

## Anselm Kiefer

(Donaueschingen, Germany, 1945)

Born in Germany during the period of the fall of the Third Reich, Anselm Kiefer, like other artists of his generation, and perhaps more so, has felt a responsibility to reconsider German history of the twentieth century, after nearly three decades of embarrassed silence. He has done so utilizing above all pictorial language and grafting this practice onto both the national trunk of German expressionism and the earlier romantic sensibility of nineteenth-century northern European artists. The handling of material in his large paintings is expressionistic—the paint mixed with varnish, ashes, and other substances, until it verges on the visual impact of high relief. The compositional structure is romantic, rigorously faithful to linear perspective and a central vanishing point. His landscapes are like romantic works of an older lineage that combine images, myths, and symbologies, linking the history of Germany to the religious and mysterious origins of all Western culture, from Egyptian and Babylonian mythology to the Old Testament, the Kabala and Jewish mysticism, along with the inevitable Germanic divinities, often in a Wagnerian version.

*Einschusse*, a painting from 2010, is one of his most recent landscapes. It depicts a snow-covered mountain chain, viewed frontally and rather conventionally. The distance is bridged by a field filled with rows of plants that stretch as far as the bottom of the mountains, in a central perspective. Everything is white, gray, and blue, as in the wintery fantasies of Friedrich, but the whiteness is disfigured at many points. Holes open up on the surface of nature, in the impasto of the canvas—holes from which blood trickles or from which little flames of an internal fire escape. Those red stains against the white background speak to us of battles and death.

Kiefer has used the vanishing point device over and over to paint and repaint the railroads or railroad tracks that led to the extermination camps, repropounding, even in the profound silence of the mountains, German history, which, like a restless phantasm, haunts every corner of the land. Going even further, he has Germanic mythology speak to us of suffering, victims, and sorrow, that sorrow that is the name carved into the sword of Siegfried. The land, omnipresent in his paintings, looming so high on the horizon it seems about to swallow up every glance, is the primal element that is nourished with the blood of the fallen that is blended in with their bodies, according to the cult of the dead celebrated by the Nazis.

At the highest summit of the mountain chain a large fire burns, positioned along the central axis of the painting, like the fire of the Holy Spirit in a religious painting. These are the flames that surround Brünnhilde, the Valkyrie who had sought to save Siegfried's father and whom Siegfried would have to free. *Siegfried's Difficult Way to Brünnhilde* or *Siegfried Forgets Brünnhilde* are titles that Kiefer has given to paintings where he more explicitly recalls the trajectory of trains taking deportees to concentration camps.

The flames that imprison Brünnhilde on the snow-covered mountains are sisters of the flames of the gas chambers.

There can be no peace for German memory, not even in the majesty of nature, and, indeed, it is the majesty of nature that seems to demand the disquietude of its people. Likewise in *Umbaba*, 2009, the forest depicted is the forest with which, as Elias Canetti reminds us, the German people-army identify, a forest calling them to perennial battle. (EV)

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