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James D. Campbell

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Montréal

## AN ALCHEMIST OF OUR TIME

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scream comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now. It is too late. The evacuation still proceeds, but it's all

theatre...» If the initial lines of Thomas Pynchon's magnum opus, *Gravity's Rainbow*, came to mind as one entered the Kiefer exhibition halls, it was not without equal measures of reason and poetry.

This welcome and long-overdue exhibition, in fact the first-ever significant showing of Kiefer's production in Canada, included some 40 works executed between 1969 and 2005. On display were paintings, books, lead sculptures and sundry works on paper, giving the viewer a sense of the full measure of Kiefer's achievement.

Resonant with the same apocalyptic idiom and demented fervour as Pynchon's novel, Kiefer's immense, raw and endlessly plowed, sown and distressed fields suggest a sundered earth world after all the bombs have dropped. His constellating inventions open up heaven, earth, the abyss and the myriad liminal spaces that lie before our enraptured gaze. From somewhere within the resplendent array of these vast landscapes of mourning, there emerges the powerful and harrowing voice of an artist for whom the stakes are infinitely high, and the act of communicating means simply everything.

Pynchon, the writer, was referring to the post-impact sound of a missile accelerating in order to catch up with its supersonic source. As we stand dwarfed on the threshold of these outsized paintings, it is as though we inhabit their ash-blasted grounds long after the rockets have fallen – but are still privileged to hear the deafening roar of the missiles' descent. This is in itself unsettling and uplifting at one and the same time. As some commentators have noted, Pynchon's unforgettable opening salvo invoked verbs of expression, transmission and disembodiment. This segues beautifully with our experience of Kiefer's paintings and sculptures. Are they angelic transmissions that foretell the human future from heaven, or aspiring thereto? Perhaps. But this is far from the Hieronymus Bosch rendition of heaven that hangs in the Doge's Palace in Venice. Irradiated telegrams from the many death worlds of Modernity? Yes. The weak and spectral luminosity that filters through the scrim of these vast, fractured, grisaille surfaces speaks of ineffable human and environmental damage, and also of numinous hope found amidst the wreckage.

The exhibition includes a Kiefer from almost 40 years

ago, *Die Himmel (The Heavens)*, 1969, a small and talismanic book containing cloud and sky pictures cut from magazines and pasted on blank pages that are both touchstone and prophecy. Also on display were some of the remarkable books Kiefer executed in his incessant cartographic rendering of earth and heaven. The show includes paintings from the acclaimed *Attic* series of the 1970s as well as recent magisterial works such as *Melancholia* (2004), which goes head-to-head with Dürer.

Along with Pynchon, another name that comes frequently to mind as we peruse all this work is that of Dr. Robert Fludd, the Elizabethan Rosicrucian so dear to Kiefer's heart. The paintings specifically remind us of the extraordinary series of engravings in Fludd's definitive work of hermetic philosophy, *Utriusque cosmi historia* (an account of the Macrocosm and Microcosm). The plates depict chronologically the evolution of the cosmogony from Fludd's hermetic perspective. For him, the divine always works from above; but for Kiefer, one might argue, it works from below. Did Kiefer take a conspicuous cue from Fludd? Fludd did not have the luxury of using colour in his book. We take no memories of colour away with us when we leave the exhibition, only a plethora of grisailles and deliriously subdued earth hues.

Tracing the tangled skein of Kiefer's sources – everything from rare Rosicrucian and alchemical texts to obscure mythological treatises – brings us to the heart of his mythology and autopoiesis. Everything here appears under the rubric of the artist's autopoietic organization – an autonomous and self-gestating unity that accounts for the extraordinary cohesiveness of his corpus.

Kiefer, however lofty his premises and elevated his ambition may be, never overreaches. He stays close to his material and his spiritual concerns. An alchemist for our time, he includes amongst his paints, salts and tinctures the following: clay, ash, gold leaf, seeds, dried plants and a huge quantity of weighty lead. A telling alternate title for this exhibition might have been *Die last der Welt*: "The weight of the world." For, like Kiefer, we all struggle under the accumulated weight of history as we struggle for transcendence at twilight's last gleaming.

