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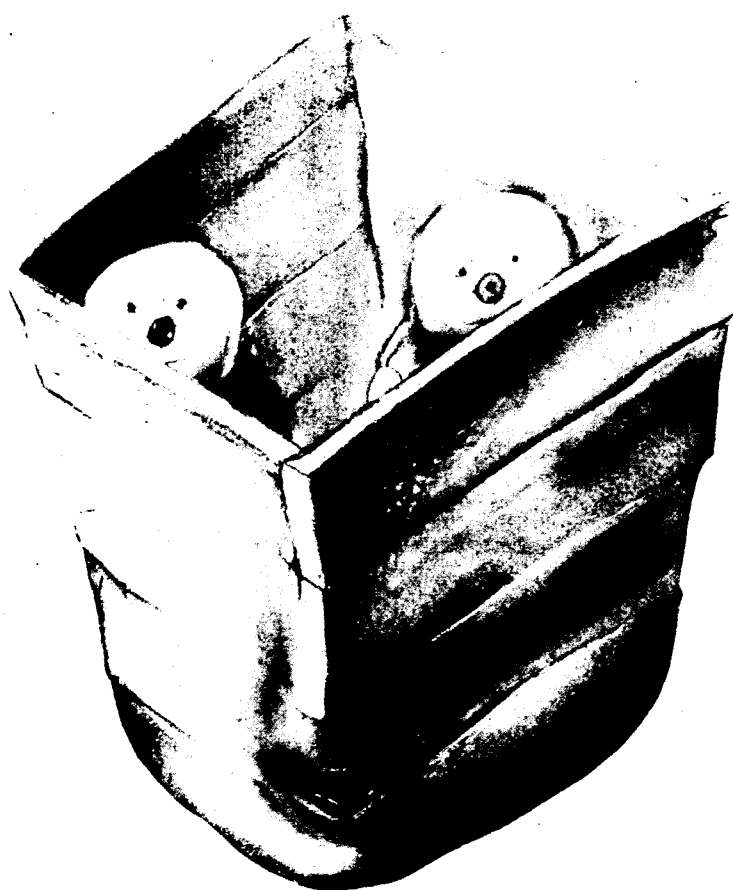


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the perpetrators. It is this obsession with the wellsprings of evil that raises ever more troubling questions about the present state of German consciousness. Current German attitudes and perceptions are uncomfortably close to those found during its moral eclipse, Kiefer suggests, yet the need for national redemption has been swept under the rug along with so many other uncomfortable truths about the National Socialist period.

While the roots and character of Nazism are central to his themes, Kiefer has attempted something far more ambitious in his explorations of his country's historical, cultural and mythological underpinnings. His distillation of history, particularly the history of German consciousness, places his work

on a rarefied plane few visual artists can share.

Painters who could eloquently express social concerns have rarely been successful. In recent decades such subject matter has been virtually banished from an art market engrossed with creativity as a highly profitable commodity. Although Kiefer's paintings have been termed evocative of the heroic tradition of such 19th century artists as Delacroix and Géricault—ponderous, historic themes executed on a grand scale—Kiefer maintains a thoroughly modern style of communicating his artistic vision.

This distinguishing trait, the application of Abstract Expressionism's complexity and subtlety to serious themes, has been hailed as one of his chief accomplishments. In the words of *Los Angeles Times* art critic William Wilson, "In good German fashion he has put abstraction in the service of the real to speak of the transcendent."

**Layered symbolism:** Strongly influenced by the late Joseph Beuys, who also gained an international reputation for his confrontational, pointedly political approach to art, Kiefer shares with his mentor an impassioned sense of the artist as conscience. In West Germany's polarized society both men gained high profiles by using art as a political weapon. Whereas Beuys has been criticized for frequently resorting to mere shock value and visual one-liners, however, Kiefer's trademarks invariably include layer upon layer of complex symbolism and subtle shades of meaning.

Kiefer's most notorious work remains a photographic series called *Occupations*. The artist had himself photographed in scores of different settings giving the Hitler salute. In innumerable unlikely contexts—saluting the ocean, a blank bathroom wall or the Roman Coliseum—the power of this symbol upon our emotions dissipates. The gesture becomes absurd, harmless. The banality of evil is certainly one message here, but of greater importance to Kiefer is the artist's ability to expose and transform symbol, to undermine our perception of historical references, to sabotage history.

Kiefer's iconoclastic efforts to unmask the tainted nature of postwar Germany zero in on some of his culture's most sacred cows, exploring their appropriation and debase-ment under the Third Reich. But such attempts to liberate symbols and values caught in the web of Germany's modern nightmare are expressed in a curiously ambivalent manner. Kiefer seems continually torn between hope and deep cynicism.

