

GAGOSIAN



**Anselm Kiefer: Early Works review – his Nazi salute dominates a show
haunted by horrors**

From shocking images of him Sieg Heil-ing to a woodland watercolour haunted by the atrocities of war, the German artist confronts his homeland's fascist past – and it's never felt so relevant

Eddy Frankel



Ghostly and quiet ... Kiefer's Für Jean Genet (For Jean Genet), 1969. Photograph: © Anselm Kiefer

When he was 24, [Anselm Kiefer](#) found his father's old Wehrmacht uniform in the attic. This hidden, shameful family history was almost lost to time, almost forgotten, but Kiefer couldn't let that happen. So he put on the overcoat and "Sieg Heil"-ed all across Europe, taking pictures along the way. This early art project in the late-1960s was the German artist attempting to embody and confront the past.

A picture of him doing the banned salute – forbidden in Germany under the long process of denazification – is at the heart of this show of his early works. He stands, arm raised, against a barbed-wire fence in shimmering, solarised black and white. It's a ghostly and quiet photo, but amazingly powerful in its simplicity. That overcoat became a historical burden for Kiefer to bear in the first gesture of an artistic career dedicated to raking through history so that it would not be forgotten, or repeated.

The war is everywhere here. Three thick, gloopy paintings of soldiers show men who are scarred and haunted. A watercolour of a grim, desolate interior is based on a photo of an abandoned building designed for the Nazi regime. Stark woodcut portraits of Kant, Nietzsche and ancient Germanic leaders who defeated the Romans are collaged together in a pastiche of Nazi idols. Even the still life of a jug and a loaf of bread is Kiefer asking if you can still paint pretty images after the horrors of the Holocaust.



Subtlety and power ... Kiefer at work in his studio. Photograph: Courtesy Barbara Klemm

There are endless references to mythology and Wagner, used by the Nazis as implements of soft power. Any artist might question their calling when they are confronted with how easily their work can be twisted to enforce fascism. But Kiefer knew he could make his point with subtlety. A vast brown smudge of a painting hides a tank and a horse, in reference to an early battle in the second world war when Polish cavalry attacked a German infantry unit. A field is not farmland or countryside any more, it's a war zone, a place of traumatic cultural memory.

This is when Kiefer's work is the most affecting. The early directness is great, but when the horror is implied instead of stated, it sends you reeling. There's one single small watercolour of a forest here – an almost throwaway, simple painting – but it's now so full of war, death, the Holocaust and blood that you can see nothing else.

There are works here which are totally personal: a whole wall of small tree and lake paintings scrawled over with Anselm and his first wife Julia's names. But even these have political and historical significance: they're Kiefer trying desperately to understand how to become a new husband, a new father, in a land so heavily burdened by history. Can you reclaim a forest that

was a mass grave? Can you find joy in a lake, where shame stains the waters you swim in? This work is all about ghosts you can't banish, demons you can't exorcise, traumas you can't – and shouldn't – forget.



Scarred landscape ... Wald (Forest), 1973–74. Photograph: Adam Reich/© Anselm Kiefer

His more recent work tends towards the grandiose, the overwhelming, and the often overbearingly complex. But here in his youth, his message is direct and so powerful. It's not that every work here is good – there are plenty of duds (the three paintings of a dancer in the first room are pretty heinous, and opening with a bunch of garish new works is a mistake) – but for the most part, it's just so visceral, so aggressively confrontational, so historically important. This is an artist making a whole nation deal with itself.

And maybe you're looking at the work and thinking: "So what, it was 80 years ago, it's over." But then someone like Elon Musk does what looks like a Sieg Heil on live TV, or Donald Trump calls for the ethnic cleansing of a whole region, or Nigel Farage is on the cover of a major weekly publication railing against immigrants, and you realise that Kiefer's right; the past hasn't been processed, it hasn't been erased, it's right here, it's now. And we're on the verge of letting it all happen again.

[Anselm Kiefer: Early Works is at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, from 14 February to 15 June](#)