Formal Analysis

5 December 2013

Mrs. Ahrens

_Burning Rods_ (1984-1987) by Anselm Kiefer

Approx. 130.25 in. X 18 ft. 3 in.

Media: Oil, acrylic emulsion, and shellac on canvas with lead, copper wire, straw, iron, and ceramic

Viewed at Saint Louis Art Museum in Gallery 244 (1 December 2013)

In his masterpiece, _Burning Rods_, Anselm Kiefer creates a large, charred landscape by merging oil and acrylic paint with the unlikely materials of lead, copper, and straw. The overall painting is very large at over eighteen feet. In 1987, the painting was originally located at the Marian Goodman Gallery in New York City, but was acquired later in the year by the Saint Louis Art Museum, where it can still be found today. Blackened channels extend toward a distant horizon, while a rusted ice skate and a porcelain shard, both placed in the foreground, emphasize the rugged surface texture of the painting. The painting is separated into three panels. In the middle panel, there are fourteen numbered pillars. Towards the bottom of the piece of art, the canvas is peeling away from the surface. Black and gold streaks run across the background of the image.

Anselm Kiefer uses unconventional materials to express the depth of emotion felt at the time of the Chernobyl reactor accident. The terrain appears ravaged by nuclear disaster. Its monumental size and imposing physical bulk are a clear representation of Kiefer’s determination to address the profound issues of death, destruction, and renewal that are found throughout
humanity. The surface peeling creates an extreme sense of intensity and emotion the seemingly bursts from the canvas. This conveys the unimaginable sadness humanity was experiencing when the painting was created. The upper portion of the canvas is smoother and more consistent, marked with bright colors and represents the glue that will hold mankind together in hopes of bringing them out from the darkness. The background is meant to communicate the idea of a brighter future for mankind. The texture is rough, and the use of the copper wire, ice skate, and porcelain shard display the wreckage left from the accident. The colors are dark overall with a few patches of light give the painting a somber mood. The landscape appears vast and empty, like it was meant to symbolize the prior devastation that occurred there.

In this piece of art, Kiefer depicts the aftermath of the destruction of the nuclear power plant at Chernobyl in Ukraine. The explosion and fire released large amounts of radioactive particles into the atmosphere, which covered most of the western USSR and Europe. The disaster is considered to be the worse nuclear power plant accident in history. Over 500,000 workers were affected along with thirty-one deaths and millions of long-term effects such as cancer and deformities. The disaster occurred on 26 April 1986 on the Chernobyl plant, located near the city of Pripyat. Though there was great tension between West Germany, where Kiefer was living at the time of the demolition, and Ukraine, Kiefer saw the greater good of human kind and unimaginable feats achievable through coalition. The large scale of the artwork enhances the annihilation and wreckage at Chernobyl and the large scale of people affected by the turmoil.

In my opinion, the criteria for “the perfect piece of art” are difficult to define. Personally I believe that an ideal piece of artwork should convey intense emotion and make a decisive statement. It must represent the artist’s own unadulterated opinion. *Burning Rods* by Anselm Kiefer is, in my opinion, perfect. It is evident in the piece of art that Kiefer expresses the trauma
experienced during and after the explosion through his somber color pallet and literal destruction of the canvas. Kiefer makes a strong artistic statement against violence, specifically the devastation experienced in the nuclear explosion at Chernobyl. His opinion is clear through the emotion expressed in the chaotic composition of the artwork. In my opinion, this work is true perfection.