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CONVERSATIONS WITH ANSELM KIEFER

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This Research Paper is submitted in partial fulfilment of requirements of the award of the Honours by Studio Practice and Research Paper, Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney.

ABSTRACT

My Honours project has examined the deep pull I feel toward abstracted landscape painting as it informs my own artistic practice across the medium of photography into painting. My background is in photography, but I transitioned into painting after searching for a way to add layers of complexity and discourse to the photographic images I had been creating. I have focused on the abstract landscape paintings of German artist Anselm Kiefer in this process, as I studied his work alongside my own, increasingly releasing images from the constraints of the methodology of photography. The research has also guided the exploration of my identity as an artist and more broadly, has assisted me in addressing my story of spiritualism within my work.

In this Research Paper, I critically unpack the rich symbolic vocabulary of Kiefer's works. These symbols underpin his understanding of spiritualism, which is defined by the dichotomy between strength and fragility, the collision of grey and light, and the reconciling of human fallibility and heavenly ascension. I will explore how Kiefer has organised and developed his work, and how his abstracted landscapes have informed my own methodology in the studio.

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge; the content of this thesis is my own work.
This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

Joey George

24 October 2022

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INTRODUCTION

My Honours by Studio Work and Research Paper is an exploration of my artistic practice and explores my understanding and infatuation with abstract landscape painting, through the work of German artist Anselm Kiefer. My background is in photography, and the honours also explores my work in the context of my transition from photography to painting. Photography has continued to inform my work throughout the Candidature. It investigates how Kiefer's work has been a means to drive my own artistic practice in this project, and the way that it has guided my grasp and understanding of landscape painting, as well as the role spiritualism plays in artmaking.

An audience with Anselm Kiefer

Anselm Kiefer is a German artist who was born and raised in a Catholic home in the Black Forest region. His formative years in this environment played a significant role in how he developed as an artist and where he found much of the imagery that formed the basis of the symbolism in his work. Kiefer draws symbolic material from an esoteric and varied range of sources, including religious iconography, myth and political rhetoric. These symbols are not, however, the subject matter of his paintings. Rather, he reconstructs this tapestry of images in a way that gives them new meaning. His sprawling paintings, imbued with confrontational darkness, are inextricably linked with reverence for the spiritual, the mythic, the tragic and the traumatised. Kiefer has used his body of work to remind society of its insignificance and corruption in contrast with the natural world. The artist uses ruin and decay to unpack the incomprehensible actions of man during the Second World War, which, in scale and objective, were both inexplicable and formidable.

Kiefer grew up in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust. The Holocaust, also known as the Shoah, was the genocide of European Jews between 1941 and 1945. His physical environment was defined by destruction, his family home having been bombed on the day of his birth. Kiefer was also born into a national, cultural, and social environment which had been seriously fragmented by the hatred-fuelled violence of World War II and was still coming to terms with that division in the aftermath of the war. It was this conspicuous wreckage and its iconography, and the attempts of its culprits to put it out of sight, which came to define much of Kiefer's work.

German society had difficulty coming to terms with its national identity after the Second World War, repressing recent history and the atrocities built on the concept of *Volksgemeinschaft*. This German national ideal, that community should be placed before the individual, had been hijacked by the Nazi Party, redefining the “community” as one which could be comprised only of people of ‘Aryan blood’.¹

The failure of the brand of German nationalism rooted in racist Nazi ideals resulted in a country split, both ideologically and geographically, into east and west. Kiefer grew up and lived in a nation cut into halves, trying to rebuild itself apart from itself, against the inconceivable but very real horrors perpetrated in the name of white nationalism.² Kiefer challenged the repression of German history and his country’s shameful reality. He attempted to reconcile dishonour and integrity through his art and redefine what being German was in a post-Nazi world. In doing so, Kiefer became one of the first German artists during this time to consider Nazism by means of art. He did this, for example, by examining and re-imagining Nazi Germany’s architectural relics.

While operating in vastly different political, social and personal contexts, his work and the ‘conversations’ I have had with him through a deep engagement with his work via books, reproductions and documentary, as well as pictorially, has helped me to reflect on and define the conflict which sits at the core of my own practice: that is, the battle between shame and identity, and going backwards in order to go forward in my yearning for transcendence, place and understanding.

A short introduction to Joey George

I was born into a Christian family in Bunbury, Western Australia. I received a Christian education and was encouraged to explore my creativity within that context. But my adult story has been one of self-discovery and leaving behind an ideology and home that did not encourage curiosity outside of itself. This led me to a secular film school after graduating high school and later to pursue philosophical and political study at university.

¹ Stephen Welch and Ruth Wittlinger, Ruth, “The Resilience of the Nation State: Cosmopolitanism, Holocaust Memory and German Identity,” *German Politics and Society* 29 no. 3: 2.

² Welch and Wittlinger, “The Resilience of the Nation State,” 52-53.

Although I grew up in a different time and place, when I look at Anselm Kiefer's work, I am reminded of my own childhood – a religious upbringing in the Pentecostal faith, which created place and understanding dictated by ideology, not individuality. In Kiefer's imagery, I find the visual language of the story of creation that I knew from the bible as a child. In the Old Testament, this story is recorded in the first book of Genesis:

“Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness covers the surface of the watery depths, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters.”

My formative years were moulded by this story of creation. I knew who I was and where I was going, because the stories of the Bible reinforced that I was on the winning side of humanity and that if I followed God, he would protect me. Later in my youth I learnt the world is not so clear. There are many things that did not make sense to me, and art came to fill this place. Anselm Kiefer's imagining of creation is much more nuanced and greyer than the stories I heard as a child and speaks to the curiosity within me, which had been stunted within the church.

Kiefer's work encompasses myriad forms of art, including literature, painting and sculpture. What draws me to Kiefer's paintings is his depiction of a heaven and god/gods above, in conversation and collision with the landscape below. He depicts natural worlds, and other worlds that cannot be understood, as they carry into being a new language of their own. I am also drawn to his use of materials: natural colours and materials of the earth, construction and destruction, like lead, concrete and ash. The grey tones of these materials lead us to consider what is repressed and at odds with what we can clearly define, as the grey seems stuck in the middle of black and white. In *Chapter Two* I will explore further the interplay between Kiefer's use of material and symbolic vocabulary.

In Psalm 139, David proclaims that divine knowledge is 'too wonderful' to express, saying, "it is high, I cannot attain unto it". Yet somehow a sense of God's majesty is conveyed through this very failure. This is the point in which Kiefer works - where the sky and earth collide, and where new landscapes are born.

In my paintings for this Honours project, I too have placed emphasis on the sky above, suggesting that which is above us is fascinating and unknowable in equal parts. I enjoy what I

am encountering, and have a sense that I know it deeply, but I cannot understand it. I will further unpack my compulsion to explore what lies ‘above’ me in *Chapter Three*, as well as how my progression from photographer to painter has aided me in this purpose.

It is the enigmatic allure of his work and practice that I am trying to also achieve as an artist. Kiefer identifies gaps very well and uses the reconstruction and assemblage of certain symbols and landscapes to fill them. There is an intensity and fervour about his work that illustrates just how imperative art is to Anselm Kiefer, as though he is possessed by artistic spirit, something he calls his “spirituality of concrete”.³ His approach and attitude towards his artmaking, as though it is done out of necessity not choice, is something I want to learn from and emulate in my own way for my own purposes. The mysticism associated with Kiefer goes to my own roots as an artist who is reclaiming his own spiritual journey, meaning and place beyond the narrow narrative offered by organised faith.

