SUN GODS, PYRAMIDS AND ANSELM KIEFER’S GOLDEN BULL
THE MODERN BLOG, JUNE 2010

Perhaps, while slaving through your liberal arts education (or perusing public television), you wandered into the world of mythology. There, invariably, you found Mithras: the Persian sun-god who — somewhere along his career — killed a fearsome bull and found a following in Rome.

Or, while traveling the world after graduation, you watched a toreador taunt a bull (a tradition linked to Mithras’s legend) or even scaled an Aztec pyramid. We’ve wandered from Rome to Spain, and resurfaced in Mexico, but what does any of this have to do with art?

When entering The Modern’s lobby, a large canvas on the right wall catches your eye. At its center rises the ruins of an Aztec pyramid — an ancient symbol of transcendence — down which a rivulet of gold paint shimmers. The painting is by German artist Anselm Kiefer, titled *Pope Alexander VI: The Golden Bull* (1996).

When I first saw this work, I was impressed by its scale as well as the near-geological layers of paint encrusted on the canvas. But I was also perplexed. Kiefer’s pyramid is the infamous Pyramid of the Moon, the site of Aztec human sacrifice. But why did he title his work after a pope who lived more than 500 years ago? And where is the bull?

For many of us, bewilderment can be a common feeling when viewing a piece of modern art for the first time, especially without previous knowledge of a work. In *Golden Bull*, Kiefer’s meaning lies coded in symbol and allusion. Deciphering it requires a keen detective nose ... and a short dive into the past.

In 1356, Charles IV issued a papal Golden Bull. Named for its gold seal, the bull was a decree by the Pope to the Catholic world intended to repress greedy politicians. But over a century later, Pope Alexander VI became the poster-child of the greed Charles hoped to deter.

Alexander was not so much a man of the cloth as a man after his own pocketbook. A friend of the Spanish monarchy, he condoned the massacre and enslavement of the Aztecs — whose culture he deemed barbaric — to serve his quest for gold. He once boasted he could fill the Sistine Chapel with sacks of gold.

Let’s leave the shores of fact momentarily for the realm of conjecture. Remember the sun-god Mithras? In Mesoamerican cultures, gold was associated with the sun’s brilliance. So could Mithras also be the god of gold? I like to imagine Alexander as Mithras’s stand-in, making the Aztec Empire his bull. Perhaps the golden, blood-like stream down the pyramid represents not only the cost of Aztec sacrifice, but also of Western greed. If so, Kiefer could be making a paradoxical statement about the Old and New World’s search for salvation and their desire for immortality.

Kiefer meant to invoke the Mithras legend — but there can certainly be other interpretations of the work. That’s the beauty of modern art. As his own painting mentor — the artist Peter Dreher — once said, art is a field of investigation “without
boundaries.” Kiefer’s *Golden Bull*, a richly layered work, becomes a sounding board for your own interpretation.

THE MAJESTIC AND MUNDANE: HIRAKI SAWA’S DWELLING AND BRIAN FRIDGE’S VAULT SEQUENCE NO. 10

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Summer at The Modern is strangely quiet. School is out and airlines are busy, transporting passengers to destinations previously trapped inside the glossy pages of *Travel and Leisure*. In the airport, the humdrum and exotic are divorced by a series of ramps, conveyor belts, metal and glass. Above the clouds, passengers sip ginger ale, forgetting that in the end they’ll find themselves in a vacuous terminal, waiting for the return-flight home. And here is where the tension lies: we seek the unfamiliar, knowing it will only anchor in us a relentless longing for home. Somewhere during our travels, we will discover the so-called “ordinary” is, in fact, filled with possibility.

I found myself contemplating this while wandering the permanent collection upstairs, where Hiraki Sawa’s *Dwelling* (2003) reveals the extraordinary potential of the ordinary. In the eight-minute video, toy miniature planes take flight in Sawa’s sparse London apartment. With its occupant seemingly absent, graceful Boeings and jet planes traverse the empty rooms, suggesting the presence of an unseen world.

Sawa’s scenario is whimsical, but it also provokes a sense of unease. Lacking any real destination, the planes seem restless, trapped in the apartment like yesterday’s stale emotions. Where is the occupant?
Perhaps on vacation, or daydreaming in a conference room at work; in all cases unaware his unmade bed is now a landing strip for flight.

To those who — like myself — aren’t traveling, the warmth of summer skies also invites reflection. Shifting constellations and meteor showers welcome star-gazers to engage the cosmos, composed of the same dust as ourselves. We are reminded, again, of the exchange between the ordinary and extraordinary — a dichotomy also suggested by Brian Fridge’s *Vault Sequence No. 10* (2000).

At first glance, the four-minute black-and-white film appears to be a time-lapsed video recording of a glittery galaxy or quasar. Nebulous white particles spiral and implode, evoking thoughts of primordial dust, “the void” or evolution. But what Fridge actually captures is ice and smoke moved by condensation inside his kitchen freezer.

Sitting before Fridge’s film, I recalled the poet William Carlos Williams’s 1923 poem, “Red Wheelbarrow,” in which he found infinite beauty in a garden tool. Like Williams, Fridge subjects a relatively banal object to serious examination, finding wonderment within an appliance generally reserved for frozen dinners. Though the natural process of freezer condensation is incredibly “ordinary”, the swirls and movements created are not something we, as viewers, are generally privy to ... since we don’t often spend much time inside our own freezers.

Both films are projected on opposite walls in the same gallery. Fridge’s work is silent, but it is impossible to watch without hearing the whir of takeoffs and landings in Sawa’s domestic airport. This curatorial effect creates a dialogue between the two films, as though both echo the same thought. *Dwelling* conjures themes of migration and displacement, but also reveals the majestic within the mundane. By dabbling in science, *Vault Sequence* unearths the extraordinary
buried in the banal. Both quietly encourage me to reevaluate my own surroundings from a fresh perspective.