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Sammi Bray

German artist Anselm Kiefer creates large-scale art often portraying the Holocaust across several mediums. One collection of paintings is inspired by the poetry of Paul Celan. Specifically, in the paintings, *Golden Hair, Margarete*, 1981, and *Dein Aschenes Haar Sulamith*, 1981 Kiefer represents the two female characters from *Death Fugue*, the 1948 poem by Celan. Both Celan and Kiefer use these two characters- one a German woman and one Jewish, to represent the treatment and role of women during the Holocaust. In particular, Kiefer captures that while German women were exempt from much of the Nazis' brutality, they did not leave the Holocaust unaffected. Using two female characters highlights a unique topic that often is unrepresented in Holocaust discourse.

First, it is important to recognize the controversy around such art. Many authors have dedicated writing to what is considered to be the right way to proceed with art and culture in the world post-Holocaust. Kiefer, who was born at the end of the second world war, has been criticized for depicting the Holocaust in his art, (*The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2008). A biography dedicated to Kiefer on the Metropolitan Museum website writes, "To them Kiefer's deliberate strategy of opening a Pandora's box of fascist and nationalistic imagery amounted to a kind of original sin of the post-Auschwitz era." It is like constantly scratching a wound, preventing it from scabbing over. Kiefer, while not necessarily evident in all of his work, utilizes Nazi uniforms and symbols in his artwork. A debate also surrounds the motivation to do so, spanning several texts, with some authors suggesting it is wrong and others claiming it to be a source of irony and parody. The paintings I will be focusing on in this essay are somewhat absent of the obvious signs of Nazi ideology, but through a critical lens, they are layered throughout the artwork.

I suggest that art, especially that of Kiefer's, is essential to memorializing the Holocaust. It serves as a refusal to forget the horrors of the past and these paintings specifically protest against forgetting the treatment of women by German soldiers. One cannot fully understand the torture that Jews and women were exposed to without exposing themselves to some of the horrors. However, as I will discuss throughout this paper, the way that women are portrayed is an essential feature to recognize in art and one that should be carefully considered.

The collection of artworks based on these two characters from Celan's poem features far more canvases dedicated to Margarete than Shulamite. As a victim of the Nazi oppression himself, why would Kiefer dedicate so much of his art and time to someone who was part of the oppressive class? At first glance, the dedication of art to perpetrators and compliant citizens seems similar to the statues of Confederate war leaders in America. Growing up among ruins, would Kiefer not want to give any more power to such people? However, Kiefer, an artist focused on ensuring the Holocaust is never forgotten likely has several reasons for this particular decision. One reason could be the symbolic representation. Margarete would have been a much more present figure in Germany. Focusing simply on one basic feature of straw blonde hair, Margarete and those who looked like her would be the focus of the public's eye, not individuals like Shulamite who were less than. Most art created during the time of the Nazi occupation would have featured characters like Margarete. Also, much of what we have from the Holocaust is not accounts or images of victims, but from the oppressors. The art collection realistically

reflects the archives that we have access to today, dominated by the oppressor and not those whom we more often want to hear from. Even in death, the voices and lives of the victims continue to be oppressed.

Even with this idolization and public affection for women like Margarete, they were reduced to their bodies and how they could please the public, specifically men. Margarete is not just the focus of the media because she is German, but because she is more beautiful and pleasurable to look at. Simultaneously, women were expected to have no real role in public life, while also maintaining a perfect appearance. German women did not have the same burdens as Jewish women, but they certainly had an expectation that they had to reach. Failure to do so led to punishment. The *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* website shares, “Also sent to the camps were women considered “asocials” for behavior deemed inappropriate to a woman’s role.” Much of this predates the Holocaust, connecting to the misunderstanding and lack of research in mental health. Also, the social roles and norms for women differ greatly from today’s. Women who perhaps remained single by choice were viewed as sexually promiscuous, or those disobedient of their fathers or husbands would automatically be outcasted. The museum website continues, “Others persecuted by the Reich included thousands of women who were punished for attempting an abortion.” Abortion was viewed as an ultimate betrayal of the husband and the German population.



