
ANSELM KIEFER

DIE UNGEBORENEN

PARIS PANTIN

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It's the other aspect of the unborn, the desire of not wanting to be born. Cry of the prophets, the revolt of Job. It would have been better if you had never been born!

Everything happens as if it would have been preferable to not be born. The retrograde movement of creation. Theodicy, the accident of creation, God's regret to have fathered this ungrateful being, this outlaw, who does not abide to the contract. (Anselm Kiefer, 2012)

To inaugurate the gallery space at Pantin, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac is presenting a new series of works by Anselm Kiefer. The title *Die Ungeborenen* [The Unborn] encompasses a collection of monumental canvases and sculptures, which reference the artist's interest in the origin and creation of life, referencing well-known myths and iconography. Through the new works, Kiefer explores the hybrid sphere of *non-belonging*, in which life and unborn life are an intermediate world dominated by the question of why one *is* and where one belongs. Through this concept, the artist considers the theological concept of *limbo*, the region on the border of Hell, the abode of souls awaiting entrance into Heaven.

The narrative basis for these new works includes Jewish myths surrounding the figure of Lilith, New Testament references to creating children from stones, the alchemistic legend of the Golem, the idea of witches' scales, the myth of the birth of Venus and the tales of Ergot.

One of the exhibits is a monumental vitrine encasing lava stones interspersed with jars containing embryos (actually synthetic resin sculptures) in "formaldehyde". It references a passage from the Gospel according to St. Matthew, where John the Baptist comes to preach repentance to the Pharisees and the Sadducees, saying to these *leaders of Israel*: "And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father; for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham." Anselm Kiefer's work often deals with breathing life and spirit into dead matter. This is reminiscent of Adalbert Stifter, who describes stones as living creatures.

A sculpture from the *Hexenwaagen* [witches' scales] series, represents a set of scales used at mediaeval markets to weigh women suspected of being witches. If they were too light, this was taken as a sign of a witch, who could fly to witches' sabbaths with the aid of a salve made from embryos.

In a series of works on canvas, where the dominant green colour was produced using the sediment from electrolysis, unborn life is symbolised through inset diamonds and images of flowers, touching on a basic theme of Kiefer's work: the correspondences between microcosm and macrocosm, taking an idea posited by the British philosopher Robert Fludd (1574-1637). In the monumental picture *Für Rabbi Loew* – its dramatic atmosphere reminiscent of Gustave Courbet –, hanging over the seascape are leaden scales; in one dish is a lump of lead, in the other a tiny embryo in a jar, which holds the lead in the balance.

Mutterkorn [ergot] refers to a fungal disease affecting cereal crops, causing the ears to turn black. In the past, ergotism led to famine in Europe, and contaminated food is poisonous. In German, however, ergot is called "Mutterkorn", because a medicine distilled from it was used to help contractions during childbirth. It is, then, an ambivalent substance, showing how close together life and death can be.

A key set of works takes the *Golem* as its theme – which translates in Hebrew as a shapeless mass, or embryo. In Jewish legend, especially in Bohemia, the golem is a human figure formed of clay and brought to life through magic. It possesses special powers and can follow commands, but cannot speak. In rabbinical tradition, the epithet is also used for women who have not conceived a child. In mediaeval times, specific golems were attributed to Jewish scholars and alchemists. The best-known golem narrative features Judah Loew ben Bezalel (c. 1520-1609), chief rabbi of Prague at the court of Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II.

"*Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must sing.* This would be Mozart's motto for opera. If one can neither speak nor sing, one must convey in symbols. Such symbols presumably preceded thought processes. This is where theory begins – and in this sense, Anselm Kiefer is not only a painter and artist, but also a theorist and composer of symbols. The images here are both visible and invisible." (Alexander Kluge, 2012).

The exhibition is accompanied by a publication with a letter by Anselm Kiefer and essays by Alexander Kluge and Emmanuel Daydé.