beds in two rows memorialize women who were integral to the French Revolution. Photographs attached to the lead structures, splashes and striations of color that look like the results of chemical reactions, dried flowers and handwritten names on the walls personalize these beds/memorials. A recent addition is a huge photograph (also on lead) of Kiefer, his back to the camera, and wearing what look like military clothes as he strides across a wasted landscape. While the bed installation is lovely, somber and haunting, Kiefer appears in the photograph as a domineering, rather macho figure.

A steel pavilion within the building houses *Velimir Chlebnikov* (2004), an imposing installation of 30 impastoed, mixed-media paintings filling two opposite walls. In addition to copious paint seeded with sundry organic materials and objects, most also feature handwritten texts and attached ships in relief. This work was inspired by the Russian Futurist poet, playwright and essayist Velimir Chlebnikov (1885-1992), who turned to mathematics and numerology to predict the course of human events. Kiefer was especially drawn to Chlebnikov's theory that pivotal naval battles occur every 317 years, a large wall text written by the artist acknowledging such cyclical violence (in translation: "Time, Measure of the world-Fate of the people. The New Doctrine of War: Naval Battles Recur Every 317 Years or in Multiples Thereof, for Velimir Chlebnikov."). In Kiefer's paintings, the ships, which also suggest a child's toys, are tossed about in seething oceans, while scrawled, cryptic messages-"Aphrodite," for instance, in one work-introduce other themes of love and desire. Powerful and even brutal, especially when seen en masse, these paintings are rendered in a dark palette that seems elegiac and deathly. They also contain luminous, near-beatific moments: sheer loveliness emerges from the surrounding fury.

Not to be missed is a selection of seldom-seen Kiefer paintings from the early 1970s, also from the Halls' collection, at the nearby Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Mass. "Early Anselm Kiefer: Selections from the Hall Collection and Kiefer Studio" (Sept. 21-Dec. 22) is an eye opener for those who think they've got Kiefer down cold. Before all the dark, brooding paintings dealing with German myths and the ravages of war, before all the rugged sculptures and big, handmade books, he was painting enchanting, frankly sublime landscapes and watery scenes packed with feeling, some addressed to his former wife, Julia. Anticipating by many years painters from Mamma Andersson and Wilhelm Sasnal to early Neo Rauch and Peter Doig, they underscore how a residual romantic streak suffuses Kiefer's entire body of work.