

Anselm Kiefer: Fields of reference

Anthony Bond

Anselm Kiefer's engagement with extraordinarily diverse and often esoteric sources can give rise to divergent interpretations. Yet keeping these interpretations at bay seems almost to be at the heart of Kiefer's working method. While his interest in ancient traditions and mythologies is backed by considerable scholarship, and invariably constitutes part of the content of his work, it is in itself not the subject matter. Throughout these cultural references in his work multiple layers can be discovered. Between these layers it is possible to trace an allegory for the artist's method that is precisely about deferring foreclosure on the possibilities of the work as embodied thought.¹ Before coming to the works in this exhibition it is worthwhile considering the implications of this method.

Anselm Kiefer believes in the importance of myths as multilayered ways of describing ideas about beginnings and being in the world without trying to prove where we come from or where we are going definitively.² The more we come to know about the universe the more we come to understand that we can not achieve resolution of all the problems of 'being'³ scientifically. Kiefer does not claim to be an expert in sciences nor in the myths of civilizations but he reads voraciously and has a deep appreciation of many of them, including Greco-Roman history, ancient Gnosticism, Cabbalistic mysticism and the philosophy of Robert Fludd (England 1574-1637). All of these in their way struggle with models of being in the world including origins and destinations. Kiefer does not rely on any one of these myths to inform his work exclusively but rather allows them all to shift and exchange meanings in the crucible of his art. Kiefer was born in Catholic Southern Germany and grew up acutely conscious of the catastrophic impact of Nazism on intellectual life that had flourished amongst Jewish scholars there. This was a charged environment for a young man and it has continued to influence the direction of his intellectual development. Kiefer began his artistic journey by naming the evil which many of his countrymen chose to forget after Hitler's holocaust. Since 1983 he has extended his interests to embrace a

¹ In a recent interview with Roberto Andreotti and Federico De Melis Kiefer affirms 'Painting is Philosophy'. Anselm Kiefer *Merkaba* Charta 2006 Milan, pp 45.

² Anselm Kiefer and Thomas H. Macho A conversation from the catalogue Anselm Kiefer *Am Anfang* Galerie Thaddeus Ropac Salzburg 2003 pp 9-10.

³ 'Being' here and throughout is used in the sense of Martin Heidegger's 'Dasein' with all its connotations of consciousness in the material world.

history of ideas dating back to antiquity and in particular those Judaic traditions that Nazism sought to eradicate.

In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, this life on earth is not a rehearsal but the real thing, our one chance to grapple with the nature of being in the world and to ponder what if anything lies beyond the parentheses drawn about our individual existence. Many of these narratives are structured around a journey, often taking the form of creation stories extrapolating from the consciousness of an individual to the formation of the material universe and whatever animates it. The passage through life from the first flickering of consciousness to the moment it is snuffed out ought to be experienced as an epic adventure and Kiefer provides us with a way to give form to this epic through art.

In 1992 Kiefer gave one of his rare public addresses to a festival audience in Adelaide, South Australia.⁴ As an acknowledgement of where he was giving the paper, he wove in an Aboriginal creation myth alongside the story of Odysseus. The theme explored mythic journeys through the world in relation to self knowledge and memory. The two journeys are markedly different: Odysseus wanders through the world with no idea of where he is or where he came from; when he returns home no one recognises him and neither does he realise he is home. The lizard man's dreaming journey actually brings the world into being, he forms the earth and Aboriginal artists who enact the dreaming through song, dance or painting still become one with the land through their actions.

