

Anselm Kiefer: Master of Destruction or Giver of Hope

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Abstract

Anselm Kiefer is a German Neo-Expressionist artist that lived in postwar Germany after World War II. The country at that time was full of issues such as rebuilding and creating a new identity. Kiefer was from a generation where the war was hidden from them and when he found out about the events that happened he did not look for a new identity for Germany but rather to own the identity and disasters that were being hidden from his generation. During World War II, Germany had been involved in awful crimes to humanity and Kiefer decided not to ignore them but to own them. He never liked the idea of covering up and trying to hide what had happened but instead he felt that showing them and bringing them to the forefront would bring about healing for the populace living in a devastated nation. Critics and Art Historians have constructed the title “master of destruction” for Kiefer based on the esthetic view of his works. It is clear to see how research and lead down a path about the despair however, when coming across the words of Kiefer himself it becomes clear that there is more to his work then the message of war, human destruction, or sadness. It is though his words that the viewer can open their eyes to see the hope and spirituality that is hidden in his work. Therefore making Anselm Kiefer not the master of destruction but rather the giver of hope for a hurting population after the tragedy is over.

Keywords: Kiefer, Destruction, Mythology, Spirituality, World War II, Chernobyl

1. What Makes Anselm Kiefer The Master of Destruction

In an interview at the Saint Louis Art Museum Anselm Kiefer said, “and this reminds me of an atomic power station, because this kind of energy is more spiritual energy cause you have not to heat charcoal or energy...It’s a kind of spiritualization of infection from another world so that’s about this painting.” This quotation gave me new insight into the world of Kiefer. When first working on research for the painting *Burning Rods* (for an image go to <http://www.slam.org>) it was easy to come across art historians that would refer to the destruction and devastation that Kiefer focused on in all his work, making him the veritable “Master of Destruction”. This was the path that the research was taking, to explore and investigate why Kiefer had this fascination with destruction. It soon became clear after reading Kiefer’s own words that there was a fixated on the appearance of his work and a closer examination of piece was needed in order to see the spiritual meaning and the hope and unity that even Kiefer has acknowledged exists in the work. This paper is intend to show how Anselm Kiefer is not the “master of destruction” as he has been constructed by his critics, but rather through his use of religion, mythology, and iconography he is a giver of hope after the destruction has been done.

It is easy to see why other historians and critics would think that Kiefer’s work is about destruction. Born in 1945 in a newly postwar Germany, Kiefer grew up in a country that had dealt with plenty of carnage. A country that was viewed by the world as being responsible for many crimes against humanity, Germany needed to rebuild itself and to create a new identity. Kiefer, being a part of the Neo-Expressionist art movement, was part of a group of artists

during this time that helped rebuild the visual identity of Germany. However, Kiefer believed that as a postwar Germany, his country should not cover up the past atrocities but rather own them, and acknowledge it in order to help the healing process that was greatly needed for a hurting population. Kiefer did not have an easy start to his art career because his early works were some of the first seen with images of the hidden past. Robert Zaller, an art historian, had this to say about Kiefer's early work,

"Kiefer's first, shocking images emerged. The artist presented himself directly to the public in a series of cardboard-mounted photographs reworked with watercolor and graphite as a solitary figure with his right arm raised in a Hitler salute. He titled this series *Heroic Symbols*, not only in defiance of the official German ban on Nazi gestures and regalia but in direct reference to an infamous 1943 Nazi propaganda exhibition of the same name. The public and critical response was outrage, which made Kiefer's gesture doubly political: as a direct evocation of the Nazi past and a challenge to the censorship that sought to erase it from memory and discussion."

James C. Harris saw Kiefer's work not as a political move and said,

"Anselm Kiefer's art is a vehicle for coming to terms with Germany's wartime past...Kiefer's generation was protected throughout childhood from references to Adolf Hitler and Germany's role in the Holocaust. For German society, 1945 was year zero as it started to rebuild from wartime damage, to buildings and to the psyche...The details of this past were kept from his generation...When Kiefer learned of Germany's past, he sought to confront it."

Harris saw Kiefer's work not as a shock but more of a way to show the hidden earlier events and to bring it to the forefront. He didn't deny that Kiefer's work was about destruction, in fact he went on to talk about how Kiefer's work was here to own the destruction of the past.

Ann Klefstad looked at Kiefer's work in the same way as Harris.

"When he first began showing his work in the '70s, it was both ambitious and hard to approach. Like his teacher, Joseph Beuys, Kiefer strove early on to re-establish for Germans a real and authentic relationship with their past and their culture. In a nation gutted by its own fascist narratives and their malign effects, he strove to re-create not a triumphalist narrative of German culture but a truthful one. This was a mission of despair, but a despair oddly energized and full of life."

