

Anselm Kiefer's *Exodus* paintings

(with some connections to Chinese painting)

Gagosian Gallery, NYC, December 2022

The works in this series and exhibition are stunning and extremely powerful in many ways. Much has already been written about the significance or symbolism of the objects used in the paintings, the sites represented, the meaning and significance of the words incorporated into the paintings. I will here focus on other matters – on some of the visual techniques, and on their emotional effects.

The paintings in this New York City Gagosian exhibition (there was a simultaneous exhibition at Gagosian, Los Angeles) are approximately of two types: Paintings of buildings; and what I shall term the turquoise paintings. Both sets of paintings are emotionally and visually powerful, and a good question is simply, “Why?” Why are these paintings so visually and emotionally powerful?



Installation view: *Danaë* (photo MOR)

On encountering these works, the first thing one notices is their size. The paintings are uniformly huge, most on the order of 20' x 30' (6m x 9m). But size alone is not sufficient to produce the intensity of feeling these works generate. We have all seen many large artworks that are not powerful or in any way impressive. In fact, that is more the norm in the art of the last decades: Make it big because...? “Well, I don’t know. Just because. Because I can? Because that is what people like?” Andy Warhol, ever the provocateur, once replied to an interviewer’s question asking why he made a particular painting so large, saying, “Because it will sell for more.” In Warhol’s case, the large sizes almost always (but not quite always) accomplished something conceptually and emotionally, well beyond “It will sell for more”. But that is frequently not the case with much of contemporary art. Here in the Kiefers, however, the scale is critical, is contributing, is significant. Before these warehouse-sized paintings (and the Gagosian gallery in Chelsea is itself warehouse sized), we feel small, emotionally small, philosophically small.

But beyond sheer size, these works are beautiful – visually, jaw-droppingly beautiful. And this is interesting because not all of Kiefer's work has been. Some has been quite deliberately harsh and abrasive. Others of his works have been neither harsh nor beautiful, but more neutral. But these paintings are uniformly physically and visually beautiful.

The building paintings (wisely grouped by Gagosian together) represent extremely large and imposing buildings. These paintings border on threatening both because of their size and the huge structures they represent. But they are not quite threatening, and I think this is because of their beauty. As he so frequently does, Kiefer enlists a terrific, mesmerizing use of color to convey volume, depth and space. But at the same time he creates pure two-dimensional compositional beauty in each painting. As he frequently has, Kiefer uses lots of browns, tans, golds, blacks, whites. And in these paintings much of the gold is, wonderfully enough, goldleaf, applied on top of the paint. The applications of goldleaf literally gleam. They glint. In doing so they echo and reference other artwork

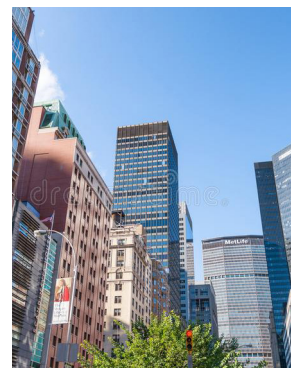


Installation view, (Courtesy Gagosian, Photo Rob McKeever). Two of the buildings paintings, with a human figure added to convey scale.

-- Klimt, Byzantine icons, and the gleaming use of goldleaf in much Japanese art. But unlike its use in most of those works, here in the Kiefers the goldleaf is used as highlights, applied as one would paint – a bit here, a bit there, an accent here, a cluster there. (One exception in this exhibition is the *Danaë* painting in which a large area at the top of the painting is covered with shimmering goldleaf. More about that below.) Even when the buildings represented are a pair of run down factory buildings (for example, the *des Malers Atelier* painting), they feel magnificent. We feel physically small before their size and philosophically small before their visual beauty, with those two attributes combining to produce a feeling of magnificence.

But it is not only size and beauty that create this magnificence. Why are they so powerful, so magnificent? What else creates this feeling of human smallness but a *comfortable* human smallness? This leads us to an unusual technique Kiefer employed, one which harks back, curiously enough, to traditional Chinese painting.