In the first painting, *Golden Hair, Margarete*, seen above, Kiefer focuses primarily on one feature of the woman Celan writes about- hair. Centered in the painting is yellow straw, a staple in Kiefer’s work, arranged in the shape of a woman’s hair. There are several other paintings that picture Margarete, all with her symbolized exclusively by the straw. Above, the text reads, “Your golden hair, Margarete.” She is painted with admiration and care, just as the poem does.

Less fortunate would be the second character in this collection of paintings, Shulamite, portrayed below.



Shulamite, who is also represented mostly by her hair, is portrayed in a shadow of darkness. Above her reads, “Your ashen hair Shulamite.” Metaphorically, the hair of Shulamite would be brunette. Other characteristics like dark eyes and distinct facial features would have

isolated Shulamite, and other Jews, from their former communities. Literally, Shulamite was likely covered in dust and dirt from poor living conditions and labor. The ash also represented- metaphorically and literally- the mass cremation of Jewish prisoners. Ash from gas chambers would fill the skies and leave everything covered, forcing prisoners to wear the remaining flakes of their fellow brothers and sisters.

The physical characteristics of Margarete- her straw blonde hair- help identify her as a German woman in the painting, as well as other men and women like her during the genocide. She likely was pale with blue eyes, the idolized version of what people should be in the minds of Nazis, and the perfect German muse. Due to her identity as a German woman, Margarete was protected from the treatment that other women would have faced during the time of the Holocaust, like forced labor and mass execution. Likely, Margarete played some role in the genocide. Wendy Lower writes in *German Women and the Holocaust*, “Roselius was a socialite who proudly admitted her Nazi convictions.” The character Margarete likely lived a similar life, connected with the Nazi soldiers and in awe of them, similar to how teenage girls flock to movie stars. Lower also writes, “She still gushed about Hitler’s ‘strong manly handshake.’” Nazis, and Hitler specifically, were seen as charismatic and well-intended leaders in Germany, not the enemies they are commonly viewed as today. These characteristics were used to their advantage. Women were also likely influenced by their husband or father’s involvement in the war, not allowed to have their own opinions publicly, and raised to think no differently regardless. The Nazi regime encouraged women to focus primarily on their role in the household, being supportive wives and mothers. This meant giving full support to the Nazis and assisting in the needs of their husbands, such as food, clothing, and basic medical needs.

The women are portrayed in opposite scenarios and environments. Margarete is painted as if standing directly under the sun, surrounded by a light that is as golden as her hair. Meanwhile, Shulamite seems to be indoors, cast into the shadows, and covered in ash. This choice of lighting is representative of the lives both of these women would have lived. One would be allowed to live, to feel the sun, while the other was forced into a dark, cramped building somewhere far from home. Likely, Margarete would have been empowered in Nazi Germany as a German woman. Margarete is also portrayed in what seems to be a field, representative of the belief that the Germans had roots and connection to the land, while the Jews had no roots. A river also seems to run through the painting of Margarete, perhaps the Rhine near Kiefer’s home, another symbol of German nationalism. Margarete is seen as having a connection to the homeland, Shulamite seems to almost have none.

“Blood and soil” was a slogan of the Nazi rule. Blood, of course, is the body of the German people and soil represents the land, which they hoped to unite. Peter H. Merkl writes, “The ideal of the family farm and of the German farmer was the epitome of not only... the Nazi party but throughout much of German literature.” Margarete appears to be on a farm of sorts, another representation of her being the ideal German woman. Jews were not included in this ideal world of farmers and farmland; they were seen as the antithesis of this. The author also writes that Nazis were in opposition to the expansion of urban environments, which seems to be the location of Shulamite. Again, Shulamite symbolizes the fears of the Nazis.