There are those that think Kiefer's work is here for us to view the past in an unpleasant way. As if he is *shoving* the gruesome history in our faces. Historian Savannah Schroll said, "Kiefer navigates the grim facts of history by way of alchemical metaphor and artistically express his own sense of metaphysical suppression, wherein humankind seeks purpose and redemption but encounters only conformation with the unpleasant history that has shaped the present?"

These are just a few of the many historians that have constructed the identity of Anselm Kiefer around destruction. Their focus was more on the horrific events of the past that comprised the subject of Kiefer's works. While these events were part of a painful time in world history they are events that helped shape the world today. After reading Kiefer's words it was easier to understand that one of the things the viewer should get out of his work is, while bad events happen throughout the world, we can move forward and heal from the pain.

2. Chernobyl and Nuclear Energy

When reading about the works of Anselm Kiefer it's hard to not feel the pain and despair of the historical events through the works. Whether it is what is seen because of the process and distress of the materials or because one can empathize with history that is being referenced in the work, the destruction is clear and evident to both the viewers and the critics of Kiefer's work. The Chernobyl disaster wasn't the cause of as much human death as World War II. On April 26, 1986 the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant encountered an explosion and fire in one of the main reactors and released large amounts of radioactive particles into the atmosphere. The power plant being located in Ukraine and under the control of the Soviet Union at the time was a prime location to expose a great deal of Europe and Russia to radiation. The incident, considered the largest nuclear accident in the world, has had an enormous impact

on the population and environment of many countries that has yet to fully be known. At least for the immediate area around the power plant we know that the radioactive materials have left the land barren and unable to produce any form of vegetation.

Throughout the years of 1984-1987, Kiefer had a fascination with nuclear energy. The Cold War was still in full swing and tensions were high. This moment in history was all about the threat of nuclear technology and its destructive powers, but Kiefer saw that this technology had a fusing power as well and chose to use this in many of his pieces during this time. Kiefer challenges the viewer to see nuclear energy through several different points of view.

A primary example of this is his painting, *Burning Rods*. This work located in the contemporary wing of the Saint Louis Art Museum, is an 11' high by 18' wide triptych. It has three equal panels that weigh over 700 pounds all together. Paint, tar, lead and found objects comprise the media used in this work. These found objects include porcelain, the blade of an ice skate, and copper wire. While the viewer can see the distressed canvas and know that something dreadful has happened, the naming of this painting helped construct the idea of destruction even more. The original title in German is *Brennstäbe* which translates to "fuel." For many years the painting was called *Fuel Rods* but was later changed to the current title *Burning Rods* because it was believed to express the subject of the painting better, giving the viewer a preconceived interpretation of the work.

The main focal point of the painting is the fourteen white vertical lines painted in the center of the middle panel which stand out against the dark colors surrounding them. These lines are meant to represent the fourteen nuclear control rods of Chernobyl. A control rod is a rod used in nuclear reactors to control the rate of fission of uranium and plutonium. Control rods often stand vertically within the core. In these rods one would find a great deal of energy and power. This power has the ability to be constructive as well as harmful in the world depending on how it is used. But the question is: did we use this power to fill the world with good or did we use it to destroy a portion of the world? Kiefer takes his viewers on a journey using this power to reveal the truth about humanity as he sees it: that humans must learn to cope with the evil that surrounds them on a daily basis.

3. Spirituality, Mythology, and Process

Kiefer was born Catholic but he went down a long spiritual journey that involved Judaism. Kiefer's first trip to Israel was in 1984 where he was introduced to Kabbalah. Kiefer went on a two year spiritual journey during which he lived and practiced Judaism through the practice of Kabbalah. Kiefer's goal was to understand the lives of the Jewish population that suffered so terribly during the war in the effort to better express the human capacity to endure and then be able to express that better in his work. He said, "I am striving for a kind of reunification...I try in my own way to reverse this irreversible and brutal self-mutilation, knowing that this too is impossible..."

Kabbalah is found in the mystic stage of Judeo-Christian biblical religion. According to Dr. Kenneth Hanson there are three stages of religion though the bible. The first being the primitive, the second is the creative, and the third is the mystic. Dr. Hanson said, "In mysticism, God's subjects can find their way back to a deep and intimate relationship with the Creator." Kiefer was attracted to Kabbalah and drew inspiration through the practices. Often during hard times and especially times of great destruction, people seek to be closer to God more than ever. In the years following his Israel experience Kiefer frequently came back to the practice of Kabbalah to seek for inspiration in order to better express this spiritual message.

