

Copenhagen Contemporary, Trangravsvej 10-12, 1436 Copenhagen K

Anselm Kiefer: For Louis-Ferdinand Céline: Voyage au bout de la nuit



Title : Anselm Kiefer. For Louis-Ferdinand Céline: Voyage au bout de la nuit. Installation shot, Copenhagen Contemporary 2016.

Website : <http://cphco.org/en>

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Copenhagen Contemporary

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Review by Jessie Bond

The works gathered in the hangar-like Copenhagen Contemporary (CC) for the exhibition 'For Louis-Ferdinand Céline: Voyage au bout de la nuit' have never been seen outside of Anselm Kiefer's studio.

Four full-size aeroplanes occupy the corners of the vast gallery, each based on a 20th century warplane from Kiefer's private collection. They are impotent, made from malleable lead and brittle zinc and leaning on rusted props and boulders. Giant poppies burst from a cockpit and ripped-open wings are adorned with sunflowers or weighed down with Kiefer's signature lead books.

The planes are surrounded by four paintings, each over five metres in height, depicting desolate landscapes based on photographs Kiefer took in the Gobi desert, as well as Ingeborg Bachmann's *The Book of Franza* (1955) a tale of a woman failing to find solace in the desert. Sunflower seeds stream into the sky, resembling biblical swarms of insects or the mighty swirls of galaxies – a gesture towards the sublime.

CC occupies four large halls on Papirøen (Paper Island) – so called because it was previously used to store paper for the Danish Press. In good weather this waterside spot attracts busy hoards enjoying beer and street food in the sunshine. Kiefer's sombre contemplative work might seem incongruous here but his monumental sculptures and paintings fit with CC's aim to create immersive installations that engage and stimulate the senses of a youthful audience.

Beyond the phenomenological and sensual impact of Kiefer's works are layered and sometimes obfuscating references. The exhibition text makes sweeping claims for encompassing themes: life and death, heaven and earth, creativity and destruction. The reluctance of the artist to assign one definitive meaning is frustrating. This could also be seen, however, as generous, leaving audiences to filter alternate readings, references and symbols, and reflecting on the impossibility of drawing a definitive historical meaning from the complexity of past events.

In dedicating the exhibition to Céline, who sought exile in Denmark between 1945 and 1951, Kiefer confronts the inescapability of the past. Céline's 1932 debut novel, 'Voyage au bout de la Nuit' (or 'Journey to the End of the Night') is based on his traumatic experiences during the First World War. Although critically well received and hailed as having modernised French literature, Celine's reputation was tarnished by his support of Axis powers and the anti-Semitic pamphlets he wrote during the Second World War.

The extent to which an artist or writer's work can be judged separately from their political position is often explored in Kiefer's work, through references to figures like Céline, Richard Wagner and Martin Heidegger. Rather than damning these figures with oversimplified judgement, Kiefer's reference to them highlights the need to understand the reasons why people become seduced by strong political ideologies; a message that feels sharply pertinent in the current climate of ascendant rightwing, divisive politics. Perhaps here, in the wrecked and ravaged objects and bleak landscapes presented, there is the possibility of growth and renewal in the hope that something might be learnt from past mistakes.

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