

Old threads

EXHIBITION

What connects us and the world around us? An exhibition of new works — which ran from 15 November 2019 to 26 January 2020 — from the German artist Anselm Kiefer delved into this question, a central theory of the universe and our place in it. Whatever its limitations, at the heart of string theory

is such an ideal that instead of fundamental, independent forces, there is an underlying construct that unites the natural world. The result was one of the most exciting London gallery shows in recent years.

Kiefer takes over the entire gallery, knitting visions of mathematical concepts and Norse mythology. Thirty unique vitrines, monolithic glass display cases, run along the dark central corridor of the gallery. An abstract smog-filled cityscape sits next to something resembling a tempestuous green sea, each case bursting with twists of tubing and electrical wiring. In some, the mass of cables obscures the contents of the vitrines, which are engraved with the shadowed lines of equations of Einstein and Witten alongside the scrawled names of the three chief Norns (the spinners of fate in Norse mythology). Kiefer is seduced by the marriage of these seemingly disparate ideas, both trying to make sense of the world and permeate our existence.

Detritus sits at the bottom of some vitrines, whether eroded or carefully placed. The real world is messier and full of uncertainty and mystery. Nothing is permanent and the Norns knew this. In Norse mythology, they water Yggdrasil, the tree that bridges the nine worlds, of which our human world, Midgard, is just one. The tree of life is preserved for as long as possible, but all things will eventually decay and die.

Off from the spine of the exhibition these visions of barren and desolate wastelands are realized in epic proportions. A left

turn takes you into a featureless and bright white, concrete-floored room, necessary to showcase works of such heft. This is not art for the living room. The largest gallery is host to panoramas over 9 metres wide. In this vast space you're immediately hit with the sheer scale of the works on show, the amount of craft and hours of physical toil that have been invested. That Kiefer remains so prolific at 74 speaks to the urgency of his imagery.

“Willing an abstract mathematical concept of string theory into physical existence.”

One such piece, *Ramanujan Summation*, presents a bleak infinite perspective of rows of dead vegetation undulating into the distance like gravestones. This ashen landscape is topped with a smouldering fire of a sky and a network of dark lines, connected at the centre, as if scorched by lightning. What happened here? In another, *Die Lebenden und die Toten* (the living and the dead), we see the remains of an amphitheatre, reminiscent of Ken Adam's iconic war room in *Dr. Strangelove*, only after the bomb has hit. Kiefer was born at the tail end of the Second World War and the conflict and its ramifications clearly still preoccupy him.

At first glance these desolate landscapes appear monolithic realizations in oil. But this is an illusion. Look up close and you'll find the canvas embedded with twigs, branches and other organic matter. Each charred crop is formed from burnt wood, the white painted kindling in the sky bringing an accented depth to the work. *The Veneziano Amplitude*, named after the theoretical physicist Gabriele Veneziano, is straddled by a metal web obscuring the landscape, willing an abstract mathematical concept of string theory into physical existence.

This fusion of nature and violence is realized in a set of paintings entitled

Der Gordische Knoten, the mythical Gordian knot that was impossibly tangled but was cut through by Alexander the Great. In the titular piece, however, the axe is not the destroyer but has branches sprouting from it, spreading out across the wasteland in oils. Some of these paintings — the word does not do them justice — are much richer, with fields of golden crops borne out of painted branches. Here, axes blow hollow in the wind as if the lightest barley. Some twigs form runes, ancient symbols communicated from the earth. Looking at these vast images of oil and straw, axes and corn husks, you get a sense of desolation but also of the beautiful aftermath, a fusion of the natural and the synthetic. Yes, the axe cut the knot, but it is also part of the cycle of regeneration.

Naturally, the exhibition barely skims the surface of string theory. What Kiefer has achieved in his fascination with this mathematical concept and its marrying with belief systems of the old world is to examine our innate willingness and need to construct philosophies that help us find meaning, yet are still only theories. The exhibition, then, reflects science, not in method, but in the unearthing of further questions more than answers. What then, is all this hard work for? How do we untangle the Gordian knot? What is the ultimate effect of human-made atrocities and devastation of the planet on our collective psyches? These through-lines connect the known world and the unknown, or things that have not yet come to pass, the yearning to understand what is out of our comprehension.

Superstrings, Runes, The Norns, Gordian Knot was at White Cube Gallery in London, UK from November 2019 to January 2020. □

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