Reframing the student/master relationship in the context of the modern, globalised studio

I mainly engage with Kiefer’s work through book reproductions. In this way, my connection to Anselm Kiefer also reframes what Ami Kantawala et al. describe as the “historical and cultural antecedents of the mentor-mentee relationship”.⁴ What once was a delineated relationship grounded in the teacher being present and student reciprocity, has changed in the post-Internet, globalised age. With seemingly infinite access to his works, interviews, and literature from and about the artist, the emblematic and far-off existence of the master has become more relevant than his or her physical presence and discrete guidance.

However, all research remains “fundamentally conversation”.⁵ In this case, the dialogue between Kiefer and myself occurs via proxy through my engagement with and analysis of his work through reproduction. The master-apprentice conversation, then, is offered as a metaphor and context within which knowledge is to be shared and understood.

³ Germano Celant, *Anselm Kiefer* (Milan: Skira, 2007), 337.

⁴ Ami Kantawala, Lisa Hochtritt, James Haywood Rolling, Dan Serig, and Kryssi Staikidis, “Establishing Collaborative Dialogue: The Mentor and the Apprentice,” *Visual Arts Research* 35 no. 2 (2009): 40, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20715501>.

⁵ Ruthellen Josselson, “Narrative research and the challenge of accumulating knowledge,” *Narrative Inquiry* 16, no. 1 (2006): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1075/ni.16.1.03jos>.

A large part of this “reframing” is looking deeply at and into Kiefer’s works in order to “reverse-engineer” them through my own practice-based research, which is the methodology of my Honours research.

For example, I constantly ask questions about the aesthetic distinctiveness of his work. How can Kiefer’s choices, when it comes to his use of colour, material and the elements, help to guide my own experimentation in the studio, and eventual artistic goals? I have tested many of Kiefer’s techniques such as layering paints, incorporating words, using photographs, and mixing materials within my paintings.

Engaging with Kiefer’s works as an artist and viewer is both shocking and fascinating at the same time. The material he uses contributes to my dichotomous response. His paintings on canvas invoke an “illusory world”, but Kiefer’s works are not paintings in the traditional sense of the word.⁶ He uses natural materials like lead, ash, sand, plant matter and straw to texturise and redefine how we understand what he is offering us. The use of such materials, seemingly out of place, has been both informative and confrontational. This effect is heightened by the immense size of his works.⁷ His work has an undeniable aura manufactured in part by scale, and in part by content. Kiefer’s deep understanding of symbolism, his authentic exploration of his own spirituality, and how it all comes together in abstracted, foreign yet familiar landscapes, produce a sense of reverence and authority that aids me in seeking answers to the questions above.

I have also used Fieldwork as part of my methodology. It has become an important part of this process, introducing a German artist, his identity, symbolism and spirituality to an Australian context.

My relationship with Kiefer has changed as I have developed my own images and vocabulary in the studio alongside knowledge of his. The outcome has been transformative on the canvas. Ross Gibson describes the process in the studio as “immersive and nervous, more implicit than explicit,” egged on by a “sense of delicate conviction in [the artist’s] bones”.⁸

⁶ Wessel Stoker, *Where Heaven and Earth Meet: The Spiritual in the Art of Kandinsky, Rothko, Warhol, and Kiefer* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 404.

⁷ Stoker, *Where Heaven and Earth Meet*, 405.

⁸ Ross Gibson, “The Known World,” *Text* 14 no. 8 (2010): 6, <https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.31508>.

Across this research paper, I will critically unpack the following themes: spirituality, symbolism and abstracted landscape, and at the centre remains an interest in Kiefer's work and how it has guided my own artistic journey.

Chapter One examines Kiefer's links to spiritualism, and how I interpreted this in order to help treat my own spiritual story in my painting. In *Chapter Two* I explore the symbolism which has come to define much of Kiefer's work as it relates to his context in Post-War Germany. Kiefer's symbolic source material is rich, pulled from a range of mythical allegories, political discourse and modern ruins. Here, I also talk to the symbolic material found in my own work and how I landed on the emblematic use of symbols. Finally, how these elements, the spiritual and the symbolic, come together in Kiefer's monumental, abstracted landscapes, is analysed in *Chapter Three*. This final chapter also explores how I technically developed my own abstracted landscapes.

KIEFER AND SPIRITUALITY

When I began this Honours by Studio Practice and Research Paper, I was acquainted with the well-known works of Anselm Kiefer, including *Everyone Stands Under His Own Dome of Heaven*, 1970 (figure 1).



Figure 1: Anselm Kiefer, *Everyone Stands Under His Own Dome of Heaven*, 1970

Watercolour, gouache, and graphite on joined paper

40 x 47.9 cm

I was drawn to how he worked at the intersection where familiar worlds meet the unfamiliar, almost under the cover of darkness. But it was a passing suggestion by a lecturer at the

Sydney College of the Arts that I explore his work in the context of my own personal history, which inspired me to delve more deeply into his oeuvre.

Immediately, I wanted to explore Kiefer's links to spirituality in his life and work, and how they informed his painting, to critically reflect on my own religious upbringing and spirituality, and how I could express this in my painting.

Anselm Kiefer was born into a Catholic family, for whom the holy trinity, resurrection, atonement and sin were the “sobering baseline for humanity”.⁹ Kiefer's investigation of the ‘spirituality of man’ has been evident in his work from the outset. Even before he was painting, an early photograph, *The Starry Heavens Above us, And the Moral Law Within*, 1969–2010 (figure 2) acts as an artistic billboard upon which much of his oeuvre will be created.



Figure 2: Anselm Kiefer, *The Starry Heavens Above us, And the Moral Law Within*, 1969–2010

⁹ Ted Loos, “Anselm Kiefer Plays Both Saint and Sinner,” *Cultured Magazine*, June 26, 2017. <https://www.culturedmag.com/article/2017/06/26/anselm-kiefer>.

Photograph, black and white, on paper with paint

63 x 83.2 cm

The full English translation of the photograph's title - 'The starry heavens above us, and the moral law within' - describes how we decipher the premise of his spirituality in that photograph: Kiefer's view of transcendence as man's conflicted desire to move between the two realms.

This friction becomes more palpable in his later painting *Heaven-Earth*, 1974 (figure 3).

