

An exploration of ruin in Anselm Kiefer's oeuvre: how decay is repurposed from passive to confrontational in his post-war practice

In Anselm Kiefer's exploration of the modern ruin, the contemporary artist unpacks the rich symbolic potential of decay in the context of post-war Germany. Within his oeuvre, Kiefer questions man's view of progress, and reminds society of its insignificance in contrast with the natural world. Kiefer uses the ruin as a catalyst to think about our place in time and in the cycle of the world. The ruin in its beauty draws the viewer in, placing them in a silent space where they can reflect on the past, present and future at once. He guides the viewer on how to look at time from different angles, and reassess what is most important. Man has always been drawn to the decay of his own creation. From Ancient Hebrew poets, to the great artists of the Renaissance and the Romantic period, ruins have provided inspiration and allure to artists throughout history. It was after the global atrocities of the first half of the 20th century though, that ruins were re-framed not as spaces confined to far-off history, draped in nostalgia and whimsy, but as very present and very confronting reminders of society's potential for corruption and cruelty. In works like *Templehof*, *Aschenblume* and *The Seven Heavenly Palaces*, Kiefer drives this changing interpretation and significance of the ruin, and demands the viewer process their own impermanence through his colossal images.

Since humanity's earliest history, people have explored ruined places, feared them and drawn inspiration from them. Fascination with decay is a thread that runs right through human records of writing and art, manifesting as the link between history and collective cultural memory. Ancient Hebrew poets found inspiration in the ruins of Sumer, Assyria and Babylon. They used stories about the wrath of God, the Tower of Babel and Sodom and Gomorrah, to explain the ruins that scattered the land.

True artistic representation of ruins began with the Renaissance. In that flourishing of art and science, the ruins of classical civilisation became symbols of enlightenment and repositories of lost knowledge. The greatest draw for artists during this period were the overgrown and crumbling remains of Rome. Painters, including Giovanni Panini (1691-1765) and Giovanni Piranesi (1720-1778), flocked there in ever-increasing numbers to paint the vistas and remains of places like the

Pantheon and the Colosseum. During the 19th century, the representation and exploration of decay continued. In this time, the works of English Romantic painter J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851) and Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) romanticised ruins in their depiction of the sublime.¹ Despite the shifts in how people have reacted to and imagined ruins over the millennia, the artist's fascination with ruined and abandoned places has never waned.

Places and things which once were, but are no longer, fill us with an evocative melancholy and provide for moments of stillness within the frenzy of modern living. While the present-day ruin has become a specific container for traumatic and horrific memories, events too current to romanticise, the ruins of the past are places where time stands still, where the ghostly presence of history can be felt, and where an artist can lose themselves in dreams. The classical ruin has held a particular status in the West. Not only has it been rescued from oblivion, it has been raised to an exalted position of contemplation and reverence. Ruins have become symbolic of various layers of time and space. It sits in a complex position, representing all manners and periods of time.² The curator of the Tate's 2014 exhibition *Ruin Lust*, Brian Dillon, said ruins do not represent only voyeuristic interest, but encompass a spectrum of human reaction from horror and regret, to nostalgia, thrill and "a sort of sublime excitement". Dillon maintains that artists think about ruins not just as moments lost to time, but as spaces filled with expressive and artistic potential.³

Anselm Kiefer is one contemporary artist who intensively mines ruins for their potential, saying he paradoxically sees in ruins the promise of something new.⁴ This is because amidst the dilapidation, many pieces are missing and imagination is required to fill them. In the post-war period, Kiefer is arguably the most significant artist exploring the symbolism and materialism of ruin left in the wake of human conflict. The wars of the twentieth century shook the definition of ruins. Following World War II, culture itself was re-cast as a ruin; a troubled witness to the violence of humanity. Unlike the romantic sensibilities attached to the classical ruin, the widespread devastation of the First and Second World Wars removed any charm or allure associated with 'the ruin'. Instead, for post-war artists, ruination signified horrors of a recent history, and as such warranted a different aesthetic

¹ "Landscape Painting after Turner," Tate Modern, accessed 01 June, 2022, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/alison-smith-the-sublime-in-crisis-landscape-painting-after-turner-r1109220>

² Brian Dillon, *Ruin Lust, exhibition catalogue*, (London: Tate Publishing, 2014), 10.

