

FLAUNT

Adrian Ghenie | The body as we once knew it

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By Filip Jakab

ADRIAN GHENIE | THE BODY AS WE ONCE KNEW IT

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Adrian Ghenie. "The Odalisque" (2023). Oil On Canvas. 51.2x74.8". Images Courtesy Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp-Rome.

"Boredom is an incredible and almost invisible force," Adrian Ghenie tells me after we walk up the concrete gallery staircase onto a spacious roof terrace. There, we sit on two chairs and chat about the impetus behind his most recent series of oil paintings and charcoal drawings created at his studio in Rome in the serenity of a falling autumn dusk. It is Ghenie's seventh solo exhibition at Tim Van Laere Gallery in Antwerp, which opened in mid-October.

"You know, in this kind of current mechanism of attention and decision, boredom plays a significant role," Ghenie shares. "And because it's nearly everywhere, you're surrounded by this fear of boredom. You don't even see it anymore, you don't even consider that this boredom was actually the reason behind certain decisions you've made. And it seems that most of what we do [nowadays], is to avoid this feeling of apathy...Only death is more scary than boredom." Fear of boredom may result in making us fixated on hyperconnection, something very close to a compelling feeling of needing to be instantly updated.

The air around us smells of steel and cement, and Ghenie elaborates further on the shift that occurred in his studio practice over the last decade—a need to be alone, yet failing to do so. The reason behind this change: The presence of electronic devices—tools of the Digital Era, especially the pervasiveness of social media in multiple corners of everyday life and the near impossibility of avoiding the online sphere leaves us lingering somewhere in between. In this interactive limbo, boredom operates as a psychological tool of control. Yes, fear of monotony might make us want to remain hyperconnected. But for what price?

Like a feeling of FOMO, our attention span fluctuates, irresistibly crumbles, and depletes as a part of a larger collective matrix. This can be observed in "Studio Scene 8" and "The Night Bird," both from 2023. Here, one may fully perceive how Ghenie explores and translates complex layers of our instantaneous and shared present through his riveting use of expressive gestural strokes. The stages he builds on canvases contain radical and eclectic *mise-en scène* by placing a deconstructed single figure (self-portrait recognized by Ghenie's Nike sneakers) utterly absorbed by the screen of the laptop in its center. With the use of fresh painterly strokes like drips, scrapes, and splatters, and emerging flashes of bright color palette, Ghenie's paintings feature uncanny, anomalistic, and corporeal vessels with bulging bodily parts and their hybrid existence almost, if not, consumed by technology.

In the interiors of Ghenie's paintings, the inability to disconnect and the concept of boredom become pioneering forces *du jour* and form their own multiverse. However, for Ghenie boredom has two ambiguous sides. Born into Communist Romania in 1977 in the city of Baia Mare, Ghenie graduated from The University of Art and Design in Cluj-Napoca and currently lives and works in both Berlin and Rome. He recalls boredom being part of the Communist regime back in Romania. People were afraid at first back in the 40s when Stalinism was brought to the country, but their fear transformed during the 80s into a type of "monotonous obedience." As Ghenie tells me, "It seemed that this particular boredom changed into the agency that pushed them [natives of Romania] to actually make a move"—a shift which would bring Romania closer to their revolution nearly a decade later. "People might survive with bad food for some time or even with violence, but not as much with boredom. It's a feeling close to [some sort of] non-existence, death."

Another type of boredom, as Ghenie recalls, occurred to his 20-year-old brother back in the 80s in their hometown due to a lack of social life and venues to go to. "It was this thing that you didn't have a place to go in the evening. And as there was nothing in that city—no bar, nothing on TV, neither on the radio...what do I do? There was always this question: 'What should I do? Where should we go?'" Now, in comparison to the past lack of entertainment, Ghenie perceives that "A current technology and hyperconnection, to which we have almost unlimited access, functions as an accelerator of information overflow in a digital era. It puts us with this bombardment of info-stimulation and into a sea of entertainment. Almost like boredom, it's supposed to entertain us and yet by its excess, it fails to do so."



Adrian Ghenie. "Street Scene With Crucifix" (2023). Oil On Canvas. 82.6x57". Images Courtesy Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp-Rome.

While Ghenie sips Cola at the gallery terrace in front of me, he harks back further to personal memories of his hometown that was “as industrial as you can get,” with large factories and smoking chimneys contributing to a constant fog. “Romania, the Soviet Block’s last domino fell in 1989,” and it marked the end of Nicolae Ceaucescu’s regime. Only after the revolution, Ghenie was able to travel and move abroad. Influences from this particularly bleak post-Communist environment of the “old world order” and the legacy of historical figures predominantly from his native Romania unravel throughout the series of Ghenie’s early works.