As usual with Kiefer's use of myths, the different versions collide or slide over each other providing an evocative metaphor for art making as a process of discovery aided by chance encounters with content and material. The journey through states of being, of knowing or not knowing the world, is a constant theme in his work although it comes in many forms. Kiefer seldom puts definitive statements about his intentions into the public domain. He carefully avoids closure on the many options that his work opens up for an imaginative viewer and I suspect for the artist himself. Very often his work suggests different states of being and provides tantalising glimpses of how a transition might occur from one state to another. In his talk in Adelaide Kiefer spoke about the uncertain nature of the creative process, about the necessity of setting out like Odysseus while knowing that the outcome is always unknowable. The act of artistic creation might momentarily allow us to suspend our doubt

⁴ Anselm Kiefer *Boundaries, Tracks, Traces, Songs*, a paper presented at Adelaide Festival 1992 and reproduced in *Art And Australia* supplement vol. 30 No. 2. pp 3-11.

and, like the Lizard man, achieve oneness of being with the material and the process. Kiefer described a kind of suspension of consciousness that might allow something to happen that may not be possible through direct thought:

“We never attain our goal. No artist will ever reach his goal. But we cannot do without one. We are constantly reaching out for a goal before our eyes, making a plan yet knowing that it will not be performed as devised. Without a plan we could do nothing. But while planning we know well that it is a senseless plan and will never come to fruition. We are all constantly hoping for a dream or at least a day- dream which might transport us to that place where we find the goal which we can never attain on purpose.”⁵



Glaube Hoffnung *Liebe* 1984

Kiefer's own work is always an experiment; he often sets out on an ambitious project only to stop short of completion, often deferring the work for years. This working process parallels some of the key topics in his art and philosophy. He often proposes inspiring even transcendental visions but shows them to be fatally flawed. An important example of this can be seen in a relief first acquired in 1987 for the Art Gallery of NSW. *Glaube Hoffnung Liebe* (faith, hope, love) was a work I had seen in the process of gestation in his studio between 1984 and 1986. A three pronged propeller floats in front of a rocky flat terrain while near the top of the canvas a narrow strip of sea separates the land from the sky. The tip of one of the propeller blades just crosses over the horizon pointing to the heavens where it was intended to fly. It is made of heavy lead, however, and will therefore never achieve its purpose. Kiefer described

⁵ Ibid.

the propeller blades as a Dionysian symbol of transcendence since in flight they would describe a helix like that on Hermes' caducean staff. Lead, he pointed out, was the metal of Saturn, the earth-bound and melancholic god, and hence the state of transcendence implied by the Dionysian reference would never be realised. The trinity of blades are inscribed with the three cardinal virtues of St Paul, Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe. There is then a suggestion by association that this religious prescription for access to heaven would be equally uncertain.

In the process of working on this construction, Kiefer considered the possibility of attaching three lead rocks below the propeller, which he finally did. The reason he wanted to do this was to multiply the three blades and the three virtues to achieve the number of the order of the Seraphim.⁶ Indeed the title for this work was originally going to be *Ordnung der Engels* (the order of the angels). The relatively simple idea of flight as symbolising transcendence is complicated by a parallel text. Ascending orders of being and forms of passage between the material world and its immaterial or heavenly counterpart appear in many forms in Kiefer's art. Ladders, wings, propellers, towers and steps all feature, often crossing the boundary of the material at the horizon.



Von den Verlorenen gerührt, die der Glaube nicht trug, erwachen die Trommeln im Fluss
2004

Our most recent acquisition is *Von den Verlorenen gerührt, die der Glaube nicht trug, erwachen die Trommeln im Fluss* 2004 which translates as; (the drums in the river came alive, beaten by the lost ones, who were not supported by faith). In this great assemblage, included in the exhibition in Sydney, a broken concrete stairway hovers at the

⁶ Kiefer explained to me that in the celestial hierarchies there were 9 ascending layers leading to the throne of God.

horizon of a vast and very material landscape. It is like the propeller which aspires to rise above the horizon but remains earth bound; these stairs that at first seem to float effortlessly in space, threaten to tip back to earth.

