

Press release

Anselm Kiefer

Mein Rhein

26 July—28 September 2024
Opening Friday 26 July 2024, 6—8pm

Thaddaeus Ropac
Salzburg Villa Kast
Mirabellplatz 2, 5020 Salzburg



Anselm Kiefer, *Anselm fuit hic*, 2023.
Emulsion, oil, acrylic, shellac, gold leaf and sediment of electrolysis. 190 x 280 cm (74.8 x 110.24 in).

Mein Rhein (My Rhine) presents new works by Anselm Kiefer that pay homage to the Rhine River and its surrounding woodlands – the place of the artist’s childhood. Kiefer grew up in the Black Forest region in close proximity to the river, and its east bank was the site of many of his early adventures. Marking the border with France, the Rhine held a great fascination for the artist, while simultaneously representing an end point to his world at the time.

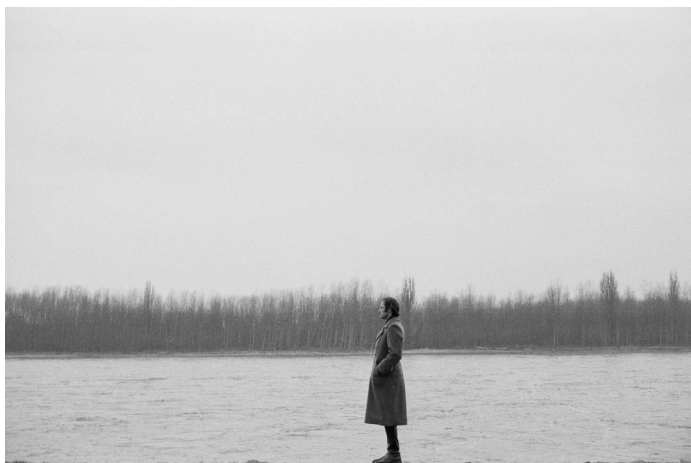
In addition to large-scale canvases, the exhibition will present a vitrine work as well as a selection of Kiefer’s childhood drawings, providing visitors with an insight into the artist’s earliest confrontations with the river. These first ever renditions of the subject, to which he has repeatedly returned over the decades, allow glimpses into his youthful imagination, while highlighting the enduring influence of his earliest experiences on his artistic practice.



Anselm Kiefer, Child drawing.

The Rhine is part of my being. It could be reached on foot in half an hour. Walking through an avenue of tall trees, you could see the shimmering silver ribbon of the river from afar, which was simultaneously the destination, the end of the journey and the promise of another, mysterious land on the other bank of the river. — Anselm Kiefer

In his paintings, the artist portrays the river in hues of deep turquoise against luminous skies of gold, glistening like a 'reflection of the Nibelungen treasure that has slumbered in its deepest depths since time immemorial,' as art historian Florian Illies writes in the catalogue accompanying this exhibition. Kiefer's depiction of the solitary figure on the riverbank – a self-portrait of the artist – is reminiscent of Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818). Illies observes, 'for Kiefer, nothing has ever been more stable than the eternally flowing Rhine, nothing more fragile than himself on its banks. The famous, early photograph of him captures him right by his Rhine.'



Anselm Kiefer, *Versuch auf Wasser zu gehen*, 1969. Photography.

In a group of works within the series, Kiefer has written their title *Anselm fuit hic* (*Anselm was here*) in his characteristic cursive handwriting on the upper edge of the picture. This references Jan van Eyck's signature on his famous *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434), which is believed to have documented the artist's presence at the marital scene. 'For the first time in history the artist became the perfect eye-witness in the truest sense of the term,' writes Ernst Gombrich about this icon of art history. In Kiefer's works, this same declaration of presence is inscribed on the gold plane above the river, 'as if to say: I was here, the Rhine is mine, it's my paradise and my Hell, it's my remembrance and my curse, it's my elixir of youth and my baptismal font, it's my abyss and my reservoir: it is my Rhine and my everything,' as Illies writes.



Anselm Kiefer, *Waldsteig*, 2023. Emulsion, oil, acrylic, shellac, gold leaf and sediment of electrolysis. 280 x 380 cm (110.24 x 149.61 in).

Three works titled *Waldsteig* (*Forest Path*) depict lush forests in rich autumn browns, referencing the narrow path that led Kiefer to the river as a child. This recurring motif in the artist's oeuvre further alludes to the eternal cycle of nature and, in turn, to themes of transience, decay and the passage of time. 'They tell of the passing of summer, that something is nearing its end,' writes Illies. The motifs of autumn are echoed in the large glass vitrine presented in the exhibition. It contains a set of scales and a plethora of brown leaves, seemingly tumbling from a different world. Kiefer has been creating this type of artwork since the 1980s; they are vessels for the unimaginable and invisible abundance that surrounds us, while reinforcing themes of alienation and isolation. Through his practice, the artist explores the fundamental questions of human existence through

the depiction of nature. Drawing on the philosophy of Robert Fludd, Kiefer presents the viewer with a microcosm that stands for the entire universe and, at the same time, unites the eternal cycle of creation and decay.



Anselm Kiefer, *Im Herbst dreht sich die Erde etwas schneller* (0,06 sec), 2018-24.
Glass, metal, lead, shellac, dried leaves, nylon threads, plaster and acrylic, 1800 kg.
361 x 280 x 172 cm (142.13 x 110.24 x 67.72 in).