³ Dillon, *Ruin Lust*, 10.

⁴ Martin Gayford, "Anselm's Alchemy," *RA Magazine* Vol. 124, (2014): 57

approach. Kiefer works in a category of ruin that is at odds with the scenic and nostalgic traditions of the romantic period. He does not frame ruins as whimsy objects drenched in idealised nostalgia, or as detached symbols of pleasurable reflection.⁵

Kiefer was born in the black forest area of Germany in March 1945, just two months before VE Day and the end of World War II. On the day Kiefer was born, his family house was bombed, instantly transforming it from a home into a mound of debris.⁶ His birth into an environment defined by its destruction, and his childhood spent playing amongst that very wreckage would come to characterise much of his work.

As Kiefer matured, he began to learn of his repressed national history. Immediately after the second world war, Germany had difficulty coming to terms with its identity.⁷ It was a country now split ideologically and geographically into east and west, a divided nation trying to rebuild itself in halves, on the buried memory of unimaginable horrors perpetrated in the name of white nationalism.⁸

Kiefer challenged the repression of German history. He became one of the first artists in this period to consider Nazism by means of art; attempting to reconcile shame and identity, to redefine what it meant to be German in a post-Nazi world. It was from this place, Kiefer drew his well-cited quote: “only by going into the past can you go into the future”.⁹ This concern with memory (how we remember) and legacy (how we are remembered) is explored and excavated at depth by Anselm Kiefer in key works such as “The Seven Heavenly Palaces 2004-2015” and “Aschenblume 1983 - 1997”. In fact, it can be said that his entire artistic journey to date consists of confronting and processing history.

⁵ “Unstable Territories: Imaging and Imagining the Contemporary Ruin,” The University of Tasmania Open Access Repository, accessed 09 May, 2022, https://eprints.utas.edu.au/34649/1/Wright_whole_thesis

⁶ Gayford, “Anselm’s Alchemy,” 59.

⁷ Stephen Welch and Ruth Wittlinger, “The Resilience of the Nation State: Cosmopolitanism, Holocaust Memory and German Identity”, *German Politics and Society* 29, no. 3 (2011): 38-54.

⁸ Welch and Wittlinger, “The Resilience of the Nation State,” 52-53.

⁹ “Anselm Kiefer: ‘Art is difficult, it’s not entertainment’,” *The Guardian*, accessed June 01, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/dec/08/anselm-kiefer-art-white-cube>



Figure 1. Anselm Kiefer, *Occupations*, 1969.

Collage, black and white photograph,

Interfunktionen, no.12, 1975

The power of architecture and its ongoing influence on German society was to become a major theme for Anselm Kiefer. In *Occupations/Heroic Symbols 1969*, his first performance art project, he attempts not to re-establish the link between the German-built environment and Nazism, but to remember that link. By remembering, Kiefer refuses to let history be buried or to let evil to remain hidden around him. What set Kiefer apart from his contemporaries at this time, was his curiosity and courage to go deeper into his own story, into these difficult and complex subjects and into the physical and psychological ruins left behind by failed and discriminatory ideology. Following on from *Occupations*, Kiefer developed into a painter under the tutelage of influential German artist Joseph Beuys (1921-1986). Architecture and the architectural ruin remained important and recurring references in his work.

Kiefer's works are powerful to look at but disturbing to think about. The buildings and landscapes in Kiefer's paintings are often burned and ruined, emulating the physical loss of war, while also acknowledging the ties between the ruin of Jewish culture, German history, and the physical environment. Kiefer depicts them true to his expressionist style as desolate and ploughed fields just as the Nazis had destroyed them.

The textures and physical materiality of his work are ruin and decay, including sand, rusting iron, straw, ash, clay, lead, shellac, oil paint, dirt and all kinds of organic material.¹⁰ These components are organised into works of monumental size, the sheer scale of which is immediately confrontational. Kiefer not only depicts ruin, he uses ruin to depict itself. A key visual strategy in his examination of destruction is evident in his method of combining and transforming physically unstable salvaged materials into epic symbolic imagery. With each material, Kiefer is symbolically signalling the fragility of life as he unfolds the story of the Holocaust victim's "tragic journey and excavates it from the density of each layer of textural debris".¹¹



Figure 2. Anselm Kiefer, *The Seven Heavenly Palaces*, 2004-2015.