The buildings in these paintings are all painted as perceived from human eye level. We stand on the gallery floor looking at this 20' representation of a very large building and the perspective of the image is looking upward. Ten, fif-



Linear perspective: The buildings' sides converge toward the top, like vertical railroad tracks.

teen feet up the height of the painting we are looking at the cornice of a building, and we are looking at it from below, for we see the underside of the cornice. Normally and naturally, when you look up that high at something, you see it with linear perspective receding in the Y/height direction. When you look at the classic railroad tracks receding into the distance, you see them converging in a very pronounced and obvious way. The same thing happens when we look up at a very tall building. Its parallel sides converge toward the top of the image. But in some of these very, very large Kiefer



des Malers Atelier (The Painter's Studio), 129 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 224 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches (330 x 570 cm). (Courtesy the artist and Gagosian, Photo Georges Poncet)



Note the near total absence of linear perspective as we look up the height of the buildings. Sides and windows of building are almost perfectly parallel.

paintings of very, very large buildings, seen from street level as it were, there is minimal or no convergence of these lines. The vertical lines of these huge structures remain parallel or very nearly parallel. What is Kiefer doing here? Surely he knows perspective. So why did he choose not to capture the expected and visually correct perspective of things converging like vertical railroad tracks?

One effect of this absence of perspective is a feeling of stability and calm. The lines of the buildings remain parallel, just as we know they really are, even though our eyes do not perceive them that way. There is a feeling of comfort in this. But at the same time the paintings convey hugeness and therefore our smallness. We have feelings simultaneously both of our vulnerable smallness and a comforting stability, a “This all makes sense” feeling.

And here there is an interesting connection with Chinese painting. The Chinese deliberately eschewed the use of linear perspective. On one hand the Chinese very skillfully used *atmospheric* perspective, which they refined and used for centuries before it was “discovered” and mastered by Italian Renaissance artists like Leonardo da Vinci in the West. With atmospheric perspective, distant objects are seen and represented as fainter and less distinct than closer objects. When applied to vast landscapes, this effectively and powerfully conveyed the hugeness of the world and our smallness within those landscapes.



Atmospheric perspective: Distant objects are fainter and less distinct. Qu Ding, *Summer Mountains*, 11th century. (Photo courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC)

In contrast to their *de riguer* use of atmospheric perspective, Chinese buildings and human structures are presented without the linear perspective we in the West have come to expect and assume since the Renaissance. The parallel sides of building structures are painted by the Chinese as remaining parallel, without the convergence of lines that our eyes see and that is linear perspective. The human-sized world of buildings is presented as we know it is, not as our eyes perceive it. It all “makes sense” to us. The result is that while we are small within the mountains/landscape represented with atmospheric perspective, we are also safe in a humanly known and comfortable world without the visual distortions of linear perspective.



The Garden Painting, late Ming dynasty, ~1600 CE. (National Palace Museum, Taipei). The lines of the walls and buildings do not converge as they recede into the distance. They remain parallel, as they are in real life. There is no linear perspective.

Kiefer does a similar thing. What he shows us in these building paintings is so much grander than us, so far beyond us. Yet at the same time that we experience that grandeur, the larger-than-life quality of those buildings, we also experience, because of their comfortably parallel edges and walls, the world as we know it is. We see that world differently. We are made aware of its hugeness, but we are simultaneously made aware of its beauty and approachability.



Nehebkau, 12.5' x 12.5' (380 x 380 cm). (Courtesy the artist and Gagosian, Photo Georges Poncet)

Not all Kiefer's buildings paintings in this series eschew linear perspective. Several, in fact, go in the opposite direction and use exaggerated linear perspective to create their effect. One of the most powerful works in the exhibition does just this. The large *Danaë* painting employs a very pronounced linear perspective to create a feeling of deep space, one that, especially because of the size of the painting, we feel we could physically walk into.