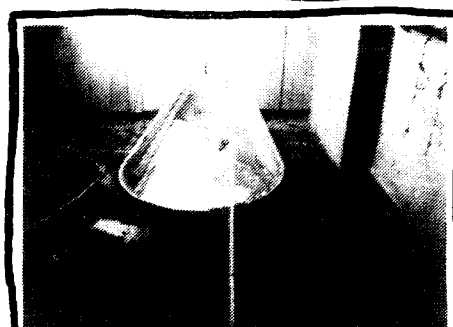
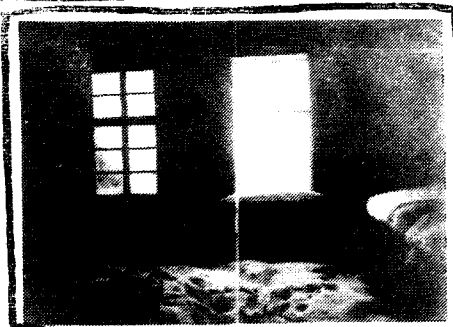
His food for thought offers the kind of irony-rich diet many find difficult to digest, particularly given the painful nature of his subject matter. In his series of paintings entitled *Ways Of Worldly Wisdom*, which features portraits of revered German thinkers and leaders, Kiefer challenges the viewer to consider that on some collective level these cultural giants led the nation along a path that ended with Nazism, thus casting their wisdom, or at least the value of that wisdom, into doubt.

By placing popular or heroic subject matter in morally ambiguous juxtapositions beside Nazi reference points he is espousing a spiritual principle as well, the idea that everything has the power to manifest itself in either a positive or negative manner, that good and evil stem from a common source in our psyches. The wholesome is not so easily separable from that which can destroy.

← Brünhilde Sleeps

PHOTO WITH ACRYLIC  
AND EMULSION, 1980

↓ PAGES FROM  
Hoffmann von  
Fallersleben auf  
Helgoland, 1978



**Scorched landscapes:** Kiefer reduces these concepts to the fundamental level of earth, fire, water and air. Fire is shown as a force that can purify as well as burn. The ease with which it can rage out of control, changing its nature, serves as a leitmotif for the artist's judgments on his culture's descent into barbarism. In the painting *Germany's Spiritual Heroes*, for example, a wooden hall filled with torches bears the names of Wagner, Nietzsche and other Germans, many of whom have been politically or morally suspect since their work was embraced to serve National Socialist ideology. The hall appears perilously close to catching fire. These symbolic flames of knowledge are able to destroy the structure that houses them. Similarly, many of the artist's large canvases present brooding, scorched landscapes that reflect, among other things, the spiritual devastation of Nazi bloodletting.

Highly characteristic of Kiefer's methodology is the ability to load one symbolic image with a broad assortment of subtexts. The recurring depiction of an old-fashioned, four-legged bathtub is among the clearest examples. As part of the Nazis' campaign for good hygiene, a superficially innocuous policy that actually was laden with racial purity ideals, this bathtub was mass-produced and distributed by the millions. Paintings and photographic series on the subject of the Jews crossing the Red Sea in the tub instantly engage the viewer to place the Biblical event in the context of the Holocaust, and the play on words with "bloodbath" easily comes to mind. But there is a second play on words in German. The word for "bathtub" is "Badwanne," while the homonym "Badwahn" means "bath insanity." It is this meaning that Kiefer had in mind when he portrayed a series of a naval battles fought with toy ships. In World War II the German High Command actually used a tub and similar toys to plan "Operation Sea Lion," a tremendously flawed strategy to invade England.

Having embraced some of the darkest themes of any recognized artist, couched in a dense, esoteric iconography drawn from such disparate sources as German cultural and military history, Nazi architecture, alchemy, myths and the Bible, Anselm Kiefer would seem remarkably well-suited for a career of terminal obscurity. Yet despite the tremendously demanding nature of his work (and without studying the highly perceptive catalogue by Mark Rosenthal accompanying the exhibit, abandon ye all hope of grasping much of Kiefer's output), there is an immediately accessible, imposing presence to his works. They capture the essence of a haunted land. Look a little deeper, Kiefer beckons, and you'll glimpse the abyss between idealized nature and the living hell that arose from the same ideals. As Rosenthal observes, his blacked, scorched landscapes show "the province of the landscape to be human suffering, not the glory of nature."

**Teutonic icons:** This haunted state extends to the realm of myth and symbol as well. The Teutonic icons projected in Kiefer's art—Siegfried and Brünhilde, the Mastersingers of Nuremberg, the tree of Yggdrasil, Arminius' victory over the Romans—are all cast into doubt by his ironic treatments. The heroic symbols of a people have been devalued into Nazi kitsch, burdened by a historical association with Hitler's new mythology. Kiefer prompts his audience to re-evaluate the power and role of myth in the light of

Continued on page 22