The title of this work is inscribed at the top edge of the painting. Like most of Kiefer's texts, its relationship to the iconography and the associations suggested by its material form is oblique but poetically charged. In a conversation with the cultural historian Thomas Macho, Kiefer said:

“When people say that oral and written traditions are different layers, the same holds true for pictures. Here too there is a purely visible presentation and a written one piled on top of each other like shifting slates continually displacing each other.”⁷

Rather than explaining Kiefer's intentions such texts extend the possible connotations significantly for each individual viewer. The reference to the drums in the river may have very specific associations for Kiefer but each of us is likely to bring our own association which may not have been part of the artist's thinking but may still support the broader ethos of the work. The structure of the work by its very oblique nature ensures that this will happen. For example, I was reminded that in some central African mythologies the Congo River plays a similar role to the horizon of Christian iconography. Passing from the world of the flesh to the world of spirits involves moving below the surface of the water, or the spirits are perceived as being reflected in the surface. The mirrors used in healing figures apparently stand in for this point of access to the spirit world. One of the compelling things about myths is that so often there are haunting parallels between different cultures derived from our common experience of the world and the inevitability that consciousness seems to transcend the material. The metaphor of the horizon bisected by the force of gravity gives rise to a cross and the possibility of transcendence. The same cross is derived in the Congo by the passage through the water's surface. In Greek mythology the dead must cross the waters of the River Styx to enter the spirit world.

⁷ Anselm Kiefer and Thomas H. Macho A conversation from the catalogue Anselm Kiefer *Am Anfang* Galerie Thaddeus Ropac Salzburg 2003, pp10.



Kiefer gave another work to the gallery that complements the image of the broken steps; it is also titled *Von den Verlorenen gerührt, die der Glaube nicht trug, erwachen die Trommeln im Fluss*. This 2005 work consists of a large pile of glass fragments scattered over a skein of human hair. Each shard bears the astronomical number of a heavenly body. While the broken stairs promise the possibility of ascension from the world to heaven, this installation suggests God's outpouring of light into his creation. The fragility of these shards also suggests the shattering of the vessels that was caused by this sudden outpouring. This is a reference to Isaac Luria's writing in the 12th century that sought to address the theological problem of how God could be everywhere and still make a place for his creation. Luria's view, which references Gnostic thought, had God withdraw into himself to make space for his creation. By proposing God's temporary absence from his creation he almost solved the dilemma of how a God that is all good could make a world that contains evil. When the creation was new, God returned with an outpouring of mercy but creation was not yet strong enough to absorb his mercy and this caused the shattering of the vessels that is described in the Cabbala as Schebirath-ha-kelim.⁸

⁸ Ibid. Kiefer and Macho discuss this at some length in their conversation pp 12-13



Schebirath-ha-kelim

The Judeo-Christian belief in this theme of heavenly intervention takes many forms in Kiefer's work, for example he has made a series of emanations suggested by lead poured down the centre of an image like the incandescent finger of God. The idea of a two way relationship between the nature of consciousness which yearns upwards and God's intervention into his creation is also reflected in Kiefer's response to the 16th-century English philosopher Robert Fludd. Fludd visualised heaven and earth as mirroring each other so, for example, every flower on earth has its corresponding star in heaven. Kiefer has made many paintings that depict the sky at night in which the constellations are equated with plants or branches. In one case he has attached a stuffed swan over the constellation of Cygnus.

In a way numbering the objects in the heavens is a futile and endless task and yet not to attempt it is unthinkable. Kiefer takes an interest in the arbitrary way civilisations have drawn figures into these constellations that seem to give meaning to the infinity of points in space. This impulse to impose recognisable patterns onto infinity is like gazing into the flames where we can discern any configuration we wish. Yet this apparent freedom to choose does not undermine the persistence of our imaginary constellations and the myths that surround them. Could there be a parallel in the way that art comes into being and survives? Both depend

upon imperfect images but they have the merit of remaining open and alive. Instead of experiencing melancholia like Renaissance scholars coming to understand that the human mind could never resolve all the questions of the universe, we might celebrate the endless possibility that unknowing affords.

It is important to understand that Kiefer's art does not form a linear progression; he returns to themes and even titles repeatedly and he always has more than one body of work underway in one or other of his purpose built studios. There has naturally been a development in the content. As a young man in post-war Germany he gave priority to dealing with the holocaust but this interest has expanded from that formative experience to embrace the history of civilisations and the nature of human consciousness. While the ideas that inform one work do not necessarily lead on to the next, certain key ideas circulate continuously. Similarly his technology is accumulative rather than progressive; he adds new ideas and new materials to his existing arsenal but has not ceased working with any of his earlier techniques. His attitude to making art is to use the most appropriate means to capture the ideas he wishes to convey.