As is typical of Kiefer's work, the paintings are characterised by a powerful materiality, created through the dense layering of materials, including gold leaf and sediments of electrolysis. Themes of transformation and the passage of time are not only expressed thematically but are also incorporated into the work itself on a formal level; the dense tactility suggests the accumulation of knowledge and history, while the transmutational process through which Kiefer puts his works and his use of gold are rooted in his lifelong interest in alchemy. Practised throughout the mediaeval world, this ancient science sought to transform the basest of metals into the most precious and pure, forging a profound connection between the human and natural worlds.



Anselm Kiefer, *Der Rhein*, 2023. Emulsion, oil, acrylic, shellac, gold leaf and sediment of electrolysis. 190 x 280 cm (74.8 x 110.24 in).

With this exhibition, Kiefer journeys back into his own past, interweaving his personal memories with historical, literary, and mythological references. The paintings that Kiefer created, shimmer like 'the gold of the Nibelungen,' as Illies observes, evoking the most famous of the German sagas. Notoriously appropriated by the Nazi regime – 'abused' by the past as Kiefer has stated – the legend of the Nibelungen bestows upon the Rhine a mystical weight that has moved the artist since his youth.

Symbolising all of Germany in a sense, the Rhine has inspired a multitude of writings and poems over the centuries, many of which are now echoed in Kiefer's works. Friedrich Hölderlin, whose poetry has accompanied Kiefer for the most part of his life, was famously captivated by the Rhine, dedicating a celebrated hymn to the river. More than 100 years later, Martin Heidegger devoted himself to this ode to the Rhine, declaring 'my thinking has an inescapable connection to Hölderlin's poetry.' Kiefer's ongoing exploration of identity and history has resulted in a multi-layered and complex iconography rooted in the artist's reflection on his personal biography and cultural heritage.

It is only logical that Anselm Kiefer's long life journey into the depths has now taken him to his source: the Rhine. — Florian Illies



About the artist

Anselm Kiefer's ongoing preoccupation with cultural memory, identity and history lends his works their multilayered subject matter, fuelled by a variety of historical, mythological and literary sources. These include references to Greek and Germanic mythology, alchemy, and Christian symbolism, as well as the writings of celebrated mediaeval lyricist Walther von der Vogelweide, Romanian-born poet Paul Celan, French poet and critic Charles Baudelaire, Russian Futurist Velimir Khlebnikov, and Austrian post-war poet Ingeborg Bachmann, among others.

Over the past forty years, Kiefer's practice has developed through the accumulation, mingling and reworking of themes, motifs and constellations which recur across diverse media. The language of material plays an essential role in his works, which often have a sedimentary geological texture. Highly symbolic connections emerge from lead, concrete, dirt, dried plants, glass, barbed wire and the inclusion of found objects such as books, scythes and model ships.

While many of his works can be interpreted in the context of fraught German identity in the post-war era, Kiefer's preoccupation with myth and memorialisation encompasses the full sweep of human history. This is expressed not only thematically, but also on the level of form itself, through his treatment of materials and use of texture. Many of his canvases and sculptures are intentionally left outside to become weathered by the elements: 'I need nature, the changing weather, the heat and the cold. Sometimes I leave my paintings out in the rain, I throw acid, earth or water over them.'

The preservation of knowledge is an important theme for Kiefer, whose extensive study of history and literature informs his practice. This is reflected in his numerous artist's books and book sculptures, which represent important repositories of learning, religion and culture. He inscribes lines of poetry, quotations and names in his distinctive handwriting on works that pay tribute to predecessors who have shaped our knowledge and understanding of the world.

Anselm Kiefer was born in 1945 in Donaueschingen, Germany. In 1992, he moved to France, where he lives and works between Paris and Barjac near Avignon. The artist studied law, literature and linguistics before attending the Academy of Fine Arts in Karlsruhe. He was selected for the West German Pavilion at the 39th Venice Biennale in 1980 and his works have since been shown in prominent solo exhibitions internationally, including at the Städtische Kunsthalle Düsseldorf (1984); Art Institute of Chicago (1987); Nationalgalerie, Berlin (1991); Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1998); Fondation Beyeler, Basel (2001); Guggenheim Bilbao (2007); Royal Academy of Arts, London (2014); Centre Pompidou, Paris (2015); Bibliothèque National de France (2015); Albertina, Vienna (2016); State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg (2017); Rodin Museum, Paris (2017); Met Breuer, New York (2018); and Astrup Fearnley Museet, Oslo (2019).

Kiefer was presented the Praemium Imperiale Award by Japan in 1999, and in 2008 he received the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade. In 2007 he was the first artist since Georges Braque to have a permanent installation commissioned for the Louvre in Paris, and in 2018 his site-specific sculpture *Uraeus* was exhibited in front of the Rockefeller Center, New York. French President Emmanuel Macron commissioned Anselm Kiefer to create a permanent installation for the Panthéon in Paris in 2020. An exhibition of monumental works by the artist, dedicated to Paul Celan, was on view at the Grand Palais Éphémère in Paris in 2021–22. In December 2023, the celebrated filmmaker Wim Wenders released a documentary that explores the working practices of the artist, as well as his inspirations, processes and fascination with myth and history.

His works are currently on view at Palazzo Strozzi, Florence (until 21 July 2024). In 2025, numerous exhibitions will be held at prestigious institutions internationally marking the artist's 80th birthday year. Among them are the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford and the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, which will organise a collaborative exhibition with the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (both in spring 2025).

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