

## ANSELM KIEFER

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### ALKAHEST

SALZBURG HALLE

28 Thursday - 24 Saturday

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Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac is showing a new set of works by Anselm Kiefer. Under the title *Alkahest*, Kiefer has collected a series of monumental canvases, sculptures and small paintings, all related to basic processes of alchemy. In these works, the mountains become a place of translocation and dissolution of matter, focusing on the correlation between water and stone. Here, the alchemical transmutation of matter always symbolises an inner transformation. The exhibition will be held in the HALLE (Vilniusstrasse 13), a venue specially designed for large-scale exhibits, and in the gallery's premises at Mirabellplatz 2.

"The term *Alkahest* signifies that there is a solution which can dilute any substance. This idea comes from the alchemists. Dilution is of course something very important for me. I often lay pictures on the floor and pour water over them, or pour on water that has paint dissolved in it. So I'm exposing them to dilution. [...] Water has to do with erosion. Whole mountains, and sediments that have accumulated over millions of years, are carried down to the sea by water. Water contributes to the cycle. Rock that looks as though it will last for ever is dissolved, crushed to sand and mud" (Anselm Kiefer, 2009).

In his paintings and installations, Kiefer explores transformative energy. His entire oeuvre is permeated by volcanic disruption of eroded layers of earth and rigid codes of conduct, and by the transformation of matter. The narrative basis for these new works is provided by the poems of Friedrich Hölderlin and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, Old Testament stories and Nordic mythology. The biblical figure of Moses, who struck a rock to bring forth water and who, in his anger over the Golden Calf, shattered the stone tablets bearing the Ten Commandments, provided Kiefer with powerful images which inspired him while he was working on the *Alkahest* series.

Hölderlin's poems often follow the movement of the heavens, the seat of the divine, on to the clouds that veil the heavens, to mankind, living between Heaven and Earth, and on to Earth itself. This structure shows the intimate involvement between the heavenly, the divine, the mortal and the earthly. In the poem *Greece* (1793), this involvement includes listening: each part contributes to the great "Symphony of Fate". Hölderlin's structure inspired Martin Heidegger to form the concept of the *Geviert* [fourfold] (1950) – the interplay of the four elements: the heavens, the earth, the divine and the mortal, which, gathered together, constitute the ontological significance of each. Kiefer's canvases *tönend wie des Kalbs Haut die Erde* and *Des Wolken heitere Stimmung* allude to this thematic complex. The work *Essence* (Ek-sistence) brings a further reference to Heidegger, this time to the *Letter on Humanism* (1945), a revised version of a letter Heidegger wrote to the French philosopher Jean Beaufret. Here Heidegger criticises the historical developments of humanism. As metaphysical definitions, he finds that they underestimate the essential quality of mankind, always reducing man to an mere entity. He counters this view with a definition of man's "ek-static" essence characterised by his relation to Being, standing in "the clearing of being". Heidegger sees this as "out-standing", ex-sistent. Man's place in the cosmos is touched upon in what is probably the best-known poem in the German language: in the second part of Goethe's *Wandlers Nachtlied* (1780), the first lines of which Kiefer has chosen as a title *Über allen Gipfeln ist ruh in allen Wipfeln spürst du kaum einen Hauch* [Stillness lies over the mountain-peaks, in all the tree-tops you feel hardly a breath of air].

Many works bear titles and inscriptions taken directly from the terminology of alchemy. *Dissolutio*, for instance, is the second stage in the alchemical process of transformation, while *Purificatio dissolutio coagulatio* refers to three of the twelve stages necessary for completion of the *Opus Magnum*, the transmutation of a baser metal into gold (or the creation of the mythical *Philosopher's Stone*). Here, *Athanor* means a special stove used by the alchemists. One of the most learned and original authors in the field of (neo)-alchemistic literature is a French writer who published his work in the

1920s under the pseudonym of Fulcanelli. Anselm Kiefer dedicated to him a work in the Alkahest series: *Il mistero delle cattedrali*. In the book of this title, Fulcanelli uses cabbalistic methods (in the broadest sense) to interpret Gothic religious buildings as manifestations of a secret language which he calls the "Language of the Birds".

Besides the image, recurrent in the Alkahest series, of the Salt of the Earth – a metaphor used by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount, referring to the disciples' responsible task in the world – it is the Old Testament figure of Samson that Kiefer draws from Christian mythology. Samson was the third last Judge in ancient Israel, in the time before the Kings. As one of God's Chosen (a "Nazirite"), he was never to cut his hair, in which lay the secret of his Herculean strength – strength which later found expression in terrible, destructive and ultimately self-destructive fits of rage. In chapter 16, the Book of Judges describes Samson's fateful end. He went to Gaza, where he fell in love with Delilah at the Brook of Sorek. The Philistines urged Delilah to discover the secret of Samson's strength. She eventually found out that it lay in his hair, and betrayed him. His hair was shaved off as he slept, and the Philistines took him prisoner, blinded him and forced him to grind grain in a treadmill. Finally he killed himself, destroying the temple and the 3,000 Philistines in it. Linked with the name Hebron (the inscription in the work *Samson*), this story becomes highly relevant to current politics.

The Bible story of the Ark is a further motif of the Alkahest series. Here, too, mountains are juxtaposed with the element water. "Mount Ararat is a good image. The ship is stranded on the mountain, so the Ark is really no longer a ship. The ship cannot continue its voyage. I always imagine that the Ark is waiting for the next Flood. [...] This is the hope that something else will emerge from what remains. The Ark is the concentration, the remainder. One could say that if the Great Flood, the flood of images becomes too much today, it could happen that the Flood refloats the Ark, in a counter-reaction, so to speak" (Anselm Kiefer, 2009).

References to Nordic mythology round off this set of works. Kiefer quotes the song of the Valkyries (Wundtau regent) and refers to the Nordic weather-god (Thor's Hammer). In the exhibition, the Valkyries, spinning threads of life from their mountain, come together with the mythical protector of Midgard, the world of humans.

"For forty years, Anselm Kiefer's work has developed through a process of depositing, crossing and revising themes, motifs and combinations that keep recurring and overlapping [...]. The more familiar you become with his work, and the more you know about it, the stronger the feeling that you are faced with a kind of labyrinth which keeps increasing in scope and complexity [...]" (Daniel Arasse, 2001).

The exhibition will be accompanied by a book with an article by Christoph Ransmayr.