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Romania brings modern mosaics to the Venice Biennale

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By Alison Mutler



Mosaics might not seem the most modern of art forms, with their roots in ancient Greek and Roman art and centuries-long development in Orthodox Christian churches. Their resurgence in the Soviet bloc from the 1930s onwards was surprising, then, morphed into state-sanctioned socialist realism and adding colour to otherwise drab cities behind the Iron Curtain. Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu favoured mosaics that idolised heroic labourers; 35 years after his fall, Șerban Savu is turning them into statements of the 21st century.

In a gallery of the Romanian cultural institute in Venice, the artist will direct a team of mosaic artists from the arts schools in Iași in his home country and in Chișinău, Moldova, in creating a mosaic of a picnic scene over the seven months that the Venice Biennale runs. “We will transform the gallery into a mosaic studio in the spirit of small Venetian workshops,” says Savu, 46, when we meet in Bucharest, the Romanian capital. After the Biennale ends, the artwork will be installed in Moldova, whose history is closely tied to Romania’s.



'True Nature' (2021) by Șerban Savu © Courtesy Galeria Plan B

A slight, thoughtful man, Savu has created a project entitled *What Work Is*, which also encompasses his paintings in the Romanian pavilion, and which will depict a complex iconography of work and leisure in scenes infused with inactivity and mysticism of a distinctly eastern European feel. Like the pavilion's curator, Ciprian Mureșan, he lives in the Transylvanian city of Cluj and is part of the "Cluj school", a handful of successful Romanian artists who came of age after communism including [Adrian Ghenie](#) and Victor Man.

In a noisy, warm café down the road from Ceaușescu’s Stalinist House of the People palace, Savu and Mureșan’s easy camaraderie is clear. The artists have worked together for more than 20 years and share a studio in Cluj, and they finish each other’s sentences and develop the other’s ideas. “Our wives joke about it,” says Mureșan.

The pair met at school and began to collaborate in the early 2000s after they had graduated from the Cluj University of Art and Design. When he started his career, Savu “used to paint emblematic Dacias”, the cherished national family car of the 1970s-1990s, and workers in factory uniforms. But he has progressed to “richer work away from his earlier more synthetic, more geometric, safer, dryer work”, Mureșan says. Initially formulaic, his scenes have become freer. “He manipulates them, he experiments more, he has more pleasure in painting.”



‘Saint Christopher’ (2022) by Șerban Savu © Courtesy Galeria Plan B

Savu paints figurative works in oil with mystical themes and, in Venice, his work will be displayed as a polyptych, with hinged and folding panels (used for paintings in Orthodox churches to spirit them away in case of attack). But he is not strictly a religious painter, rather he blends “social art with religious themes”, for example in his scenes of churches being renovated, a common sight in Romania since religious suppression ended with communism.

Mureșan points out that Savu isn’t judgmental and has no sense of irony as an artist: “He’s an observer who tries to understand.” Although Savu no longer sees the heroism and the pathos evoked by the Socialist realist images of yesteryear, the theme of the worker is meaningful for him in a contemporary post-communist context: “I took all the socialist realist themes, but I made them up to date.”

The communist regime which collapsed in the bloody revolution of 1989 looms large for Savu and Mureşan, who became adults in the chaotic decade immediately afterwards. Communism promoted itself through mosaics glorifying workers and flattering portraits of Ceauşescu, the “Genius of the Carpathians”, but stifled artistic expression. In private circles, “abstract art was considered real art, free art, [and] abstract painting meant you were painting against the regime,” says Mureşan. “You couldn’t exhibit, but you could show it to your friends,” so it didn’t count as real dissent. The most defiant act, if it can be regarded as such, was when Ion Grigorescu, commissioned to paint a portrait of Ceauşescu, turned in an “expressive” rendition which couldn’t be exhibited for fear of offending the vain autocrat.



'Pursuing their goals' (2014) by Şerban Savu © Courtesy Galeria Plan B

There were advantages to keeping quiet. The artists’ union guaranteed a comfortable lifestyle to artists who painted Ceauşescu nicely — a studio, commissions and holidays on the Black Sea and in the mountains. But neither Savu nor Mureşan wants to criticise their predecessors. “Let’s say if Michelangelo, say, hadn’t made a small compromise [in his career], maybe he wouldn’t have painted the Sistine Chapel,” Mureşan theorises.

Recalibrating and adapting to the post-communist reality without the safety net of the state is a problem for artists across the eastern bloc to a varying extent. The Romanian artists’ union still exists, nominally, but long gone are the days of rent-free studios and party-appropriate commissions. “The fight now is to be on the market,” Mureşan says. “The market is free, but it is a cruel place and art somehow is modified. It is free, but it isn’t.”

These are the questions Savu and other artists grapple with — often with an eye on the past. He did an experimental painting with Ghenie, Romania’s most successful contemporary painter, who pretended he was painting Ceaușescu back in the communist era. “We went back in time and wondered what would have happened if Ceaușescu hadn’t been overthrown.”

Savu paints to make sense of the transformations in Romania over the past 35 years. “I didn’t understand who we were or how we got here, but this confrontation [with the past] can give you the answer . . . It’s a way of understanding history.”

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