

German Occupation

In a new show, Anselm Kiefer plows back into his nation's troubled history

Art



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**Anselm Kiefer:
'Next Year in Jerusalem'**
Gagolian Gallery
555 West 24th Street
212-741-1111, gagolian.com
Through December 18

BY R.C. BAKER

The Nazis make for boffo box office, with their stylish SS uniforms and Albert Speer's imposing architecture. And what could be more dramatic than the wasteland that was Mitteleuropa after Germany got crushed between the pincers of Communism and America's Arsenal of Democracy?

Anselm Kiefer, whose paintings and sculptures currently crowd Gagolian's vast exhibition space, was born in Donaueschingen, in southwestern Germany, on March 8, 1945, a little less than two months before Adolf Hitler blew his brains out in his Berlin bunker. To muffle the sounds of Allied bombs raining down around them, Kiefer's mother put wax in his ears. "As a child, I had no toys," the artist has said. "Our house was bombed, but there were lots of bricks. Ruins are wonderful because they are the beginning of something new—you can do something with them."

Kiefer's oeuvre can be seen as ruins right out of the gate: Fashioned from ash, cracked clay, blistering plaster, snakeskins, and thorn bushes (along with traditional paint and canvas),

the materials are falling apart even as the artist puts them together.

Yet these tenuous components deliver a roughshod beauty. In the Gagolian show, titled "Next Year in Jerusalem," spools of thin, flattened lead plastered with photos depicting skeletal struts cascade down the inside of a towering, 20-foot-high vitrine. Other sections of these ersatz film strips feature overexposed, sepia clouds that call to mind the opening of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, in which the Führer descends from the heavens like some Wagnerian god. The title of this massive sculpture translates as *The Destruction of the Temple*, but in Kiefer's worldview, the ruins may offer hope of a new beginning. A companion glass box, equal in height, contains tumbling dresses frozen into place with thick paint and spindly wires. Are these fallen angels or, perhaps more hopefully, ascending victims? In translating the title, *Engel-Sturz*, we get the former.

Between these totems of decay and hope hangs a massive canvas depicting a winged painter's palette, ash-gray and bone-black, with rusty highlights. The title, *San Loreto* (2009–10), references the house purported to be the home of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, which was said to have been miraculously transported from Nazareth to the Italian town. Possessed of a leaden radiance, this strange and dusky form conflates the Catholic legend with Kiefer's own metaphysical

a powerful emotional resonance.

In a 1980 watercolor (not part of the Gagolian show), *To the Unknown Painter*, a palette rises out of a reflecting pool surrounded by somberly lit columns. Replacing Germany's brutal martial past with respect for modern artists also allowed Kiefer to turn Hitler's quasi-worship of provincial, neoclassical art on its head. A year later came the huge canvas *Innenraum*, a nine-foot-tall collage depicting Hitler's megalomaniacally scaled Reich Chancellery, designed by Speer. With its rough, blackened woodcuts emphasizing harsh perspective, skylights depicted in dripping paint, and gobs of pigment spotting everything like machine-gun holes, Kiefer imagined a vast vacuum of power, an interior savaged by the Soviet victors.

One of the most disturbing of Kiefer's newest works takes place in an equally haunted, though more claustrophobic space. As a student, in 1969, Kiefer embarked on his *Occupations* project, traveling throughout Europe to take self-portraits of himself giving the Nazi salute. In one image he appears to stand on water in a bathtub, looking ridiculous in jodhpurs, with frazzled hair. He bound this absurd travelogue into a book, outraging some fellow students, who accused him of fascist sympathies even though the works were actually a send-up of the philistine pomposity of the Nazi regime. Only his instructor, the influential artist Joseph Beuys (who had served in Hermann Goering's Luftwaffe), got the joke.

The new version of *Occupations* (2010) includes some of the original images enlarged to mural size and pasted onto colossal sheets of lead. Hanging from long steel hooks like coats in an overstuffed closet, 76 of these huge photos are jammed into a steel box that is roughly 34 feet long and 16 feet wide; viewers can glimpse the pictures on edge through half-open side doors. At this scale, the absurdity of the earlier project is replaced by grim associations with cattle cars and gas chambers. Kiefer has long struggled to wrest a proud national culture out of the abyss into which it was plunged by his grandfather's and father's generations, but his aesthetic reach sometimes becomes entangled with an overly conceptual grasp.

Much of the show is viscerally beautiful: Paintings of gloomy, tree-clotted forests and mountains crusted with clouds in Kiefer's signature burnt blacks, smoky grays, sepulchral whites, and dried-blood browns, coalesce into desolate, brooding quiet. The vistas call to mind the wastelands, still strewn with long forgotten ordnance, that surround the eradicated Austrian village of Dollersheim, which Hitler had blasted off the map in an attempt to destroy any trace of a family past he feared might be tainted with Jewish blood. To this day, locals refer to the place as *verfallen*—"ruined."

Hitler tried to hide his origins. Kiefer wears his like an outsize badge.

Decay is the way: *Merkaba*, 2010

beliefs in the redemptive power of art.

Whether he depicts them with wings or as monuments, Kiefer has long been fascinated with palettes—quaint tools of easel painters that he has no use for in the fabrication of his epically slathered and encrusted visions. Decades ago, he delved into the history of the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy, which centered on the Ten Commandments' prohibition against worshipping graven

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images. Playing on the ancient belief that images can magically bring about that which they depict, he added to that mix the supposed documentary truthfulness of photographs. He shot toy tanks and miniature soldiers laid out on the floor of his studio, sometimes strewing sand around them as if they were on location in the desert, and then silhouetted the photos with the painted shape of a palette or glued sand onto their surfaces. Such a visual and material ouroboros—pasting actual sand onto a representation of sand—lent Kiefer's sometimes turgid content