

by Dorothy Krousie and Nilofur Farrukh

Two Views on 'Palmsonntag'



Palmsonntag (2006), a significant work of Anselm Kiefer was on display this year (Mar- Aug 2010) at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Its intellectual and creative rigor has the power to communicate with global audiences which makes it open to multiple interpretations.

NuktaArt invited two writers from two different continents, cultures and religious orientation to interpret Palmsonntag here to give an insight into this work of the socially engaged artist.

Anselm Kiefer's 'Palmsonntag' is an installation that is overwhelming in its scale, symbolism, and layers of meaning. It is extremely moving. It demands your engagement. After you have left the exhibition, it keeps coming back to mind, with strong visual images and the remembrance of a visceral reaction. There is something essential about life/the life experience that is realized in this work.

On entering the installation, you are confronted with a huge life size replica of a date palm tree lying on the diagonal across the gallery floor, in a north to south orientation, with the roots at the south end and the top branches 'resting' on a pile of handmade terracotta bricks at the north end. It is made of plastic resin and clay. The walls on either side are covered floor to ceiling with two rows of mixed media compositions in deep glass lead sealed vitrines, 44 in all, each about 10'x 4'. These are imposing, monumental in their effect. There is rhythm, unity and repetition across the panels generated by the earth tones and the use of 'natural' materials. The viewer is 'encased' in a world of terracotta with highlights of black, grey and white.

There are notations - most often the words 'Palm Sunday' or its equivalent scribbled in various languages together with Place names, as well as references to prayers and descriptors of the Blessed Virgin Mary or perhaps the Christian 'mother church'.

What does all this mean? The Christian symbolism is unmistakable but what is the purpose? What is Kiefer's specific intent? What understanding should we walk away with?

Our response to the work begins before we even consciously recognize the text and the possible symbolism. The first reaction is to the monumental scale of the installation and its aesthetic qualities, then to the individual elements. The whole of the work is greater than the sum of its parts. The experience is not unlike that of walking into one of the great cathedrals, though perhaps a late Romanesque one rather than a Gothic one. There is a sense of enclosed space, suitable for sorrowful reflection or indeed supplication.

Serendipitously, this AGO site even mimics the flood of light 'from on high' through skylights in the ceiling. The light is reflected and captured across the glass surfaces of the vitrines. There is a play of light and shadow that shifts with the arch of the sun throughout the day.

The palm tree may be the symbol of military might, resurrection or of life but here it is uprooted, encased in an antiseptic urban structure. It is more like an ancient artifact in a museum; except that it is made of resin. The plastic branches look dried out and dead, painted the white of skeletal bones; the trunk is scarred

and burned; the roots seem to be encased in crusted dried out terracotta clay. There is no life sustaining fruit evident, no seeds for new life.

This piece is a rich tapestry of materials, text, religious symbolism and historical reference. There are any number of layers of interpretation and meaning. The work is open to your immediate response based on what you bring to your engagement with the work and to further interpretation based on research into Kiefer's body of work and the symbolism he employs.

The broken Jacob's Ladders in the vitrines were perhaps the most sorrowful, perhaps a profound embodiment for regret. Jacob's Ladder came from the first testament, the Jewish Bible, on which the Christian Bible is built. If Jacob's Ladder is destroyed there is no way to get to heaven. The reference may be to the consequences of the genocide perpetrated on the Jews in WWII. What does it mean for us who participated in that genocide either actively or passively? What is our path to heaven, to salvation?

The materials used in the compositions in the vitrines are reminiscent of the crematorium ovens, skeletal bones and fragments, and ashes generated by the genocide. The palm tree itself seems charred.

The vitrines might also be read as the pages of medieval manuscripts - herbal recipes for healing the body. However, the

full meaning and understanding of the text appears to have been lost leaving us with no clear way to heal the body or the soul.

Kiefer seems to be telling us to learn from our mistakes, take accountability for our actions, and never allow such atrocities to happen again.

Palm Sunday, marks the triumphal entrance of Christ into Jerusalem, begins the Christian 'Holy Week' leading into the Passion, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection which heralds the hope for Christians who make atonement for their sins so that they may enter into heaven, the Kingdom of God.

And yet it is not necessary to recognize all the religious symbolism in order to respond to the work. It is possible to grasp the message from the aesthetics, scale, and ruggedness of the materials. A Buddhist friend indicated that it is enough to walk away with the certain knowledge that significant questions have been seeded into our minds rather than with the definitive answer. ■

Dorothy Krousie

Dorothy Krousie's primary interest, in writing, lies in exploring how works of art engage us aesthetically, intellectually and emotionally, especially those that elicit response across cultures.

She has a Fine Art Diploma from the Toronto School of Art, Canada. She studied Art and Medieval History at Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, University of Toronto and University of Guelph. She also has an MBA from York University, Toronto.



On entering the room with the monumental Palmsonntag (Palm Sunday) the effect is one of being drawn into a force field with an atmosphere of dread. The plant material that surrounds the visitor in different stages of decay helps to trigger primal connections that can transport one to a distressing space in the subconscious.

This is the transformative power of Arselan Kiefer's art that invests new meaning in old metaphors and constructing new ones to face problematic histories. The German artist who fearlessly resurrected the brutality of Nazism, and took on taboo subjects head-on in a post World War II career has created a body of work that asks difficult questions and offers some form of atonement through remembering and experiencing.

While the title of the installation establishes direct reference to Palm Sunday held at the end of the month of Lent, when small pieces of palm leaves are distributed to church congregations to symbolize the resurrection of Jesus Christ, in no way is it limited to this. The work has the complexity to allow multiple readings in response to the personal memory of the visitor.

The uprooted date palm laid with ceremonial purpose diagonally across the middle of the installation appears almost

like a living thing killed by the violent act and dry plant material encased in the lead frames that surround it, appears both a prophecy of impending dangers and a reference to the weight of violence in religious history.

Kiefer here could be confronting the paradox of converging and diverging realities in the construction of religious otherness that has, like an ideological cleaver, ruptured interfaith trust to ignite post 9/11 conflicts that threaten new holocausts in the twenty-first century.

The title establishes a strong link to Christianity but since all the three major religions emanated from the desert of the Middle East, the date palm, its central motif, can also act as a reminder of shared genesis.

In the context of Islam, the date palm is revered for its references in Quranic text and in practice the fruit is associated with fasting in Ramazan. As a visual icon it entered the consciousness of the people because the prototype mosque built by the Prophet with tall palm timber is said to have inspired the minarets and the palm leaf stylized over centuries evolved into sophisticated patterns that are central to the lingua franca of the Islamic decorative arts.

The majestic 30 feet long palm lying dead with its elegant foliage disheveled and un-harvested shriveled fruit has strong

connotations of destruction, a recurrent theme in Kiefer's art that brings attention to wars where man's deadly ambitions have destroyed human and plant life with impunity. The two facing walls with tightly packed 44 large paintings seem to echo the same foreboding with dry plant material pressed against a background of red clay. The abundant presence of clay effectively evokes earth textures from floods to drought to point, to call attention to, how acres of arable soil poisoned in war fails to get attention as a crime against the planet.

Kiefer, who references mythology, theology, history, literature and philosophy in his art to embrace the width of human spiritual, emotional and intellectual capacity, has, with material like lead, concrete, straw, dry flowers and seeds constructed a visceral language of physical materiality. With Palmsonntag, created in 2006 and displayed at numerous venues, the palm, a powerful Christian emblem becomes the catalyst for a dialogue in a world once again threatened by religious disharmony and forgotten war ecology. ■

Nilofur Farrukh, Editor, NuktaArt