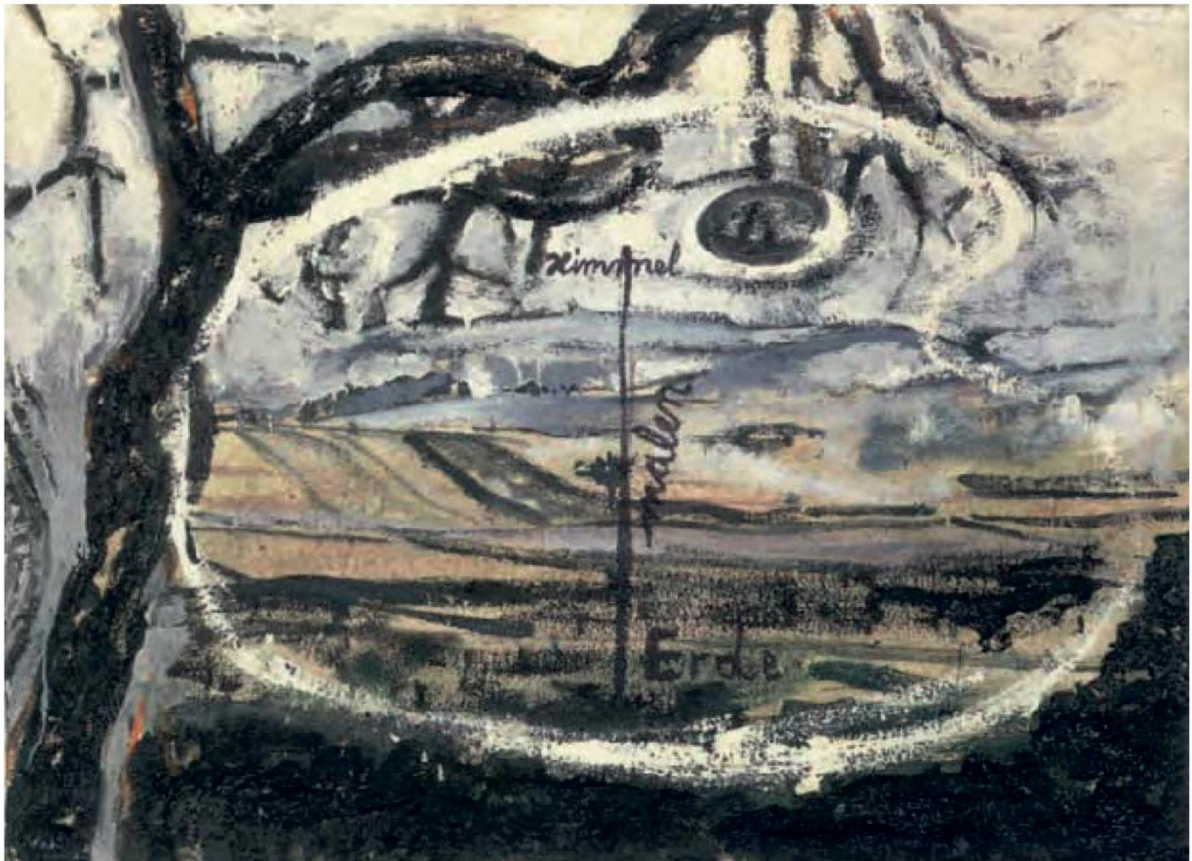


Figure 3: Anselm Kiefer, *Heaven-Earth*, 1974

Oil on canvas

70 x 95 cm

Here, Kiefer uses the artist's palette, superimposed over a landscape, as a symbol of what connects these two realms. The line connecting heaven and earth, with *malen* (to paint)

written beside it indicates “undeniably that Kiefer views his art as spiritual”.¹⁰ Kiefer addressed this himself in an interview with Germano Celant, saying:

“The palette represents the idea of the artist connecting heaven and earth. He works here but he looks up there. He is always moving between the two realms... the palette can transform reality by suggesting new visions”.¹¹

Spirituality of concrete

It must be remembered that spirituality is a broad concept. As Cheryl Delgado has noted, “It goes beyond religious or cultural boundaries... and now appears to have as many definitions as persons defining it”.¹² (Delgado 2005, 157). In keeping with the vast rationale behind spirituality, the spiritual character of Anselm Kiefer’s work is not restricted to any specific religion or faith tradition, rather it has been generated from several sources.¹³ Kiefer encapsulates his spirituality by calling it “a spirituality of concrete”.¹⁴ Concrete is made up of tones of grey, upon which fragments of light reflect. Therefore, Kiefer’s “spirituality of concrete” evokes a spiritualism underpinned by a melancholy, but from which optimistic slivers of light peak through.

Kiefer’s borrowing from the Jewish faith tradition is particularly manifest in his sculptural installation, *The Seven Heavenly Palaces*, 2004-2015 (figure 4), which is on permanent display at the Hangar Bicocca in Milan.

¹⁰ Stoker, *Where Heaven and Earth Meet*, 397.

¹¹ Celant, *Anselm Kiefer*, 397.

¹² Cheryl Delgado, “A discussion on the concept of spirituality,” *Nursing Science Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (2005): 157. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894318405274828>.

¹³ Stoker, *Where Heaven and Earth Meet*, 398.

¹⁴ Celant, *Anselm Kiefer*, 337.



Figure 4: Anselm Kiefer, *The Seven Heavenly Palaces*, 2004-2015

Concrete sculpture

Pirelli Hangar Bicocca, Milan

It is from the palaces described by mystics of the Jewish Merkabah that this work derives its name. Merkabah is an early school of Jewish mysticism, whose stories illustrate man's effort to ascend and become closer to God. Kiefer represents this attempted spiritual ascent using monumental architecture. He has constructed towers, which vary in height from thirteen to twenty metres, out of ruined materials, including concrete debris pulled from wrecks.¹⁵ While these structures are impressive in scale and arrangement, the very material from which they have been constructed is damaged and weakened, creating a vulnerable and unstable foundation.¹⁶

¹⁵ Martin Gayford, "Anselm's Alchemy," *RA Magazine* 124 no. 3 (2014): 51, <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/anselms-alchemy>.

¹⁶ Sophie Fiennes, *Over Your Cities Grass Will Grow*, Sciapode, 2010.

As Sarah Janavicius writes, this work is also a visual manifestation of 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".¹⁷ The paradox and tragedy of human destiny - this dichotomy between strength and fragility, the collision of grey and light, the reconciling of human fallibility and heavenly ascension - is at the crux of Kiefer's reading of spirituality.

In the painting *Heavy Cloud* (figure 5), God is manifested as a cloud placed low in the horizon, devoting a large portion of the landscape to the sky from which the divine emanation pours down.¹⁸ As in the biblical story of Exodus, one of the forms God assumed to show himself to the Jews was a pillar of cloud. The same composition - land with a low horizon, dominated by a trickle of lead sliding towards it - is repeated across several of Kiefer's works.



Figure 5: Anselm Kiefer, *Heavy Cloud*, 1981

Lead and shellac on photograph, mounted on board

¹⁷ Sarah Janavicius, "How Does the Idea of the Ruin Resonate with the Concept of Contemporary Fine Art Practice?" (Hons diss., The University of Northampton, 2015), 28.

¹⁸ Daniel Arasse, *Anselm Kiefer* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2015): 198.

59.4 x 87.6 cm

Kiefer's idea of the "spirituality of concrete", which I interpret as a spiritualism grounded in melancholic greys through which optimistic fragments of light emerge, is tangible in this scene unpacking the theory of divine emanation, as an immense sky spreads its influence, good and grey, over the earth.

This chapter has discussed the context which has informed Kiefer's spiritual outlook – a spiritualism defined by an overwhelming sense of greyness with mere fragments of light. I have discussed this in his installation and painting work. I began this investigation by wanting to explore Kiefer's links to spirituality and how they informed his painting, to reflect on my own religious upbringing and spirituality, and how I could express this in my painting. Kiefer's understanding of spiritualism is much more nuanced than the spiritual rationale offered up to me by my Pentecostal upbringing, which was defined by an immutable identity and place in the world based around unwavering faith. Kiefer's "spirituality of concrete" has given me broader parameters to help express my story of the spiritual.

The next chapter will present the ways that Kiefer has borrowed symbols from different faith traditions, political rhetoric, and myth to pull together his imagery into a cohesive, but constantly evolving body of work.

KIEFER AND SYMBOLISM

In this chapter, I explore the symbolism which sits at the core of Kiefer's work. It is drawn from a rich range of source material, including mythical allegories, religious iconography, political discourse and modern ruins. Here, I also talk to the symbolic material found in my own work and how I landed on the emblematic use of heaven, earth, pathways and steps.

Throughout his body of work, Anselm Kiefer has created a “web of images from various traditions that refer to one another in order to evoke transformation and recovery”.¹⁹ Kiefer says his diligent use of symbols is not genius. By his own admission, the artist is rearranging and adding to patterns and images that already exist.²⁰ I have observed that it is the conscientious way in which he reconstructs symbols, myths, theology and cosmology through his own lens of “concrete spirituality,” that gives his images new meaning, and in turn communicates meaning to me.