His choice of materials and processes embodies an allegorical approach to painting and photography as aspects of the idea rather than neutral means for rendering an image. When he uses Photography is not just a way of gathering imagery but it is used for its indexical relationship to memory. The black and white photographic print is capable of introducing chance effects. Pooling of chemicals and bleeding of light suggest ephemeral presences. The making of photography is in effect an alchemical process and this is as important as the image itself. Similarly the book in Kiefer's art is more than a means of presenting images and more than a representation of any particular book. The idea of the book as a storehouse of cultural and personal memory holds a powerful attraction for him. Kiefer continues to 'carve' landscapes out of material that might be thought of as paint but which include organic materials like shellac and traces of fire and ash. Even in what seems to be painting, the object embodies something of the subject and can not simply be read as an image. Kiefer is making objects that leave the studio but he is simultaneously creating a permanent installation around the studio that constitutes an integrated world, possibly the most extensive site work ever attempted. It includes teetering towers, tunnels under the earth, great glass houses to house permanent installation. He accumulates materials and objects found on his travels and incorporates them into his assemblages and installations. All of this activity is in a way

interdependent with each object being an aspect of the whole and the present exhibition shows this process at work.

The first of the works prepared for the exhibition are on the theme of Palm Sunday and they consist of multiple assemblages under glass that cover the wall almost as if they were the pages of a book spread out before us. The second body of work is quite different in form being ostensibly a series of separate but closely related landscapes. These panoramic scenes are at first sight a return to the great charred landscapes of his earlier periods and yet there is a clear link to the Palm Sunday theme not least the carpet of flowers that is strewn across the foreground of each canvas running counter to the dominant perspective. Once again the texts are tantalising but they avoid explaining the images.



Lieber tot als rot

One of these paintings, '*Lieber tot als rot*', (better dead than red) has a red flush through the foreground and a dark shadow covers the top left corner almost obscuring the words of the title inscribed there. This is a phrase coined by Goebbels to harden the resolve of soldiers on the Russian front in World War II and later adopted in the USA by McCarthy. Kiefer condemns totalitarianism or ideology of any persuasion and has often referred to the catastrophes of the Inquisition, the Cultural Revolution, Nazism, the Moscow show trials as examples of ideology or religion that consider their higher purpose can condone atrocities.⁹ Maybe if we recall his series of Mao paintings, "*Let a thousand flowers bloom*" in the late 1990s we can see a parallel to these new images. In those works Kiefer reflected upon the terror of the

⁹ Ibid. p 16-18

Cultural Revolution following Mao's invitation to intellectuals to speak out, "let a hundred flowers bloom". Thousands did so and were subsequently persecuted for their naivety. Kiefer painted the figure of Mao on a pedestal his arm raised in a gesture remarkably similar to the Nazi salute, while around him a thousand flowers bloom.

Palm Sunday marks the beginning of one of the most poignant journey myths. It starts with Christ's triumphant arrival in Jerusalem followed by his agony on Golgotha and finally his resurrection and ascension. Palms were spread out along the path as Jesus rode into the city. The palm has many associations, it was an imperial symbol of victory and in Catholicism it is associated with the victory of martyrs over the flesh and the world. It is also associated with the raising of Lazarus and thus again with crossing between worlds. In Germany Palm Sunday is also known as Blumensonntag and flowers are strewn about the cross in the churchyard. In this body of work palm fronds dipped in plaster or white paint stand almost heraldically on parched and cracked red clay while around them swirl veils of misty white. Other panels include thorns or roses and the texts refer to the holy day in Latin, French and German. One names the Holy Virgin of Virgins (the palm is also a Marian attribute) while another recalls Kiefer's Mexican travels, Domingo de Ramos (Sunday of branches) the ceremonial gathering to bless the palms before the Palm Sunday procession begins there.