It is fitting that Kiefer, whose works invoked Pynchon's lines at the outset, and who stands on tall stilts and true in this exhibition as his work transcends and memorializes the death worlds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, brings home to us the meaning of the clos-

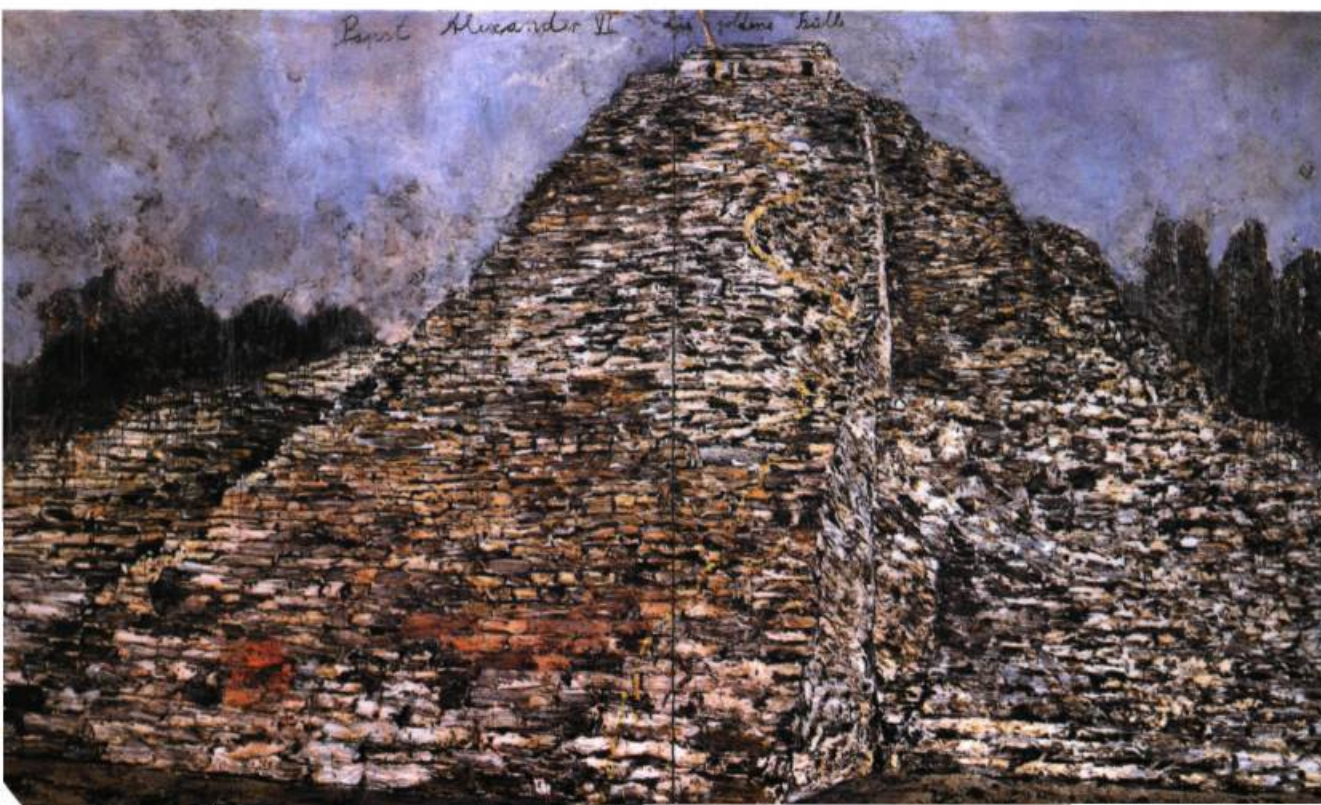


ing words of Proust's *Remembrance* at the end with uncanny resonance : "I should not fail... to describe men first and foremost as occupying a place... immoderately prolonged – for simultaneously, like giants plunged into the years, they touch epochs that are immensely far apart, separated by the accretions of many many days – in the dimension of time."

JAMES D. CAMPBELL

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> *Anselm Kiefer : Heaven and Earth* originated at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas, under the direction of the museum's chief curator, Michael Auping. Paulette Gagnon, chief curator of the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, was the able catalyst for and in charge of the Montreal presentation. After the MAC, it will travel to the Hirshhorn Museum and finally to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.





Anselm Kiefer, *Livre avec ailes*, 1992-1994. Plomb, acier et étain; 189, 9 x 529, 9 x 110, 2 cm. Coll. Musée d'art Moderne de Fort Worth.

Anselm Kiefer, *Quaternité*, 1973. Huile, fusain sur toile de jute; 298, 4 x 432, 4. Coll. Musée d'art Moderne de Fort Worth.