Mythical and political symbolism

Kiefer seems almost obsessive in his depiction of mythical and historical imagery. He exploits the power of mythic and religious images, suggesting perhaps that “somehow myth transcends history, that it can redeem us from history, and that art, especially painting, is the high road toward redemption”.²¹ To the contrary, the artist is not claiming symbolic art is somehow superior to reality, with a superhuman ability to bury shame and history in its quest for refreshed identity. For Kiefer, myth and history are inextricably linked through symbolism, where history relies on mythic images to be elucidated.

Kiefer understands well that German society and identity remains haunted by its past actions. It is haunted by images, which in turn produce the haunting images emblematic of Kiefer's practice. It is for this reason that Kiefer is constantly drawn to icons and motifs with an established connection to the German political tradition which, “a generation earlier, had

¹⁹ Stoker, *Where Heaven and Earth Meet*, 404.

²⁰ Kiefer in Celant, *Anselm Kiefer*, 184.

²¹ Andreas Huyssen, “Anselm Kiefer: The Terror of History, the Temptation of Myth,” *October* 48 (Spring, 1989): 26, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778947>.

energised the fascist cultural synthesis that resulted in the worst disaster of German history”.²²

From Kiefer’s provocative re-enactment of the ‘Sieg Heil salute’ in his early photographic series, *Heroic Symbols*, 1969 (figure 6), to his use of the forest mythology central to German nationalism, his preferential treatment of German philosophical, literature and artistic icons, “most of whom have been tainted with the sins of German nationalism and certainly put to good use by the Nazi propaganda machine”,²³ and his reframing of monumental German architecture as symbols of egomaniacal power, Kiefer’s use of political symbolism is prolific.



Figure 6: Anselm Kiefer, *Heroic Symbols*, 1969

Collage, black and white photograph

²² Huyssen, “Anselm Kiefer: The Terror of History,” 30.

²³ Huyssen, “Anselm Kiefer: The Terror of History,” 30.

While Kiefer certainly does not identify with or glorify this fascist iconography, his bravado in choosing these images violates some sort of social contract. He trespasses across a boundary understood by others as uncrossable. Andreas Huyssen calls Kiefer's insistence on working with such controversial symbols "problematic".²⁴ However, Kiefer's use of such symbols is not intended to open wounds in the middle of being healed. These symbols and motifs point to uncomfortable truths that were difficult for German people to come to terms with and that some of Kiefer's countrymen wanted to forget. By repeatedly using this iconography, Kiefer refuses to allow others to normalise what the symbols themselves have come to represent, and literally record, in recent history.

Kiefer has demarcated Germany's national shame as an inevitable part of a national identity, which should be carried forth into the future by all who remember it. The artist, through his work, is telling people they should remember their collective shame and accept its burden.

Symbolism of the modern ruin

Similarly, Kiefer looks to the symbolic potential of ruin and decay, intensively mining it for indicators to more broadly signal the fragility of man. In works like *Tempelhof*, 2010-11 (figure 7), he unfolds the story of the Holocaust victim's "tragic journey and excavates it from the density of each layer of textural debris".²⁵

²⁴ Huyssen, "Anselm Kiefer: The Terror of History," 30.

²⁵ Adrian Searle, "History Repeating: Anselm Kiefer goes back to the beginning," *The Guardian*, December 23, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/jul/10/anselm-kiefer-bastille-opera>.



Figure 7: Anselm Kiefer, *Tempelhof*, 2010-11
Oil, acrylic, terra cotta, lead and salt on canvas
330 x 760 cm

The Berlin Tempelhof Airport is depicted as a decaying shell in this 17-metre-long painting. The airport was built by the Nazi regime in 1927 to inspire awe at home and fear abroad by linking massive architectural scale with Third Reich propaganda. Following its destruction, the airport was rebuilt in the post-war era, and was in use until 2007. Similarly, Kiefer's painting was created over decades, building layers upon layers of images, which cast the iconic building as an inglorious ruin – a spectacle of a multifaceted collapse.

Kiefer transforms materials, considered unsalvageable and unstable, into something new. Unlike the charm and allure attached to the ruins of the classical era, there is nothing romantic about the modern ruin. In fact, after World War II, culture itself became a ruin, a troubled witness to the widespread devastation caused by humankind.²⁶

It is for this reason that Kiefer utilises ruination with an aesthetic approach different to that of the artists who came before him, such as German painter Caspar David Friedrich. The

²⁶ Gayford, "Anselm's Alchemy," 59.

nostalgic whimsy associated with the traditional ruins of the romantic period is transformed into a deliberate signifier of the horrors of a very recent history.²⁷

In addition to the ruin, one of Kiefer's most enduring symbols is the forest landscape, utilised in paintings such as *Winterwald*, 2010 (figure 10.) All of Kiefer's landscapes are ruled by the natural world, where man does not have control over the environment, but in much of his work, the artist places a special focus on the forest. The natural world towers above human figures, silently demonstrating their majesty and grandeur, just as it does in the paintings of his predecessor Friedrich (figure 8).



Figure 8: Caspar David Friedrich, *The Monk by the Sea*, 1808-1810

Oil on canvas

110 x 171.5 cm

For Kiefer, the forest is at once a place of refuge and a place where deep introspection takes place, and symbolic meaning can be found. In paintings such as *Man im Wald*, 1971 (figure

²⁷ (H. Wright 2017) Helen Wright, "Imaging and Imagining the Contemporary Ruin" (PhD diss. University of Tasmania, 2017), 3.

9), the artist leads us to a place where our certainty and control over the world are thrown into question – where mankind is humbled and dwarfed by the unmoving, inflexible nature of history and his or her place within it.

In German, this humbled figure is known as the *Rückenfigur*, or “figure from the back”, a compositional device originating in the Romantic movement to convey a sense of longing, isolation, and contemplation of his or her existential restlessness.²⁸ While the figure in *Man im Wald* does indeed face the viewer, it is undoubtedly wrestling with its perception of the world, brandishing fire as a symbol for destruction and/or renewal. In this sense, Kiefer’s *Rückenfigur* is reminding us of the infinite beauty of the natural world, while pointing out our inability to experience it fully without either destroying or changing it.

²⁸ G.D. Schott, G. D. “The Rückenfigur: A Note on an Intriguing Rear-View Pictorial Device,” *Perception* 49 no. 5 (2020): 600, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0301006620912361>.



Figure 9: Anselm Kiefer, *Mann im Wald*, 1971

Acrylic on cotton canvas

174 x 189 cm



Figure 10: Anselm Kiefer, *Winterwald*, 2010

Oil, emulsion, acrylic, shellac, torn bushes, synthetic teeth, and snake skin on canvas, in glass and steel frames; in three parts

332 x 576 x 35 cm

In this chapter, I have presented Anselm Kiefer's rich symbolic vocabulary and have explored how he joins text and image to produce a visual poetry. The purpose of his language is to preserve memory and highlight the importance of not forgetting, or not allowing memory to fly away and to force the viewer to wrestle with his or her perception of our world. How Kiefer's symbolism and spiritualism come together in abstracted landscapes at immense scale will be examined in the next chapter, alongside how Kiefer's symbolic mastery, has inspired my own iconographic painting.

KIEFER'S LANDSCAPE AND MY FINDINGS

In this chapter I look at the coming together of Kiefer's symbolic material and spirituality in his landscape paintings. I also turn the lens on my own methodology and what I have learnt from discerning techniques used in Kiefer's work. I place emphasis on the aesthetic techniques of layering, atmospheric perspective, the use of words, symbolism and scale to understand what I have learnt from Kiefer in the context of my own subjectivity and expression.

As mentioned in *Chapter One*, Kiefer creates a natural home for his spirituality and symbolism in the abstracted landscape, where heaven and earth - *Himmel und Erde* - are manifested as symbiotic but separate dimensions. It is to this place I am also drawn, in the studio and in my own environment.