Otherworldly and enigmatic, such spirit can be found in “The Trial” (2010), which shows Ceausescu and his wife before their execution, and in “Turning Blue” (2008), the painting of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin’s corpse placed in the mausoleum whose surface begins to mold. Marked by fusing figurative and abstract elements, “his paintings aim to unearth feelings of vulnerability, frustration, or desire, and often draw on human experience and ideas of the collective unconscious.”

Known for implementing a rich nexus of collage and assemblage techniques onto canvas and thus creating deconstructed reimaged portraits, Ghenie’s oeuvre expands Dadaist and surrealist styles, while at the same time also recontextualizes Baroque’s chiaroscuro and elevates signs of Abstract Expressionism. In 2015, Ghenie was selected to represent Romania at the 56th Venice Biennale and showed “The Darwin Room” (2013-14). His most recent solo exhibitions include the State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, and the Palazzo Cini, Venice (2019). In 2022, two site-specific paintings by the artist were permanently installed in the historic setting of Chiesa della Madonna della Mazza, Palermo in an independent project curated by Alessandra Borghese.

Unlike eerily-depicted, yet deeply fervid paintings of figures in Ghenie’s earlier works, set in dark-lit interiors revealing effects of political malaise, his recent works manifest a different type of tension that occurs from the more invisible social tumult. “The hallucinatory spatial arrangements resulting in a collage-like assemblage” expand Ghenie’s three observations of corporeal transformations occurring as a result of human interaction with screens of iPhones and laptops in the Digital Age. In comparison to formal historical poses of Saints, Ghenie’s new works further unravel his fascination with this particular shift in body language—leaning and bending down, bowing heads to electronic devices—“Passive Anxiety” or “Hunchback pose,” a term coined by Ghenie which apprehends the impact of current digital zeitgeist.

Warped and almost sci-fi-like portraits, “The Reader” (2023), as well as “The Narcissist” (2023) masterfully distort and derive from the known human anatomy and physiology. Their gnarled face and body, seduced by the phone, interconnects with the machine. Facial features twist and melt apart. Helpless and magnetized with glued gaze on their screen, these figures multiply and mutilate into new kinds of hybrids.

Hyperconnection fails its purpose and the overflow of information leaves the body and mind defected, estranged from its previous state. By unfolding these issues Ghenie challenges the viewer’s imagination. Avoiding boredom is “fostered” by staying interconnected, checking feeds, reels, TikTok’s, and whatever comes next in the close future...In an homage to an iconic sound of “Nokia Connecting People” (1992) tagline committed to bringing people “together” through a very first for mobile technology.

Laid on a bed, in a seemingly torpid boredom “The Odalisque” (2023) appears in a condensed movement warping and deconstructing itself and facing the laptop screen. This motion is created by the temperament of Ghenie’s expressive touch on a canvas. Its headless torso explodes in the painting with variables of dangling parts. Tentacles puzzle through one another into a knot and only legs resemble what we know of a human silhouette.



Adrian Ghenie. "The Reader" (2023). Oil On Canvas. 33.5x47.2". Images Courtesy Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp-Rome.

Paintings entitled "Impossible Body 5" and "Impossible Body 6," both 2023, further exaggerate the "state of perpetual anxiety." Both caricatures clutch phones in their hands—with the information vector flowing through them and hijacking their human attention. A sense of impossible body movements captures "Self-portrait in Villa Borghese" (2023) and "Street Scene with Crucifix" (2023). Both in the confrontation with the street and in contrast to a classicist ideal of a male body, which is also portrayed in the painting, these semi-monstrous figures seem lost in their endless scroll, walking the streets of what looks like Rome. Aloof and pompous, these screen-fingering creatures could resemble tourists lost in the spectacle of a foreign city.

By imagining the psychological and physiological effects on the structure of the body, Ghenie's paintings project a unique vision in which the body as we know it, blurred by penetration with electronic devices, seems nearly alien to us. And yet, inseparable from technology. Ultimately, the enigmatic language developed by Ghenie in the large-scale paintings and charcoal drawings presented at the Tim Van Laere Gallery leaves us wondering about something far more undeniable within our current society and culture at large— however torpid the life may seem, interconnected or not, it keeps us showing that we are still only human. At least for now.

The sun slides down behind a concrete apartment block. It's cooler, and Ghenie and I smoke and talk further on the terrace. Neither Ghenie nor I have checked our phones since our conversation began.

Adrian Ghenie's forthcoming exhibition *The Brave New World* will open at Pace gallery in New York on November 10th.



Adrian Ghenie. "Self-Portrait In Villa Borghese" (2023). Oil On Canvas. 94.5x78.7". Images Courtesy Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp-Rome.

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