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Dr. van den Berg  
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### Contemporary Artist Role Models

Two contemporary artists who used their artwork to criticize major political movements of the twentieth century inspire me as an artist. They are William Christenberry and Anselm Kiefer. Christenberry is an American professor with whom I studied at the Corcoran School of Art. In 1968, he left Memphis, where he had been teaching art at Memphis State University, and moved to Washington, D. C., to join the faculty of the Corcoran Gallery School of Art. On the other hand, Kiefer is a German artist who lives and works in Paris and whom I met in Salzburg, Vienna. Born in 1945, he saw the end of World War II and lived the shame of both his nation, as well as his family being part of Nazism. (Lopez-Pedraza 9) Both artists used their subject matter to make a political statement. The colors they worked with have a deep meaning, and the symbols also have a strong significance. At the same time, Christenberry and Kiefer intermingled political issues, color, and symbols in their work to protest controversial events.

These two artists used art as a strong declaration of opposition as a political statement. For instance, Christenberry is a native of the American South. In 1964, as the Civil Rights Movement was gaining momentum, he produced a series of drawings and paintings of hooded men that looked like the Ku Klux Klan (Gruber 54). In 1975, Kiefer created a series of photographs in which he recalls his family's Nazi past, and plays a risky game portraying himself as Hitler saluting his military troops. He visited places with historic implications in

order to pose in empty spaces with his arm raised in the Hitler salute. The background contains landmarks of the occupation of various European countries that were invaded by Hitler.

Christenberry and Kiefer used color, and the absence of color, to express deep meaning, as well as to emphasize and to make a statement. For instance, Christenberry produced a series of drawings with fine lines, and at the same time he used strong black shadows, in which he showed hooded men engaged in a malignant conversation. He used simple white paper and pencil lines; the white represents purity, and in contrast pencil lines illustrates the white supremacy in the darkest time. Christenberry used the purity of the color white for his subjects to make a statement, and his hooded men look like a clean "Supreme Race." In contrast Kiefer, in his series of photographs called "Occupations," used only black and white to express Hitler's demented fantasy of dominating the whole of Europe. In other paintings, Christenberry used strong bright colors like yellow to highlight his hooded white men who are looking for their prey. For his part, Kiefer used dark colors in his paintings to show the sadness and shame of Hitler's legacy. Both artists use colors to send a strong visual message of disapproval of the evil of those times that will prevail for generations.

The symbolism they used is very significant. For instance, Christenberry produced drawings with his hooded subjects with a cross that represents the symbol of the KKK. The Klan figures seem to be emerging from a dark and shadowed place and into the light of the day, into the consciousness of enlightened audiences. These three figures are guarding the innocence of their crimes. (Gruber 55) Christenberry's idea of drawing the robed and hooded figures emerging from the shadows is shocking. He plays the sharp outline of the figures against the blackness of the background as haunted printed images. Also in his painting "Klavern," he used symbols with imperial seals of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. In contrast, Kiefer used black and white

photography, and placed himself in isolated important landmarks of the countries occupied by the Nazis. The simple and straight figure looks like a declaration of Hitler's evil. Another example is "Operation Sea Lion I," a painting in which Kiefer painted three empty chairs. He used this image to signify the German generals with the massed troops behind and in the foreground: the little boats in a bathtub. Above are three empty chairs that would appear to signify an absence of meaningless denotation (Lopez Pedraza 20). The three empty chairs as symbols are intended to portray the Nazi's omnipotent game, revealing not only their madness, but also their stupidity (Lopez-Pedraza 20). Kiefer has the ability to depict in a graphic way in his art pieces the idiocy of the Nazis power and the stupidity that is an innate part of human nature, as a characteristic human trait (Lopez-Pedraza 20). Kiefer explained, "I would like to stress that I am reflecting the specific stupidity that is related with power... Nazism not only is the example of evil, but it is the example of insanity" (Lopez-Pedraza 20).

To me, Christenberry is very talented and he uses many different media and subjects. I had the opportunity to have him as a professor and mentor at the Corcoran School of Art. He encouraged me to continue to grow as an artist. He also challenged me to shift out of the conventional into innovative places, and as a consequence, I developed my own perspective to go ahead into experimentation with mixed media. Kiefer has been equally successful in his art work. I met him in Salzburg at the opening of one of his exhibits and had the opportunity to talk to him about his work. He also encouraged me to continue to see art from a different perspective and to experiment with any material

possible. In other words, I had to think outside of the box. Because of his innovative use of materials, like straw, metal, and sand in his work, he provoked me to try them myself.

I cannot say which artist is better than the other. Christenberry and Kiefer have worked very hard and are very successful. They had international exhibitions and their work is very well known. I can only say that both talented artists have influenced my work because they encouraged me to use innovative materials and subjects, which I have experienced and enjoyed very much. I conclude that each used his own way to express unhappiness with a political movement of the twentieth century, and created a body of work that will educate humanity about the human mistakes of genocide using different subject matter, color, and symbols. Although they are both critical, at the same time they are different and successful as twentieth-century contemporary artists.

Dear Dr. Christina Devlin,

If my essay gets accepted I will send you color images.

Thanks.