Kiefer consistently borrows these images of heaven and earth and abstracts them further using scale and imaginative use of materials. He moves beyond the landscape we are accustomed to, visualising a radically experimental world, bridging the gap between numerous fields including architecture, physics and philosophy.

In his painting *Zim Zum*, 1990 (figure 11), Kiefer portrays earth as a ploughed field, in muted whites and browns. Patches of orange and the inclusion of ash indicate the destructive presence of fire. Surrounding the field is a frame comprised of broken lead bars, and in the middle a big grey hole. Looking through the hole, all I see is emptiness: a nihilistic representation of what life on earth could, or already has, become.



Figure 11: Anselm Kiefer, *Zim Zum*, 1990

Acrylic, emulsion, crayon, shellac, ashes, and canvas on lead
380.3 x 560.1 cm

Although it might not be Kiefer's intention, when I look at Kiefer's painting, I feel compelled to think about God's withdrawal from earth in Noah's day, which was followed by calamity as recorded in Genesis 6:3-5. Is this withdrawal an act of "desertion that leaves the world lacking... without salvation",²⁹ or is God's exile a transformative purification – an opportunity for humankind to find and define themselves in a torn reality?

The painting could be seen as resembling a battlefield, and Kiefer has said,

"Ploughing and burning, like slash-and-burn agriculture, is a process of regeneration, so that the earth can be reborn and create new growth toward the sun... The beginning of the

²⁹ Mark C. Taylor, *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992): 305.

cosmos... began with incredible heat... Fire is the glue of the cosmos. It connects heaven and earth”.³⁰

The flickers of orange, or the fire which connects heaven and earth, speak to Kiefer’s paradoxical “spirituality of concrete.” From the suggestion of nihilistic doom and emptiness found in the hole toward the bottom of the canvas, springs forth opportunity for humankind to forge its own, new world.

While I was able to find some biographical information about the artist, which I have discussed in the *Introduction* and in *Chapter One*, Kiefer is reluctant to discuss the intimate details of his life and his working methods, believing such information hinders appreciation of the spiritual and philosophical content of his art.³¹ It was therefore difficult to find much material on his working methods that I could apply to my own work, outside of attempting to ‘reverse-engineer’ what I could see in the reproductions of his work. However, within the components he brings together in his landscapes, he is searching for the ineffable meaning of existence, attempting to define it through his visual and symbolic representation of the incomprehensible world in which we live.

This is what I am also searching for in my own work and as such, I identify with Kiefer’s subject matter and his approach to materiality. Travelling between the landscape and then working in a studio on small and large scale works to develop my painting has been a new experience for me.

Finding my abstracted landscapes in layering

Prior to this honours research of Kiefer’s abstracted landscapes I was creating images of landscape using a camera (figure 12), however, I felt limited by photography.

³⁰ Kiefer in Celant, *Anselm Kiefer*, 338.

³¹ Mark Rosenthal, *Anselm Kiefer* (Munich: Prestel, 1988): 10.



Figure 12: Joey George, *Untitled*, 2020.

Photograph, silver gelatin

42 x 29.7cm

I remember looking at the environmental landscape imagery of the Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky, b. 1955, and being moved by it, while simultaneously imagining how much deeper these photographs could be if additional layers of paint and other media could push and pull them in different directions. From here, I asked the same questions of my own photographs: could more layers be added? How could I add layers of complexity and discourse? How could I release a photograph from the constraints of its methodology into something new?

Similarly to the American photographer John Pfahl, who composes objects within the frame, I began to physically work over my printed photographs to create new landscapes, entirely unknown and not yet understood. I decorated trees, drew lines into the ground and over vistas, fabricating the view to question our perception of the landscape. These added elements referenced mark-making devices associated with photographs, maps, plans, and diagrams and would sometimes fill in information suggested by the scene, or act upon information external to the photograph itself. The picturesque scenes are at once interrupted and completed.

In this way, the camera for me became more than a tool for documentation, but rather a tool for creating, because the frozen moments captured by my camera became unreal to me, as they had done also to the British artist David Hockney, b. 1937. When he decided to paint, Hockney said,

“Photographs didn’t really have life in the way a drawing or painting did... because of what it is compared to Rembrandt looking at himself for hours and hours, putting all these hours into the picture that you’re going to look at, naturally there’s many more hours there than you can give it. A photograph is the other way around. It’s a fraction of a second, frozen. So, the moment you’ve looked at, for even four seconds, you’re looking at it for far more than the camera did”.³²

I believe art is very much a discovery of self, and engagement with the work of others is an important part of that process. My studio-based research this year is not an isolated iteration

³² Wright, Randall Wright, *David Hockney: Seeing Beauty*, Paramount Pictures, 2016.

of this discovery as it follows on from my photographic practice, however I did start painting for the first time. I have started conceptually complex with a knowledge of art history, philosophy and spiritualism, but visually simply in order to learn how to paint and ensure that this research and continual studio experimentation would open new possibilities into my practice for future research and work.

I began the process of painting by working with monochromatic acrylic paints, working up to using oil paints, colour and introducing other materials, like tissue paper and photographs. As a beginner, it was important to learn some basics by looking deeply at the works by Kiefer that I loved. I also took painting classes in other subjects and learnt the many ways you can physically manipulate paint both on the canvas and in the mixing process to play with its level of transparency.

My purpose in combining these two mediums was not to eventually leave photography behind, but to incorporate it into my practice whilst learning something new: to paint.

Before I embarked on this Honours research, I had already spent a lot of time taking photographs in the landscape, and so early in the research, fieldwork became an important tool and activity in allowing me to see how I could use this methodology to imagine new worlds on the surfaces of my paintings. I spent a lot of time travelling to and walking in the Blue Mountains - Ngurra Country of the Dharug and Gundungurra peoples - which is close to where I live.

I wanted to connect with the textures of the landscape that came to define the era when colonial painters in the Western tradition found admiration in their fascination of the Australian environment, rather than dismissing it as odd.³³ I began to observe textures and colours which reminded me of Kiefer's paintings. Intricate rock formations, and aggregate formations of plants, stone, wood, bark, and nuts, were both chaotic and harmoniously formed into the edges of cliff faces. These photographs are of the Australian landscape, but the textures of these surfaces, and the feeling of being in the landscape linked me to Kiefer,

³³ Bell, Leonard Bell, "Colonial eyes transformed: looking at/in paintings: an exploratory essay," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 1 no. 1 (2000): 46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14434318.2000.11432653>.

an artist working in continental Europe, in post-war Germany. I took photographs of these formations and scenes, printed them and inserted them into my paintings (figures 16 and 19).



Figure 13: Fieldwork, Blue Mountains National Park, April 2022



Figure 14: Fieldwork – a photograph of myself holding a rock Blue Mountains National Park, April 2022. Photo: Meggie Morris



Figure 15: Fieldwork, view from Burramoko Ridge (Hanging Rock) in the Blue Mountains National Park, April 2022. Photo: Meggie Morris



Figure 16: Joey George, Untitled, 2022

Oil, photograph

29.7 x 42 cm

Finding my abstracted landscapes in words

Kiefer's use of words and symbols within his paintings cannot be overlooked. When art journalist Judith Benhamou-Huet asked Kiefer why he includes words in his paintings he replied, "they are in me. They are sediments".³⁴

Words augment the painting's context or psychological richness. If we are first drawn through the picture plane by the creation of perspective, the addition of words can slow the viewing process down and allow our eyes to rest and focus on the surface. The viewing experience is then split and layered between a fluid movement through the landscape and a

³⁴ Kiefer in Judith Benhamou-Huet, "Anselm Kiefer: forever in search of the ideal painting," *Judith Benhamou Reports*, December 14, 2021, <https://judithbenhamouhuet.com/anselm-kiefer-forever-in-search-of-the-ideal-painting/>.

more focused reading of the painting's surface. This, once again, leads us around the picture plane, accumulating different speeds and playing with the tension of the painting being both an object and a window.

