

# AN ALTERNATIVE BACKING METHOD FOR KEIFER'S *MELANCHOLIA*

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In 2005, the collection committee of the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea, decided to purchase a unique work by Anselm Kiefer entitled *Melancholia* (2004, mixed media on canvas, 190×280 cm). The work of Kiefer from this period usually has heavy impasto with thick paint layers and unusual materials such as straw or flower seeds. A glass polyhedron, part of this work, also appears in other works with the title 'Melancholia'. Cracks already existed all over the surface of the acquired painting, and were accepted as part of the artist's intention, not as a problem. However, after year-long display all over the country, which did not involve any preventive conservation measures, the work had lost many paint fragments, especially around the edges. Moreover, the title 'Melancholia', written in charcoal at the upper left corner, had become faint due to mishandling. When the painting was inspected by a conservator for the first time in 2007, the painting had been placed flat in storage for several months due to concerns over paint losses. The weight of the heavy paint layer and the glass polyhedron had been causing the canvas to sag slightly.

The deep cracking observed all over the surface was not a serious problem by itself, since it has been recognized as a typical texture of Kiefer's recent works. He accepts this as a part of the aging process, and does not have any objection to adhesive being used to attach loose paint [1]. The artist himself has used adhesive for reattachment of some components [2]. An adhesive used previously could easily be seen in many areas.

## DECISION MAKING

Substituting the stretcher with a rigid honeycomb panel could be considered, although complete adhesion between canvas and honeycomb panel using adhesive would be hard to achieve without treating the painting face down, while the delicate paint surface could be destroyed by any facing method. Also, a bundle of iron wire fixes the polyhedron to the reverse of canvas, which precluded treatment face-down. In addition, the considerable size of the work reduced the benefit of using a lightweight honeycomb panel as a new support.

Loose lining or stretcher bar lining were other options which seemed inadequate in this case. There was also an idea of impregnating the whole structure with synthetic resins from the reverse side. This seemed to be inconsistent with conservation ethics. Opinions from other modern art conservators were sought [2]. The advice was to use local consolidation for the flaking paint layer, rather than a structural intervention to the whole painting.

After long consideration, the following criteria were selected for the treatment:

- keep the original stretcher as a support
- consolidate the weak paint with a stable, synthetic adhesive
- provide extra supports which can reinforce the canvas physically without the use of adhesive
- the materials used for the treatment should be lightweight, rigid, stable and reversible.

## TREATMENT

Polyvinyl alcohol adhesive was injected to adhere the paint layer. While consolidation proceeded all over the surface, units were prepared for insertion into the stretcher. Polyester sailcloth was stretched over six strainers, matched in size to the spaces between members of the original stretcher. Polyester wadding with a thickness of 1 cm was cut to the size and inserted into the spaces on the verso of canvas. The prepared strainers with polyester fabric were fixed to the wadding with hinges.

## CONCLUSION

Strainers and stretchers can be an inadequate support for large modern works of art, especially when the paint layer is quite thick and heavy. Yet lining or replacing the supports with other rigid material need careful consideration. Conservators today are expected to adopt minimal treatments and to use the minimum possible amount of adhesive.

In the case of Kiefer's work, the alternative backing will give extra support, will permit the canvas to withstand the weight of the heavy paint layers and may possibly reduce movement of the different components. Still, the cracks continue to exist, and the low tension of the canvas will not be remedied until another solution is found in the future. Further consolidation of the paint layer may be needed soon. The present treatment has ensured survival of the artwork, without making it resemble a stuffed specimen in a natural history museum.

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## REFERENCES

- 1 Smithen, P., Tate, London, personal communication, April 2007.
- 2 Duffy, M., Museum of Modern Art, New York, personal communication, April 2007.