This painting also differs from the others in its use of gold leaf. In Greek mythology, Zeus had sex with the beautiful mortal woman Danaë (as he was wont to do with beautiful mortal women) while disguising himself as something else. In this instance he descended upon her as a shower of



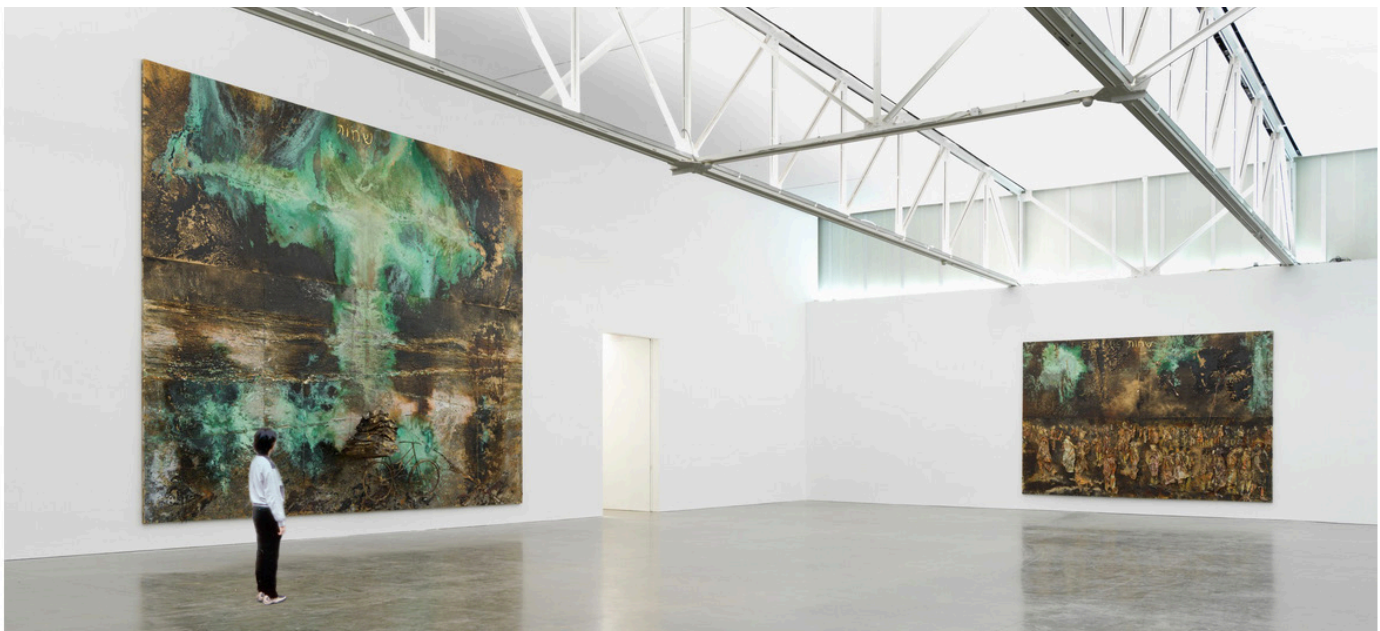
gold from heaven. A very large area of the top section of the *Danaë* painting is fully covered with beautiful gleaming goldleaf. The painting is beautiful and mysterious, creating a feeling of, “What a huge and beautiful, but strange because of its emptiness, space! What a strange and powerful combination of loneliness and beauty!”



Danaë, 2016–21, 12 feet 5 5/8 inches × 43 feet 7 5/8 inches (3.8 × 13.3 m) (Courtesy Gagosian, Photo Rob McKeever)

Not all the paintings in this exhibition entail buildings. Several are more abstract and are (wisely) displayed in a separate (and very large) room. These I am terming the “turquoise paintings”. Several include the word “exodus” directly in their titles, several include inscriptions in Hebrew. They are more overtly about “exodus”, yet the emotions they generate in us are very similar to those generated by the buildings paintings.

Once again, the paintings are huge, in some cases even larger than the buildings paintings. These exodus paintings include very large washes of a gorgeous green-blue turquoise. They are, again, jaw-droppingly beautiful. The swaths of turquoise suggest “sky” or perhaps “water”. But their point is, I believe, other than what they might reference or point to mimetically. Their point, I believe, is simply and profoundly their jaw-dropping beauty. They say, “Look! Life is beautiful. We are beautiful.” And embedded as they are in this “exodus” series of works, they further suggest, “We are all beautiful, regardless of who we are or where we come from or how much or little wealth we have. We are all beautiful.”