I used the phrase "learning to speak", which I inscribed in some of my paintings, as a comment and expression on my state of mind as a beginner in painting. A close friend of mine likened learning a new skill to learning to speak an entirely new language, in that we are learning to express parts of ourselves and our thoughts in new ways which may be at once limiting and limitless.

The composition of the lettering is vital to the image's message as a whole. I found writing towards the top and 'heavenly' portions of the landscape gave an authoritative voice, like an historical scroll or list of commandments – works that have come from above, aged and have been stored in the earth. The words running vertically represents a threaded connection between heaven and earth, reinterpreting Kiefer's use of ladders throughout his work (figures 17 and 18).



Figure 17: Joey George, Untitled, 2022

Oil and acrylic on cotton

59.4 x 84 cm



Figure 18: Joey George, Untitled, 2022

Acrylic and photograph on paper

29.7 x 42 cm

Finding my abstracted landscapes in the symbols of the sky

And what of the sky, or heaven, itself? The sky symbolises transcendence, eternity and infinity. If I were to launch from the painting into the sky, I would explode into boundless space as we know it, or rather, do not know it. The sky above is constantly moving as its various shapes and tones appear, evolve and disappear. The special transcendental quality of clouds comes from the dichotomy of their appearance – they appear in solid form to the human eye but are also formless and cannot be contained. I explored this contradiction in my painting, making several works which feature clouds in a strong, more literal form, and others where the clouds are very faint, merely a suggestion (figures 21, 22, 23, 24 and 25). The way the sky above can look like an explosion and a collision of colour and cloud is appealing to me, and I have experimented with this theme by allowing the paint to naturally collide into itself by watering it down and pouring it onto the canvas.

Most of my landscape paintings have been arranged as portraits, creating an augmented, symbolic view of the landscape. The portrait format takes away the sense of familiarity we have when looking at a landscape painting in its usual form and leads us naturally into the unknown. I used my own photographs of paths I trod in the Blue Mountains as the base of these works and applied the landscape over the top using acrylic paint (figure 19). These are not neatly arranged paths. I intentionally bury them in layers of paint to obscure them from any clarity. The paths are ascending but with no clear end in sight. This comes from my own fascination with the unknown, with processes, and with a willingness to explore portals into difficult territory in order to define and identify ourselves and our place in the world away from the constraints and coercion of organised religion. Working vertically in this way, from earth to the heavens and vice versa, leans into the very different energies inherent to these “places” - dark versus light, reality versus escape, boundaries and brevity versus eternity.

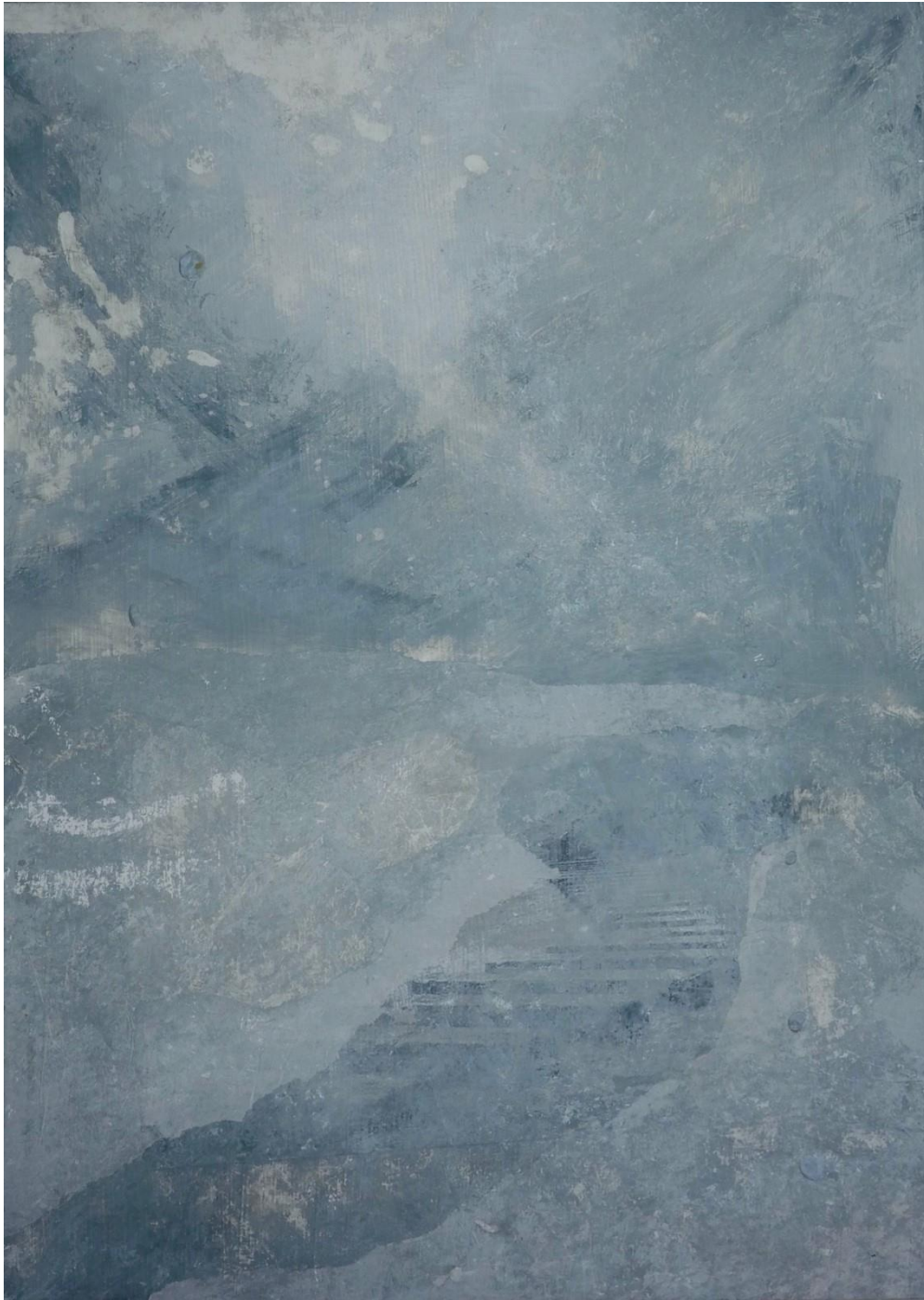


Figure 19: Joey George, Untitled, 2022

Acrylic and photograph on wood

42 x 59.4 cm

Over the year my work has become increasingly abstract in the way that it portrays landscapes. I have pushed the abstraction further and further, exploring the landscape as a place of wonder, anchoring the eye with a hint of the familiar before exploring the unknown

on the canvas. My questions have evolved from: “can I suggest a cloud or a tree instead of painting one?” to “how can I suggest that matter?”, moving further away from the literalism of the photographic image.



Figure 20: Working in the studio, Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney, October 2022. Photo: Meggie Morris

Because of modern technology, we have seen and engaged with so many landscapes from afar, that we have never physically stepped into. I can close my eyes and rove around an English forest without looking for an image of one. As a painter, I only hint at these places through suggestion of form, tone and colour, and the viewer will fill in the landscape for me. I discovered I was tapping into deeper imaginative potential, pushing the abstraction further using suggestion more akin to the sensibilities of a poet.



