

Artnews, April 2002, international reviews

ANSELM KIEFER
Fondation Beyeler
Basel

This exceptional show highlighted three decades of painting by Anselm Kiefer, offering an overview of the German artist's conceptual concerns and muscular use of materials. While Kiefer first gained notice for using iconography relating to his country's Nazi past, his recent work alludes to a history that is more archaic and universal.

Most powerful were the colossal, late-1990s tableaux. They skate the line between painting and sculpture, their surfaces covered with such materials as terra-cotta, sand, iron, shellac, and emulsion. Dominating the entry hall at 15 feet tall and nearly twice as wide, a 1997 painting of an ancient pyramid--*Dein und Mein Alter und die Alter der Welt* (Your Age and My Age and the Age of the World)--was the exhibition's showstopper. The monument appears almost life-size, its stratified layers seem to dissolve into each other as they rise to their apex. Up close, the peeling and scorched paint (Kiefer sometimes uses a blowtorch) is tangibly organic, recalling the look and texture of an insect's discarded carapace.

Dating from the same year two massive brown-hued paintings with distressed surfaces faced each other in the main gallery, both showing abandoned temples (or palaces) almost obliterated by the desert winds and sand enveloping them. Here, Kiefer creates a powerful paradox: the images are timeless, yet the pieces themselves seem to be decaying.

Less evocative were the "Attic Paintings" of the 1970s, with icons relating to the Third Reich and appearing bluntly symbolic. Kiefer's more recent "Star Paintings" depict fantastical constellations with astronomical notations inscribed on the canvases and tiny pieces of lead and withered sunflowers embedded in the surfaces. However, in this presentation, these paintings lacked the monumental power of his large 1997 pieces or the grace of the recent gouaches.

-Marc Spiegler