Margarete’s portrait also contains elements of nature within it. Her hair is crafted with straw, giving her an even closer connection to the land, to dirt, while Shulamite’s painting remains flat and one-dimensional. Perhaps the dimension added to Margarete symbolizes how she would be allowed to live freely, while Shulamite is confined. While it is not clear what has happened to Shulamite, her body lies flat in the painting. She becomes a forgotten part of history,

trapped in the page. Margarete moves off the painting and lives another day. Her fate is not determined by others, nor is how she is remembered. Kiefer paints her with dignity, Shulamite with none left.

This belief- that Jews had no roots in Germany- was demonstrated through the introduction of the Nuremberg Laws, which cemented the Nazi goal of shifting antisemitism from religious to racial. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum explains, “According to the Reich Citizenship Law and many ancillary decrees on its implementation, only people of “German or kindred blood” could be citizens of Germany.” Another reason why Shulamite is cast in darkness with her back to the painter and viewers. She is ashamed and isolated by being Jewish and torn between identities. Kiefer himself may have been pouring his own feelings into this painting, as he too was a victim of the Nazi occupation and a German citizen. Again, Kiefer connects to the idea of blood and soil- Shulamite is allowed no connection to any land, especially not Germany.

Next, Margarete’s painting is not completely absent of darkness. It creeps in through the edges of the canvas as if the sky is filled with darkness. This creeping in of darkness may be symbolic of how the Holocaust left nothing untouched. Even the seemingly perfect and undisrupted Margarete is exposed to the ash of the Holocaust, spreading closer to her. Still, Margarete seems separated from the dark, as if she is in the front of the painting and the darkness is far off behind her. Perhaps a symbol of the Nazis’ attempts to destroy and hide everything that they did, or of how bystanders turned their backs to the monstrosity and did nothing to prevent it from occurring.

Shulamite is also present in the painting of Margarete. If the two women are opposites of each other or reflective of the two types of women in Nazi Germany, is the darkness in Margarete’s portrait Shulamite? A black outline like smog or ash hovers around Margarete’s hair like a shadow or outline of another present figure. Shulamite may live in the mind of Margarete, perhaps as guilt for what she watches occurs in her nation. Maybe features of Shulamite exist inside her- after all, how different could they truly be on basic levels? Both were subjected to the belittling of men and the degrading of gender roles. Then, is Margarete symbolized in the portrayal of Shulamite? There seems to be no light, no earth, no freedom. The absence of Margarete in Shulamite may be a sign of just how much humanity has been stripped of Shulamite. No longer does she have freedom of anything, even her thoughts. The Holocaust has tainted every element of her life, stripping her of femininity and dignity. The setting of Margarete, a field, also symbolizes new growth and birth. Surrounding her are what appear to be rows of plants, a symbol of new life. Her hair itself looks like a collection of wheat, a plant that grows in the German countryside. It resembles not a collection of cut plants but ones still growing.

Another goal of Nazi soldiers was strengthening the state of Germany, so German women were encouraged to have children. Hitler, for example, instituted the practice of the Mother’s Cross, which was awarded to women based on how many children they had. “A mother could be awarded a bronze, silver, or gold cross depending on the number of children she had borne. Eight or more would entitle the woman to a gold cross, six or seven for silver, and four or five for bronze,” explains the Australian War Memorial. Jewish women would not be eligible for such an award. Instead, “Jewish women were also exposed to enforced sterilization and abortion,” (Helena Duffy, 2020). The empowerment of German mothers is symbolized in the light that Margarete is shown in among new growth, meanwhile, Shulamite is a danger and threat to the German state.

While encouraging women to be mothers may have been viewed as rewarding or empowering women, it was creating a dangerous standard for women in Germany. Instead of being treated as individual humans, they were reduced to their reproductive function. Charu Gupta writes, "Women appeared in the Nazi world view primarily as mothers." Even women, like Margarete, who may have supported the Nazis' mission likely would not have had any real role in the military except compliance and providing children. More children meant more soldiers, more bodies to send into war. The deeper into the war Germans went, the younger soldiers became. Also, Shulamite's visible body is curved like that of a mother's, not a young child's. Her hips are wide, a symbol usually paired with motherhood and maternity. Even as Kiefer allows her to be portrayed as a somewhat whole human, one immediately recognizes the figure in such a fashion.