Concrete sculpture,
La Ribaute, France, 2015

One example of this is seen in his sculptural installation known as *The Seven Heavenly Palaces 2004-2015* on permanent display at the HangarBicocca in Milan. The work owes its name to the palaces described by mystics of the Jewish Merkabah, which depicts man's effort to get closer to God, in memory of the monumental architectural constructions of the past. The towers vary in height between thirteen and twenty metres, and are made from ruined materials, primarily concrete and debris, pulled from wrecks and fragments.¹² From watching their construction, they appear at once impressive, yet vulnerable and unstable.¹³ This dichotomy, between strength and

¹⁰ Gayford, "Anselm's Alchemy", 59.

¹¹ "History Repeating: Anselm Kiefer goes back to the beginning," *The Guardian*, accessed June 14, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/jul/10/anselm-kiefer-bastille-opera>

¹² Gayford, "Anselm's Alchemy", 51.

¹³ Sophie Fiennes, *Over Your Cities Grass Will Grow* (DVD: 2014).

fragility, is what Kiefer is suggesting. It is a visual representation of the paradox and tragedy of human destiny. That is, humanity's "never-ending search for balance between a raising up to heaven and a casting down to earth, the transfiguration of matter and the disintegration of the material body".¹⁴ The towers allude to the spiritual interconnection between the physical and the psychic domains, demonstrating feelings of waiting, or potential, rather than nostalgia.



Figure 3. Anselm Kiefer, *Tempelhof*, 2010.

Oil, acrylic, steel, lead, plaster, pastel and charcoal on canvas 129 15/16 x 299 3/16 in.,
White Cube, UK, 2012

Kiefer again frames the ruin as something requiring immediate and present attention, rather than passive nostalgia in *Tempelhof 2010-11*. This 17-metre long painting depicts the decaying shell of the Berlin Tempelhof Airport, which was constructed by the Nazi regime in 1927. It was built to link massive architectural scale with Third Reich propaganda, and in doing so, inspire awe at home, and instill fear abroad.¹⁵ The airport was bombed and razed by the Soviets in the Battle of Berlin in 1945, but was rebuilt in the post-war era and functioned as a freight airport until 2007. Kiefer's *Tempelhof* was created over a period of 30 years. Each image casts a different historically dense and iconic Third Reich interior as a decaying and inglorious ruin. Critics have said that seeing the work in person elicits a strong sense that they too are experiencing the spectacle of a

¹⁴ "How Does the Idea of the Ruin Resonate With the Concept of Contemporary Fine Art Practice?," The University of Northampton, accessed 09 May, 2022, <https://www.sarahfjanavicius.co.uk/assets/dissertation-final>

¹⁵ "Unstable Territories," University of Tasmania, 59.

multifaceted collapse – of physical and psychological structure, and the disintegration of any illusion of permanent monumentality.¹⁶

Kiefer's message is clear. He wants to deal with ruins as persistent reminders of unforgettable devastation. His dramatic paintings reflect the significance of such catastrophic ruins as a way to think through the relevance of the past. Kiefer has transformed architectural structures, built to honour Nazi ideals and heroes, into a memorial for their victims. In doing so, he is exploring the relationship between architecture and propaganda, upon which the battle for grandiose ambition, but ultimate ideological failure plays out.¹⁷ *Templehof* contrasts the physicality of massive, man-made structures with the temporality of human existence, seeking catharsis and confrontation through the sublimely awe-inspiring pictorial representation of the ruins of Third Reich monuments.



Figure 4. Anselm Kiefer, *Aschenblume*, 1983.

Oil, emulsion, woodcut, shellac, acrylic, and straw on canvas, 213 x 145",

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, USA, 2012

Kiefer explores these same themes over and over again through his large-scale works, including *Aschenblume* 1983-97. This piece depicts a photograph of the grand Mosaic Room in the Reich Chancellery. Designed by Hitler's favourite architect Albert Speer in 1938, the neoclassical style of the mosaic hall connotes authority, order and permanence. The room was designed to display Hitler

¹⁶“ Unstable Territories,” University of Tasmania, 60.