Figure 21: Joey George, Untitled, 2022

Acrylic and oil on canvas

29.7 x 42 cm



Figure 22: Joey George, *Untitled*, 2022

Acrylic on canvas

29.7 x 42 cm



Figure 23: Joey George, Untitled, 2022

Acrylic on canvas

29.7 x 42 cm



Figure 24: Joey George, Untitled, 2022

Acrylic on paper

41 x 78 cm



Figure 25: Joey George, Untitled, 2022

Acrylic on paper

29.7 x 42 cm



Figure 26: Joey George, Untitled, 2022

Paper and acrylic on paper

29.7 x 42 cm



Figure 27: Moving work into a test space to collate during semester break

Atmospheric perspective

Studying the sky above me led me to learn about the aesthetic technique within visual arts known as atmospheric perspective. This is a central technique artists use to mimic how we see depth two-dimensionally. This is a something I had observed and absorbed in the Blue Mountains, as I looked and the infinite landscape ahead of and beyond me (figure 15). Depth is key to holding the attention of the viewer and to providing a space for the eye to travel deep into the landscape image. When I looked at these works of Kiefer, I would ask myself, “How is it I can imagine myself being inside the painting, wandering about? What lies beyond that opening there?” I discovered that “atmospheric perspective is achieved through the variation of textures from sharper focused areas to muted detail as the object recedes, typically accompanied by a reduction of vibrancy and colour saturation”.³⁵



Figure 28: Joey George, *Untitled*, 2022

Acrylic and oil on paper

42 x 42 cm

³⁵ Gareth Edwards, Gareth, *Painting Abstract Landscapes* (Ramsbury: The Crowood Press, 2021), 100.



Figure 29: Joey George, Untitled, 2022

Acrylic on paper

60 x 84 cm

It is important here to reference some secondary influences on my art practice during my Honours research and studio work. Working with atmospheric perspective and scale, Ethiopian American artist Julie Mehretu's, b. 1970, influence cannot be overlooked. Her intimate understanding of atmospheric perspective is evident in her large-scale, almost three-dimensional depth paintings, like *Fragment*, 2009 (figure 30). Her paintings are made up of layers that show through one another, including smudges of smoke-like cloud or fog depicting primordial forces like the wind, or ocean currents. Mehretu has described her

rich canvases as “story maps of no location”, seeing them as pictures into an imagined world, rather than windows into reality.³⁶

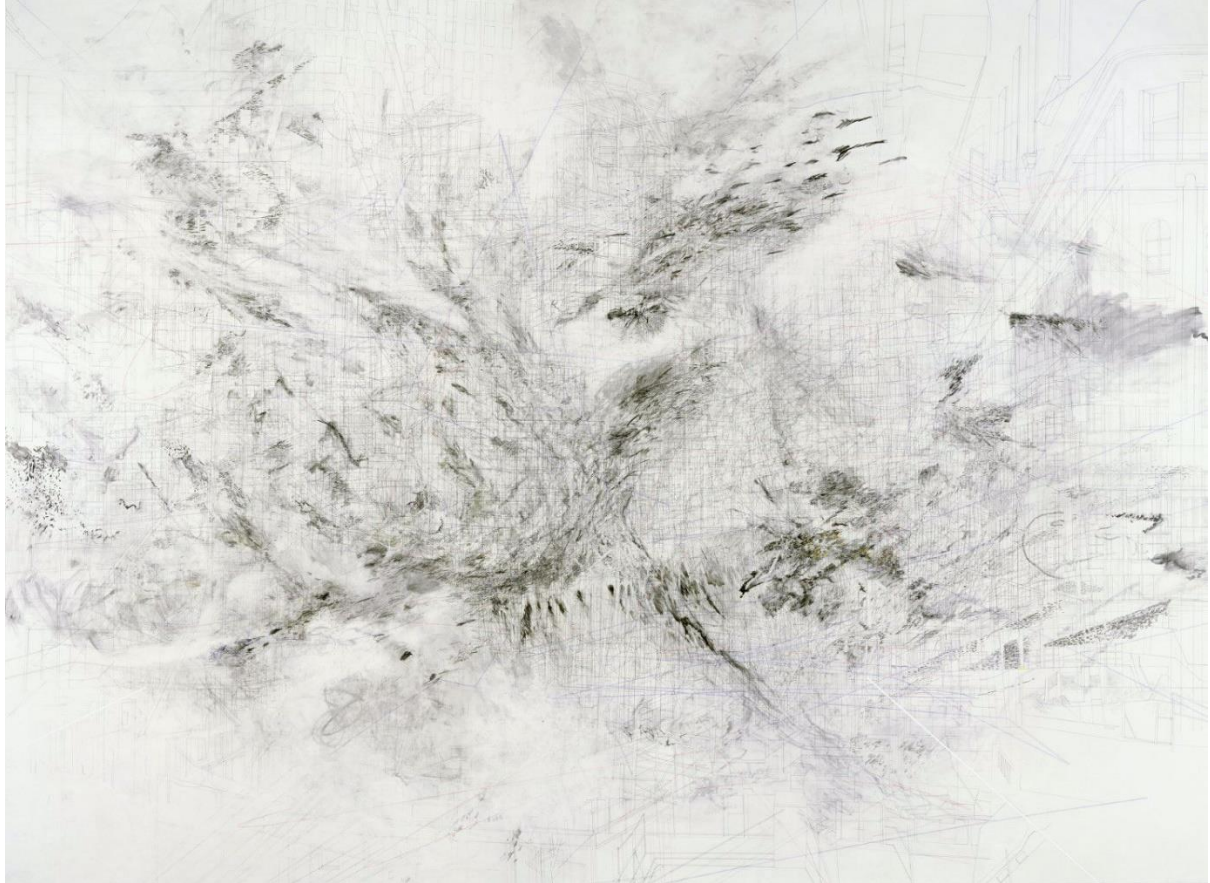


Figure 30: Julie Mehretu, *Fragment*, 2009

Ink and acrylic on canvas

303.5 x 415.8 cm

³⁶ Diana A. Ramadan, “Story maps of no location,” *Africa is a Country*, June 21, 2021, <https://africasacountry.com/2021/06/story-maps-of-no-location>.



Figure 31: One of the great artists of atmospheric perspective is the oil painter JMW Turner (1775-1851). I was fortunate to view *Falls of Schaffhausen*, 1845 at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne earlier this year.

Ultimately, the aim is to transport the viewer to a more transcendent realm: a place into which they can disappear. This is also the aim of my work – to represent this dream world. In familiarising myself with the possibilities of atmospheric perspective, I have tended to create compositions that have a darker and brooding foreground that then move the eye towards a hint of light, representing transcendence and a yearning for something beyond which lies within us all, as a hallmark of our human condition. This play between dark and light was flipped as my Honours research and studio work developed and I leant deeper into painting abstracted landscapes which foregrounded lightness rather than darkness.

During the semester break it was important for me to take a break from the studio and to spend time reflecting on the work in a new space. I used a clean studio space to sequence my

work and to determine what was working well and what was not. I concluded mid-year that my lighter toned works were stronger and so I made the decision to spend second semester focusing on that aesthetic. Working within a shallower range of tones simplified the process of painting, as the tonal limitations I placed on myself gave me more freedom to experiment with fewer technical frustrations (figure 26). I also used this time to start sequencing my work in preparation for the graduate art exhibition. I chose to display my work chronologically and thematically, a visual organisation which lends itself well to the different stages of experimentation which I have outlined in this chapter.