It is not only through Kabbalah but also through Kiefer's knowledge of ancient Egyptian mythology that he shows a journey in his work. Some historians like that of Nancy Marmer, acknowledged the use of Egyptian mythology but only to see more destruction in Kiefer's work. "If in this recent work Kiefer as longer specifically addresses and romanticizes the Germanic past, his evocation of Egyptian chthonic mythology, with its memories of prehistoric murder, dismembering and chaos, nevertheless seems to continue to allude to his own country's World War II traumas." However, a good example of the ancient Egyptian world is the sister painting of *Burning Rods* entitled *Osiris and Isis* (for an image go to <http://www.sfmoma.org>) located at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. In this work we see a pyramid that takes up most of the canvas. Located at the bottom of the pyramid are 17 pieces of broken porcelain meant to represent the pieces of the Egyptian god of the dead Osiris who, was cut apart by his brother and scattered about the earth. His twin sister and wife Isis went on a journey to gather the pieces and bring Osiris back to life. Kiefer had this to say about the myth, "And they came together, the brother and sister and they produced a son, but without a penis, so in a spiritual way, so that intrigues me very much because this theme of separation and unification, and the unification is on a very spiritual way because the sex was art." A similar piece of porcelain is located in the middle of the right panel of *Burning Rods*. According the Saint Louis Art Museum this piece is meant to represent a piece of Osiris' body.

The materials in *Osiris and Isis* are similar to that of *Burning Rods* and they are manipulated in an equivalent way. To show the deterioration in both *Osiris and Isis* and *Burning Rods* Kiefer actually goes through a process that is meant to erode the materials. His most frequently used process is to burn the canvas. Kiefer puts paint, tar, and straw on the canvas and then sets it on fire.

“Such doomsday interpretations are amplified by Kiefer’s brutal and highly unorthodox use of materials. Paint is fiercely brushed across the surface. Straw, embedded in the wet paint and ignited, registers only as blackened residue. Molten lead is split here and there. The surface of the painting undergoes extraordinary torment, as if the creation were only possible through repeated destruction.”

By controlling the extent of the damage he is able to show the viewer what looks like a barren land that has been through torture. He got this idea because his art studio is located next to a wheat field. Every year the farmers would come through and burn the leftover crop from the previous year. This annual burning process made it easier for the farmer to come in, rotate the soil, and get the ground ready for the new crop. For Kiefer this was much more than a process, it was rebirth. Similarly, through the journey of Isis finding the pieces of Osiris he was able to be reborn. According to Daniel Arasse, the burning process is analogous to the journey of Isis and her quest for Osiris’ rebirth.

As noted, located at the bottom of the pyramid in the painting *Osiris and Isis* are several pieces of broken porcelain meant to represent the scattered body parts of Osiris. These pieces are connected together using copper wire. This wire is used both in this piece as well as *Burning Rods*. Kiefer said, “That’s connecting wire...copper wire is used for electricity. So the painting...make[s] contact because they all speak from the same, from separation, unification and from human being because we are all refugees and nomads in the world”. The wire is Kiefer’s way of connecting the pieces and bringing them together. He is able to link the modern world with the ancient world as well as join humans to the supernatural world.

These found objects of porcelain and wire form a part of Kiefer’s personal iconography that tie us to the spiritual world and gives us a sense of a journey. There are two additional items that Kiefer uses in *Burning Rods* that give us that same spiritual journey experience. Located at the foot of the left panel is the bottom of an ice skate. Kiefer turned this skate into a modern version of a *memento mori*, or a reminder of death. Kiefer said, “the skate is a general symbol for the human spirit traveling in space and time.” Connecting the skate with the copper wire shows the connectivity and communication that happens between humans and the supernatural through the religious practice of Kabbalah.

The other crucial element is the melted lead that Kiefer uses in this piece. Kiefer said if you were to x-ray this work you would be able to see through all of the materials with the exception of the lead. It is the only material that cannot be seen through and Kiefer uses it to show the impenetrable truth. Throughout this piece you will find portions of the lead that are peeled back to reveal the painted and distressed canvas beneath the lead. According to Kiefer, this is meant to represent the journey and search for truth. The lead is connected to the porcelain and skate through the copper wire to bring it all together and provide unification.

4. Conclusion

The appearance and subjects of Kiefer’s work has caused many art historians and critics to write about the destruction that is clearly visible. Kiefer sometimes makes it hard for the viewer to figure out the meaning behind his works. Daglind Sonolet noted that “Kiefer has also left many foreign critics – supporters and detractors – at a loss as to the interpretation of his intentions and the meaning of his emotionally highly charged art.” It was only through Kiefer’s words that a viewer would be able to find his interpretation of the meaning of his works. His words have called into question the way one may look at his work. Through the new lens one can now see hope concealed in the destruction and this is the message Kiefer is trying to share.

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