¹⁷“ Unstable Territories,” University of Tasmania, 57.

in his role as absolute dictator. Kiefer took this inspiration and covered it with oil, clay, ash, and dirt. The ash and dirt give the surface of this work a dullish and grey colour that suggests not only solemnity and death, but also the monochromatic damage left behind by bombs and fire. The building suffered severe damage during the Battle of Berlin and was demolished after the war by soviet occupation forces.

Over the top of *Aschenblume*, Kiefer places an upside down sunflower, connecting the top and bottom of the canvas. Sunflowers are recurring symbols in his works but they do not carry life or vitality, like the flowers of Vincent van Gogh or other artists. Kiefer's flower is dead and hanging upside down, reading as a symbol of both death and rebirth, connecting heaven to earth.

Aschenblume translates from the German to English as "Ash Flower." Kiefer suggests that from the destruction and deadly nationalism of Nazi Germany, a beautiful transformation can take place. Sunflowers are seen as symbols of brightness, simplicity and blind loyalty to something bigger than themselves – the sun. The Ceremonial Hall in the Third Reich building was designed to display Hitler as a larger-than-life figure that people could look up to and follow, much like the sunflower and the sun. Kiefer's sunflower stands for the German national shame and spills its seeds onto the ground. Amidst the architectural ruin which he uses to symbolise human vanity, there is the possibility of natural rebirth. In this image too, is a message about man's exploitation of nature through the built environment. By adding such a visceral, but damaged, symbol of nature, Kiefer shows a sense of morality or irony within the ruins, and how they are organically reclaimed.

It is here where Kiefer finds potential in the beginning of ruin. Kiefer is showing the viewer that the architecture of ruin reflects human insignificance in the force of nature. The beautiful decay of the sunflower appears centre-stage as nature's revenge, while humanity's shared fragility resigns itself to its insignificance. He uses the deluded glories of men to show their true failures and shortcomings, with the natural world as the ultimate guide.

Kiefer consistently takes into account man's capacity for both destruction and rebirth. He shows that these are not mutually exclusive ideas, but exist within "the inescapable aspiration towards ascent that has always governed us, no matter the barbarity and horror shown throughout history".¹⁸ Kiefer's ruins are always pointing the viewer towards something. They have an ability to move the viewer across time, to see the past, the present and what will be, all at the same time.

¹⁸ "Kiefer's towers: a symbol of man's tragic struggle that have become a Milan landmark," Italy24, accessed May 14, 2022, http://www.italy24.ilsole24ore.com/print/AEMjppu/0?refresh_ce=1

The transportational quality of Kiefer's works is largely propelled forward by their haunting beauty. War has ravaged these landscapes. He expresses that with the use of thick impasto and expressive gestural scaring on the canvas, as well as the variety of organic material used.

But amidst the striking beauty, Kiefer's work also prompts an unease about the modern period and man's pursuit of progress. It raises uncomfortable ideas concerning the march of capitalist and manufactured advancement at all costs. Kiefer's work succeeds in presenting universal reminders to the audience, revealing their vulnerability to themselves, and a stoic reminder of the cyclical nature of life and death, to which all will eventually succumb.

Ultimately, Anselm Kiefer is forcing his viewers to confront their own insignificance and the cruel realities of their kind by using the ruin as a catalyst for reflection. The transformation of the ruin from romantic to unapologetically antagonistic is vital in his attempt to force the viewer to consider the past, present and future. Man has always been drawn to the spectacle of decay, but for Kiefer, the meaning and significance of the ruin is no longer derived from a dispassionate, nostalgic historical foundation, but rather from an assertive presence; the dilapidated remains of physical and cultural spaces become potent reminders of man's potential for inhumanity which demand scrutiny.

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Figure 4. Anselm Kiefer, *Aschenblume*, 1983. Oil, emulsion, woodcut, shellac, acrylic, and straw on canvas, 213 x 145", San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, USA, 2012