As mentioned previously, abortion would of course be in direct violation of the Nazi goal to "build the Aryan race." Women's healthcare was significantly threatened by this, as women were likely barred from receiving the proper care they deserved. Some may have forced themselves to continue having children to please their husbands, while others were likely forced to do so. Also, the option of having an abortion to protect the mother would of course not be an option, leading to the deaths of pregnant mothers. Risky, illegal abortions also claimed lives as women were essentially butchered.

If Jewish children were seen as less than, why would German soldiers risk contributing to their conception? The Nazis soldiers placed the blame on their victims who they felt lured them in like a mermaid. They also felt it was no concern of theirs, the women they abused less than human in their eyes regardless of what relations they may have had. Or they felt it was another great opportunity for science. Most of modern science has spawned from the research of Holocaust scientists who took advantage of Jewish peoples' bodies for their own benefit. Why not use pregnant Jewish women and babies for testing and experiments? Rather than just aborting these babies, they found another way to abuse Jewish women. Pregnancy of course would be no easy thing in a concentration camp, another way to subject to torture. Also, Jewish women were more often subjected to unsafe abortions.

Kiefer chose to physically portray the women in different styles. Margarete is reduced to her hair, but Shulamite is seen to have a figure, one that is quite curvy and feminine. While Jewish women were seen as less than, they were also frequently assaulted. "Whether in ghettos, camps, hiding or resistance groups were often victims of sexual assault," writes Duffy. Forced into prostitution and reduced to slaves, Kiefer chose to depict Shulamite in this fashion. Her body, and the bodies of all Jewish women, were seen as tempting or sinful. "A particularly egregious aspect of Nazi ideology was the promotion of an image of the Jew as licentious, sexually promiscuous and defiling," writes Beverley Chalmers. Although the persecution for sexual reasons was more commonly found in homosexual men, the Nazi's also singled out women who were considered to be promiscuous. These women were likely then used as objects of obsession and disgust- like the imperialism of European travelers who were both fascinated by other cultures and felt superior. It is a complex cycle.

Consider again the figure of Shulamite and the posture in which she sits, like the famous German Lorelai Statue that sits on the Rhine River. Mermaids are believed to lure in men and bring them to their downfall. Shulamite and Jewish women, then, are like mermaids to the Nazi soldiers, luring them in and leading them to be "sinful." The sin here, of course, is lusting after a Jewish woman, someone seen as less than human by the Nazis. Sara R. Horowitz writes, "The

tropes of womanly good and evil are linked strongly with women's sexuality, even when framed in contexts not explicitly sexual."

Shulamite's back is also turned away from the viewers. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman write in *Women in the Holocaust* that due to the role of women in German society, women often had far less connections within communities and lacked non-Jewish connections. When the Holocaust began, they then had far less if any, friends or family that would risk protecting them throughout the genocide. In an attempt to protect herself, Shulamite turns her back. She also protects her identity, maintaining some of her privacy and human dignity. Returning to the material that represents Margarete, straw, an element that is recycled. Is the depiction of Margarete and Shulamite all that different? The straw is not a new material created for the painting, but something that once had a life of its own and is now being repurposed for art and pleasure. Margarete may not have been forced into the same cycle of abuse as other women, but she certainly would have been seen as a vassal for creating children and not much else. Awarded for having more and more children, like the straw, Margarete would have been recycled repeatedly to satisfy the desires of men. Also, straw becomes weak and bends, falling to the ground for people to step on. The fragility of the material represents the true fragility of Margarete- despite being German, she is still a woman.

Straw is also used for scarecrows, which are symbols of brainless, fake humans. Their purpose is to simply stand around in a field. Representing Margarete with straw suggests again that her purpose is reduced to her appearance and body, nothing else. The idea that women are stupid and incapable of thinking for themselves is also present. Women remain under the control of Nazi soldiers dictating their stance. Scarecrows cannot move themselves; they must be moved.