Installation view, (Courtesy Gagosian, Photo Rob McKeever) (Human figure added to convey scale.)

One painting, *Exodus*, 2022, includes attached to its surface near the bottom a bicycle, a physical, metal bicycle, with its rear carrier piled high with what appears to be luggage. The bicycle and its luggage are all painted, with the same colors as is the canvas proper, including an abundance of gleaming gold. Above the bicycle floats a huge swath of the gorgeous and mysterious turquoise. The painting is beautiful. We are all beautiful. Those of us who are privileged (e.g. being comfortable enough and in an environment where we have the luxury of going to an exhibition of Anselm Kiefer's *Exodus* paintings) and those of us who are not, who pack their lives and belongings and memories onto a bicycle to try to pass beyond some border beyond watching border police to a better life. We are all beautiful.



EXODUS, 2022, 259 ¼ × 299 ¼ inches (660 × 760 cm). Courtesy Gagosian, Photo Georges Poncet.



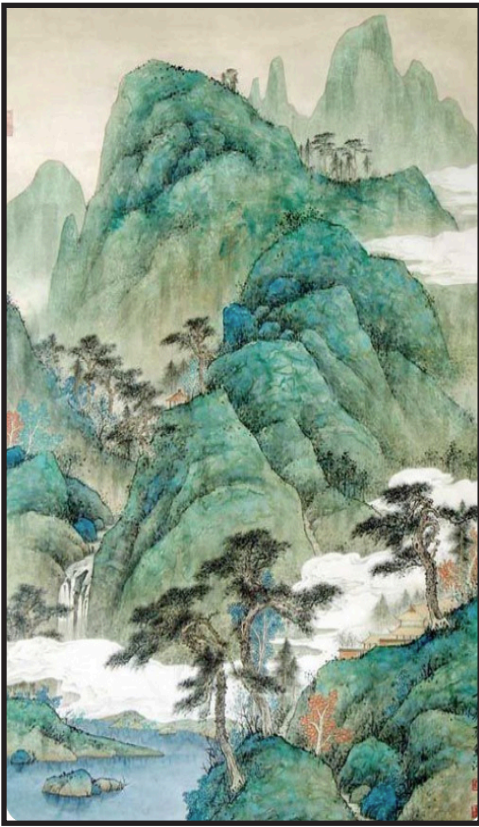
Another *Exodus* painting, similarly large, includes glued to its lower half painted clothing – pants, shirts,... These are configured as human figures, one with this gesture, another with that. And by applying linear perspective to the size of the figures, the collection of them conveys a great mass of people receding into the distance. The emptiness of the clothing figures is haunting, an effect enhanced by the reds, browns and other earth tones of the figures. And above this crowd of refugees float three large splashes/clouds of that beautiful turquoise.



EXODUS, 2021, 149 5/8 x 220 1/2 inches (380 x 560 cm). Courtesy Gagolian, Photo Georges Poncet.

The human figures in the foreground are lifesize. All the human figures consist of painted fabric.





Wu Wei, 15th century Ming dynasty landscape painting.

I noted above Kiefer's deliberate avoidance of linear perspective in some of the paintings and how that relates to the history of Chinese painting. The beautiful turquoise of these *Exodus* paintings suggests additional familiarity on Kiefer's part with that Chinese history. Nor should it be surprising that an artist of Kiefer's caliber would be aware of, borrow from, and reference techniques and motifs from other cultures.

When Chinese painters added color to their compositions, one of the most commonly used colors was turquoise. For centuries turquoise was used representationally to convey "mountain" in landscape painting. In more contemporary Chinese painting, the color has been used abstractly while still referencing the long history of its use in Chinese painting. In all cases, the color is, as it is in these Kiefer's, beautiful.



Zhang Daqian, *Peach Blossom Spring*. 1988.

As I walked through this exhibition I felt several times, "I am in the presence of several masterpieces of human artistic endeavor". And by "masterpiece" I meant "Will continue to survive and to affect people profoundly for centuries, well beyond our present time". These paintings capture and speak to something timelessly profoundly human.