Figure 32: Moving work into a test space to collate for the SCA graduate exhibition 2022

Scale

Anselm Kiefer is known for his colossal paintings, some of which, like *Aschenblume* (1983-97), are more than seven metres wide. Unfortunately, none of Kiefer's large works are available to view currently in New South Wales, which I discovered when I arrived at the Art Gallery of New South Wales to view *Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe*, 1984-1986, which was mistakenly marked online as 'on display' in the contemporary galleries. Despite this, I decided I had to enquire myself, how much of a painting's power comes from its overwhelming size? I then gave myself a weekend to start the process of working for the first time on a large piece (240 x 150 cm). Working at scale is arguably a luxury for many artists. The costs associated with painting increase as the size of the work increases, it is not easy to paint over an enormous canvas or just move onto another one. These were important considerations as I made my first attempt (figures 31 and 32).

As I started to apply paint, straight away I felt that I was inside the painting as it lorded over me. When I came in close to paint a small section, the edges of my eyes could not catch the edge of the canvas, putting me in a place of complete absorption. I needed bigger tools to apply the paint and make the mark changes I envisaged. Accordingly, I needed bigger motions for certain applications of the paint. This made the mere act of painting much more physical, as I was walking in and out of the painting to view it properly. I gained a deeper understanding of Kiefer's process by working much larger and this is something I will continue to explore as an artist. There is a great excitement working on a canvas without edges. Perhaps having a visual conversation with something bigger than myself is the closest an artist can come to the divine?

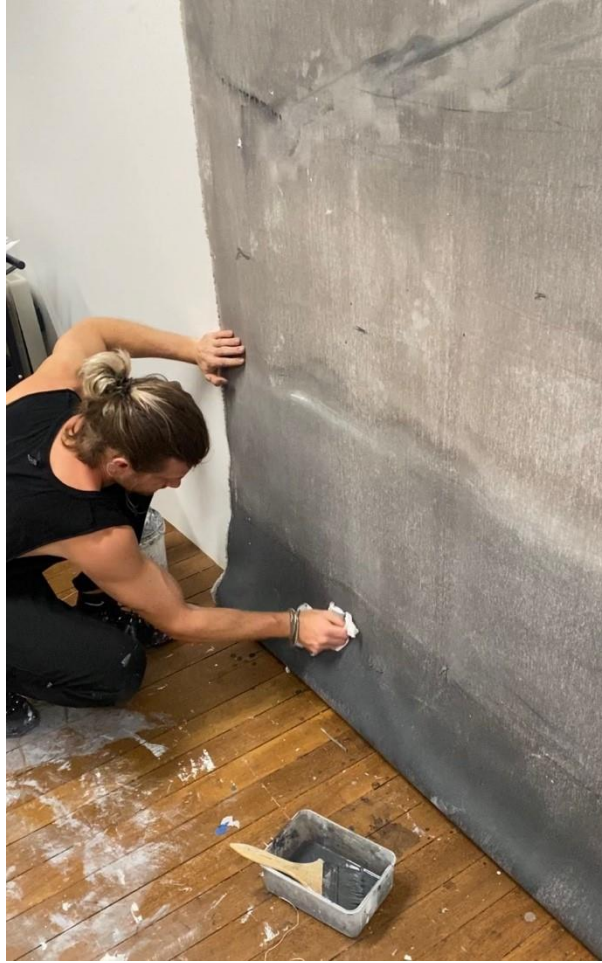


Figure 33: My first attempt at a large-scale painting, October 2022. Photo: Meggie Morris



Figure 34: Joey George, Untitled (work in process), 2022

Acrylic on canvas

118 x 220 cm

CONCLUSION

My Honours by Studio Work and Research Paper has explored my grasp of and infatuation with the abstracted landscape paintings of Anselm Kiefer in order to drive my own artistic practice and exploration into the 'unknown', as I transitioned from photography into painting.

When I began this year, I was experimenting with how to create new landscapes on paper by releasing my photographs from the constraints of their methodology. I was physically working over these photographs with paint, decorating trees, drawing lines over vistas in order to fabricate a new view, entirely unknown and not yet understood. Running parallel to this process was my investigation of how to treat my own story of spiritualism within my painting. Having grown up in the Pentecostal faith, I had my identity and understanding of the world dictated to me, by ideology. Subsequently, I left the Church to engage with my curiosity of the world and my place within it, far from the constraints of Christian ideology. In this way, I was looking for artistic practice that would better allow me to treat this story in my painting.

I had been familiar with Anselm Kiefer's more well-known work, but it was a passing suggestion from a lecturer at the Sydney College of the Arts that pushed me to explore his work in the context of my own personal story of spiritualism, and development as a painter. I immediately sought out his paintings in book reproductions and was drawn to how he worked at the intersection where familiar worlds meet the unfamiliar, the earth meets the heavens, and human fragility meets transcendence, almost under the cover of darkness. I began to explore Kiefer's understanding of spiritualism and how it informed his work, to reflect on my own religious upbringing, and how I could express this in my painting.

My relationship with Kiefer changed throughout this process as I developed from a viewer into an apprentice, bringing my own images into the studio alongside knowledge of his. The outcome has been transformative both on the canvas, and analytically, as I critically unpacked the themes of spirituality, symbolism and abstracted landscape.

Kiefer's sprawling paintings are saturated with a confrontation of darkness and an invitation into uncharted territory. His reverence for the spiritual, the mythic and the tragic,

manifested in his rich symbolic tapestry and organisation of his landscapes into heaven and earth, reminds us of our impermanence and corruption while optimistically inviting us to investigate a new realm within and of ourselves.

Kiefer's spiritual outlook is a "spirituality of concrete" characterised by an overwhelming greyness with mere fragments of light peering through. This understanding is much more nuanced than the ideological rationale of my Pentecostal upbringing, defined by an immutable identity founded on unmoving faith. Kiefer's "spirituality of concrete" gave me broader parameters to help express my story of the spiritual.

Within those parameters, I found the ways in which Kiefer borrowed symbols from different faith traditions, mythical allegories, modern ruins and political iconography. It is this symbolic vocabulary that sits at the core of Kiefer's cohesive, but constantly evolving body of work; symbols including fascist iconography, modern ruins, and religious allegories of heaven and earth and God's departure from it. I was drawn to the conscientious way he reconstructs these symbols through his lens of spiritualism, and in turn experimented with my own symbolic language in my painting. This experimentation is how I landed on the emblematic use of heaven, earth, pathways, steps and carefully chosen words.

Within my own methodology, I placed more and more emphasis on the aesthetic techniques of layering, atmospheric perspective, the use of words, symbolism and scale to understand what I had learnt from Kiefer. Like Kiefer, I found a natural home for this symbolism and treatment of spiritualism in the abstracted landscape – where heaven and earth collide in a cloudy sky that symbolises transcendence, eternity and infinity. It is their paradoxical appearance which gives clouds their special transcendental quality – they are at once solid and formless, unable to be contained. I explored this contradiction in my painting, manifesting heaven and earth is symbiotic but separate, an exercise in methodical experimentation as a painter, and conceptual investigation as someone reframing their spiritual identity.

Through this exploration, and in preparation for the graduate art exhibition, I felt that my paintings that foregrounded light rather than darkness, were much stronger. So, in the second semester, I focused on this aesthetic. I felt that by working with a shallower tonal range paradoxically gave me more freedom. This is because the painting process was simplified

and allowed me space to experiment with fewer technical frustrations. Sequencing my work chronologically and thematically in the graduate art exhibition has highlighted the development of these different stages of experimentation as I continued to ask more of myself and my work, like Kiefer, who is constantly searching and asking for more in his work: more meaning, more size, more symbolism.

This sort of 'greed' is necessary, not formed from ego but from a mindset of abundance; a desire to fulfil his dreams and the dreamlike landscapes which come forth from this place of unhindered artistic creation. It is this excitement, swollen with infinite opportunity and possibility, to which I deeply relate as a new painter. The prospect of a canvas without limits or earthly boundaries, continues to prove inspiring.

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