Finally, Kiefer attempts to place guilt within the viewers. After all, we are looking at these images with pleasure. The blond hair of Margarete and the curves of Shulamite's body do not differ from our own norms and ideals of beauty. Does the viewer become responsible and compliant with the crimes of the Nazis by looking at these two women as sources of pleasure? Neither woman has a face or last name or any other characteristic, just the shell of a body, perhaps the "best," most romanticized features of a woman.

Some art, like Felix Gonzalez-Torres's *Portrait of Art in L.A.*, includes the viewers in destruction. In Gonzalez-Torres' display, museumgoers take a piece of candy from a pile, representing how his lover lost more and more weight as he died from AIDS. To some, myself included viewers not only aid in the process of "art-creating" but recognize their compliance and the compliance of those who came before them in watching the AIDS pandemic continue without much support. In the work of Kiefer, viewers are placing themselves in a role similar to that of Nazis, sucking pleasure out of these tortured victims, and in the role of the compliant citizens who simply watched without action. This role is also a part of culture, especially American, as we continue to use the Holocaust as a source of entertainment. Typically, the heroes remain men while women of all kinds remain as background characters. Few characters or female victims are the focal points of Holocaust dialogue. Most famous is the writing of Anne Frank in her diary, but even this feels almost like a perverse way to find pleasure amongst the darkness and gain profits from the innocence of a child, even as it is stripped away. Is Kiefer also responsible in a fashion like the Nazis by creating this work? Yes, he himself was a victim, but so were women and other Jews and they did not necessarily have the power or will to stop it. Despite any intentions of Kiefer, he is contributing to a certain narrative that women are victims and powerless? After all, is Kiefer not just another man who is profiting off the

bodies of women? Beyond this, is he not just profiting off the Nazis' ideology and oppression? Of course, the trauma is his own, but only to some degree when he focuses primarily on what happened to women. This logic can be used for any creator of Holocaust "content," from the movie director to the museum curator.

The debate and question around this art lie within a much greater topic of conversation in art. The Guerilla Girls, a feminist art group, notes that the Metropolitan Museum has a collection of nude paintings made up primarily of women, but only five percent of the artists featured in their modern art section are women. Even in an attempt to do good, one must consider the fact that women are once again being used as a tool for pleasure in art. Kiefer is not necessarily wrong to create this art, but when women were treated so differently in the Holocaust, specifically sexually, their portrayal becomes part of the conversation automatically. The content of his work also raises the question of what is the appropriate environment for his pieces? Returning to the controversy described at the beginning of this essay, should Holocaust work be used exclusively in Holocaust museums? Should it be mixed in with the art in the MoMA? New York City is home to Jewish-focused and Black-focused art museums. The appropriate solution may be shipping Kiefer's art to the Jewish Museum or opening an additional museum with just Holocaust art. But, on second thought, the art depicting slavery and war violence is often scattered throughout the "typical" museum. Truthfully, I have failed to come to up with a concrete conclusion. The most appropriate reaction may be to ask living artists and Jews what they feel is best. Making copies of art for Holocaust museums and allowing art created to be art live within art museums may be the fairest option too. I do feel that any obvious marking of the paintings or isolation to one wing in a museum feels a little too reminiscent of the treatment of Jews in the Holocaust.

Ultimately, the role of art and of Kiefer's specifically is important to ensure that the Holocaust remains a discussed part of history. Without reminders ingrained throughout education and culture, the Holocaust will become a forgotten genocide and the torture of Jewish people will return rapidly. Additionally, as a tool for education, visual rhetoric like art is essential. The debate around this topic in general, I believe, is also a useful and important tool for education. One generic stance on a topic as complex as this is almost disrespectful and an easy way out. Reconsidering and reconsidering the portrayal of victims constantly maintains the presence and memories of the souls lost in such horror.

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