

WHITE CUBE

Anselm Kiefer

*Superstrings, Runes, The Norns,
Gordian Knot*

15 November 2019 – 26 January 2020

White Cube Bermondsey

White Cube is pleased to present an exhibition of new work by Anselm Kiefer. The exhibition brings together many of the interests that have characterised Kiefer's work for decades, including mythology, astronomy and history. Located across the entire Bermondsey space, it features a large-scale installation and paintings that draw on the scientific concept known as string theory.

String theory is a mathematical model that attempts to articulate the known fundamental interactions of the universe and forms of matter. In this new body of work, Kiefer has 'tried to bring together theories of seemingly extraneous principles from different cultures and histories', so that complex scientific theory is connected with subject matter from ancient mythology. In so doing, Kiefer makes visual the idea that, 'Everything is connected: the missing rune letters, string theory, the Norns, the Gordian knot.'

Along the length of the gallery's corridor is a single installation comprised of thirty vitrines, which forms the backbone and lends its title to the exhibition *Superstrings, Runes, Norns, Gordian Knot* (2019). Each vitrine, over 4 metres high, is filled with densely worked, stained and crumbling panels and entwined masses of plastic tubing, in undulating, knot-like arrangements. Marked across their glass surfaces are urgently recorded hand-written phrases, equations relating to string theory and the names of the three chief Norns, the female spinners of fate from Norse mythology: Urd, Verdandi, Skuld. Offering a visual index for the themes informing the work of the exhibition, the rigid geometry of each vitrine appears barely able to contain the explosive mass within.

Kiefer's new series of paintings, featuring a barren landscape and rows of charred vegetation receding dramatically to a point in the pictures' middle distance, pose a sublime confrontation that both belittles and impresses with its epic magnitude. Their dark encrusted surfaces, obscured with tangles of organic matter – branches, twigs and straw, sometimes extending beyond the painting borders – suggest an uncontrollable natural force at work. A vision perhaps of a paradoxical circularity of both a beginning and an end, form and 'unform', decay and rebirth, thereby offering the potential for growth and expansion beyond earthbound limits.

Several paintings in the North Galleries titled *Der Gordische Knoten* (2019), suggest the undoing of the hopelessly tangled Gordian knot, which originates in the legend of Phrygian Gordium. Featuring unruly plant matter

set against light-filled backgrounds, scattered letters from runic alphabets are set amidst the swaying stems of dark wheat and tangled branches. Forming the written basis of various Germanic languages before Latin, for Kiefer these letters join string theory to mythology and Nordic language, serving as they do as 'an ancient means for mystics to interpret the secrets of the world'. In the very centre of each painting also sits an axe, enmeshed in the undergrowth itself, its blade copper with rust and branches grafted onto its handle. The tool or weapon represents Alexander the Great's simple solution of unravelling the Gordian knot with a single deft cut.

In South Gallery I, immense paintings each measuring over 4 metres square, depict the rhythmic arcs of an amphitheatre or parliament, sitting within a bleak landscape; a scene tangibly resonant of power structures. *Die Lebenden und die Toten* (2019) shows rows of seats in a semi-circle, locating the viewer within this enclosure as if a participant. A panopticon structure, the seat of political power here appears in the midst of a devastated blackened wasteland, that in another painting of the same name is itself threatened by a cascading mass of blackened straw.

The paintings exhibited in South Gallery II similarly represent landscapes obscured. In these works Kiefer appears to give visual shape to string theory, as with the eponymously titled *Edward Witten: Quantized Gravity* (2019). Named after the American theoretical physicist, the painting is dominated by a huge gridded web that is at once whole and modular. A form that appears to be in constant evolution, this union of imagery articulates 'the discrepancy or tension between our idea of the three-dimensional world, the perspective that runs to one point, and the resulting strings, which no longer have a centre.'

In $9 \times 9 \times 9$ a single monumental painting titled *Ramanujan Summation – 1/12* (2019) features a composition uniting ashen fields and brooding sky, lit up with stars and overlaid with hand-drawn astrological notations. Titled after a mathematical technique used to assign value to infinite series, Kiefer knits classical myth with contemporary physics, exposing how the spiritual and scientific, the celestial and terrestrial, and the past and the present are intractably conjoined. To quote Goethe, we still all want to find out, 'What holds the world together at its core.'

BIOGRAPHY

Anselm Kiefer was born in Donaueschingen, Germany in 1945 and has lived and worked in France since 1993. He has exhibited widely, including solo shows at Astrup Fearnley Museum, Oslo (2019); The State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg (2017); Albertina Museum, Vienna (2016); Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (2015); Royal Academy of Arts, London (2014); Tel Aviv Museum of Art (2011); Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (2011); Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark (2010); Grand Palais, Paris (2010); Guggenheim Bilbao, Spain (2010); San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2006); Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas (2005); The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1998); Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin (1991) and The Museum of Modern Art, New York (1987). In 2007 Kiefer became the first artist since Georges Braque 50 years earlier to be commissioned to install a permanent work at the Louvre, Paris. In 2009 he created an opera, *Am Anfang*, to mark the 20th anniversary of the Opéra National de Paris.

White Cube Bermondsey is open
Tuesday–Saturday, 10am – 6pm and Sunday, 12 – 6pm.
Admission is free.

For further information, please contact
enquiries@whitecube.com
or +44 (0)20 7930 5373.

144 – 152 Bermondsey Street
London SE1 3TQ
+44 (0)20 7930 5373
whitecube.com

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