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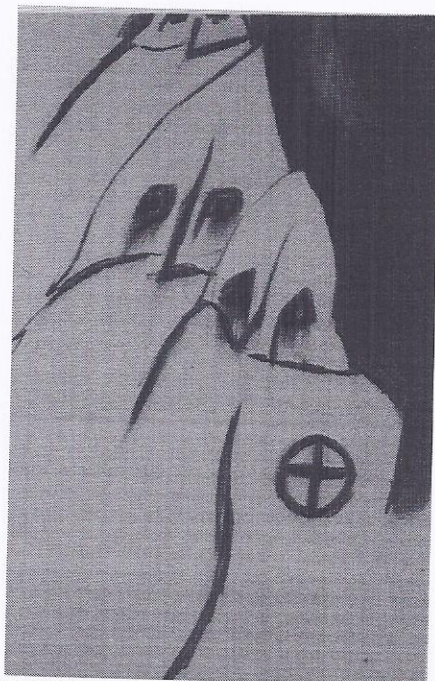
Works Cited

Gruber, Richard *William Christenberry the Early Years, 1954-1968*. Morris Museum of Art Augusta, Georgia.

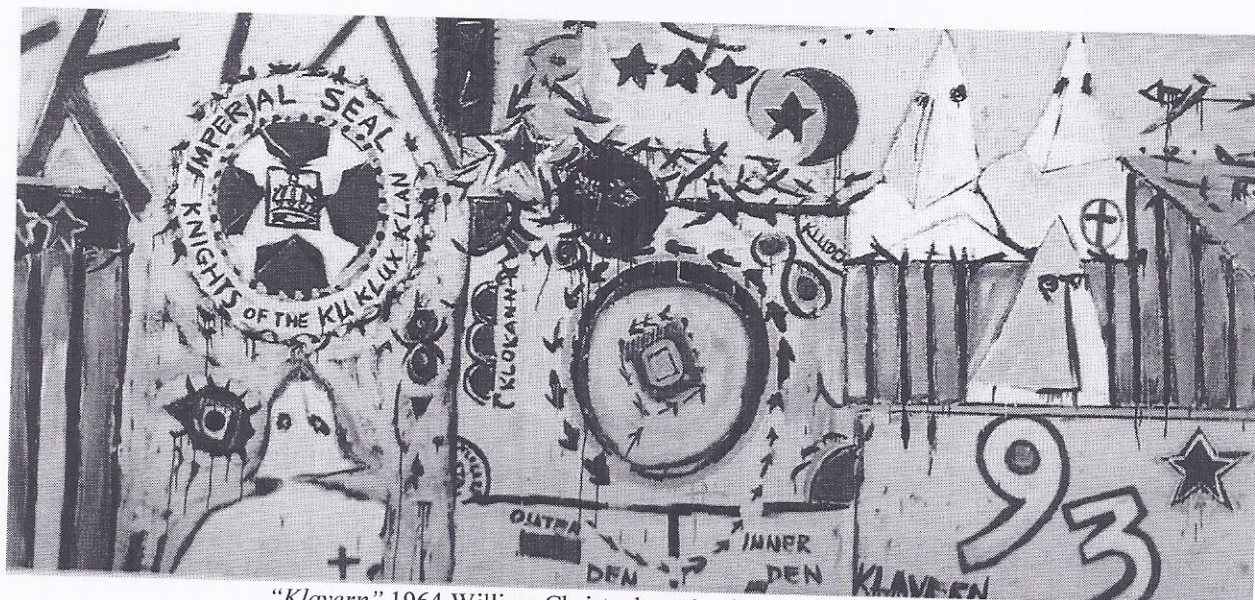
1996. Print

Lopez-Pedraza, Rafael *Anselm Kiefer the Psychology of "After the Catastrophe"* 1996 In the United States by

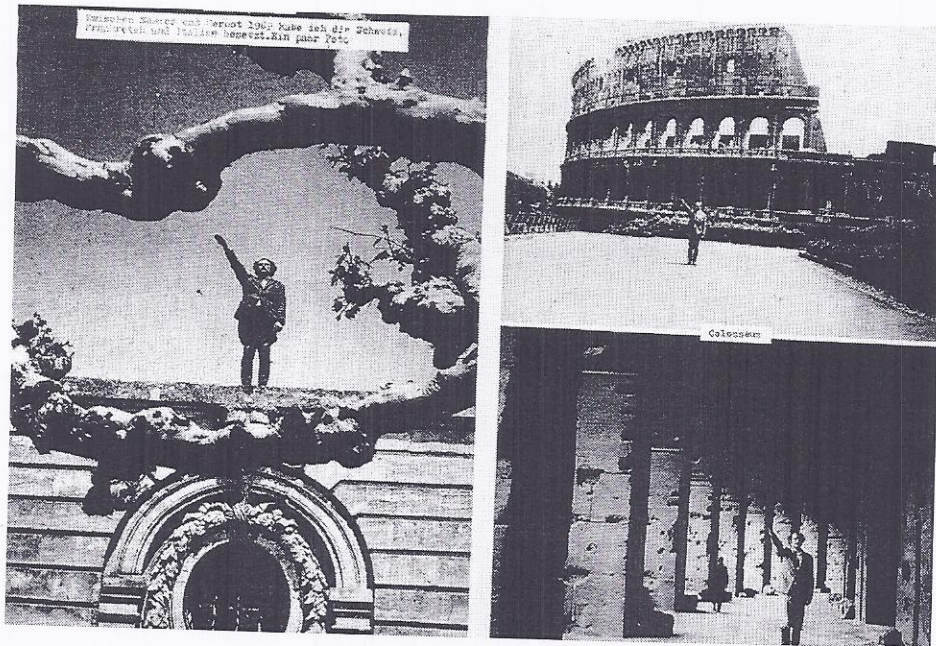
George Braziller, Inc. 1996. Print



KKK" 1963 William Christenberry pencil on paper 9 x 53 in.



"Klavern" 1964 William Christenberry's oil on canvas 68 x 152 in.



*"Occupations" 1975 Anselm Kiefer Photographs*



*"Operation Sea Lion I" 1973 Anselm Kiefer*