Palm Sunday installed at AGNSW with actual palm tree

Before the procession the palms are blessed and purified with incense and holy water, and later they are handed out to the congregation who take them home and venerate them. It is also a tradition to burn the palms after Easter and keep the ash till the following year when it would be applied to the heads of the faithful on Ash Wednesday, the first day of lent. It would be possible to see the swirling white veils around the palms in the Palm Sunday paintings as a reference to this pattern of veneration and renewal. Fire appears in the flower strewn landscape paintings as well.



Aperiatur Terra et Germinet Salvatorum 2005-06

One of the paintings is inscribed with words from Isaiah that open the liturgy for Palm Sunday, 'Aperiatur Terra et Germinet Salvatorem...rorate caeli desuper, et pluant iustum' (Let the earth be opened and bring forth a saviour....drop down dew, ye heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain the just). In the top left sector of the landscape a fiery emanation descends on the ploughed landscape. In a related painting to

be shown in Sydney Kiefer has written the second part of Isaiah's verse *Rorate coeli desuper et nubes pluant justum* which is part of the liturgy for Advent. Yet another work that will show only in Sydney includes fiery rain descending onto a field of flowers that hover in front of a field of caked mud. This work also includes the words *Aperiat Terra et Germinat Salvatorem*.



Nachricht vom Fall Trojas 2006

In *Nachricht vom Fall Trojas*... a series of fires burn across the fields recalling the eight fiery beacons Agamemnon had set to carry the news of the fall of Troy to his faithless wife Clytemnestra. Because Kiefer has made a great many works about maligned women¹⁰ just this hint is enough to invoke her.

¹⁰ For example; *The Women of Antiquity* and *The Women of the Revolution*, along with the *Lilith* paintings have been continuing themes for him since the 1990s. ¹⁰



Three women of Antiquity: Myrtis, Hypatia and Candida

Clytemnestra was one of the women of antiquity who may have been unfairly reviled by history. Seven hundred years after her death, Aeschylus in his *Oresteia* introduced the story that she had murdered her husband. Kiefer may well agree with some writers who have sought to vindicate her as a proto feminist.¹¹ The Version of this subject that will be shown in Sydney includes an applied thread or tape that traces the journey home. In many of these paintings different conceptions of space occupy the same surface. The map is applied over the image of a particular section of landscape in some ways recalling the multiple readings of micro and macro treatment of space and time that apply in Aboriginal painting.

¹¹ A trilogy for Clytemnestra, the Feminist. Garland Wright Directed a play for the Guthrie Theatre in NY in 1992 that was very controversial MacEwen, Sally "Reclaiming Klytemnestra: Revenge or Reconciliation (review)" *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* - Volume 50, Number 3, Fall 2004, pp. 783-784



Women of the revolution installed in Boundary Rider at AGNSW 1992

In another of the paintings, *Fur Victor Hugo*, the text ‘Olympie’ inscribed at top left could invoke a real feminist, Olympe de Gouges, an early heroine of the French Revolution who later succumbed to the Guillotine during ‘The Terror’.¹² She was condemned for refusing to support the execution of the royal family in spite of, or partly because of, her commitment to women’s rights. The French writer Victor Hugo also tried to take a more balanced view of recent history. He sided with the revolution but wrote of the good intentions and bravery of those who fought on the other side. This moderation in the face of a totalitarian regime is something Kiefer would admire.

These are, of course, a few of any number of possible speculations and loose associations that might be derived from the juxtaposition of words and images in these works. That is the nature of looking at Kiefer’s inexhaustible art. His is a generous practice because it invites each new beholder to work with a wealth of ideas and sensations according to their own experience. He has said that no viewer ever sees the work the same way as the artist does and he does not seek to constrain the imaginative possibility of our response. Because of this, the work can only continue to grow with each viewing. In the last analysis Kiefer acknowledges the complexity of memory that combines our reasoning mind with bodily memory and memories buried deeply in the reptilian depths of our brain. Kiefer’s works harness the allegorical possibilities in language, imagery and material processes to activate this complexity to fire our individual imagination and release memories that touch us personally again and again.

¹² This is a rather specific speculation on my part but it may be enough of a connection that in 19th century France the name Olympie is often associated with Courtesans. Manet’s *Olympia*, for example was a modern, self assured woman and a working girl who was also attacked by the establishment.