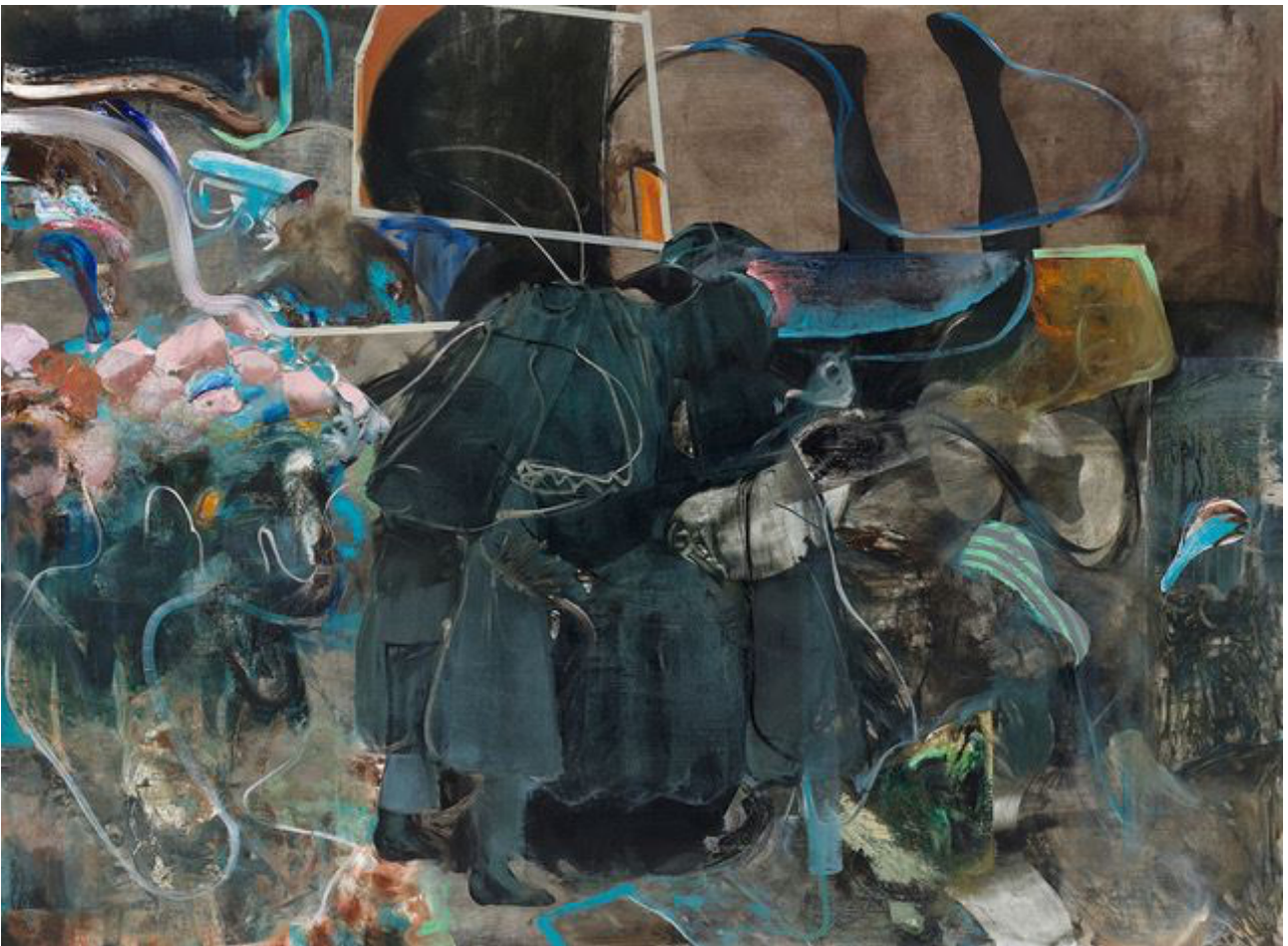


## Adrian Ghenie's Echoes of the Old World

by Bianca Spaggiari / MutualArt

JANUARY 12, 2021

The Romanian artist blends abstraction and realism, appropriates art historical heroes and some of history's villains, creating magnificent and deeply psychological works.



Adrian Ghenie, *The Impressionists*, oil on canvas, 220 x 300 cm, 2020, © Adrian Ghenie, Courtesy of Pace Gallery, London

A multidisciplinary artist of many virtues, Adrian Ghenie, born in Baia Mare, Romania, and now based in Berlin, represents a former artistic education, which is being validated through the exponential growth of his career. Growing in popularity, both on the primary and the secondary market, critics debate the reason behind his increasing stardom, not unprecedented but also not as anticipated. His ascent is supported by a well-established knowledge of art history and consistent research, producing a curious angle and concern with disruptive characters of the past.



Adrian Ghenie, Self-portrait 'en plein air', oil on canvas, 190 x 230 cm, 2020, © Adrian Ghenie,

*Hooligans* is the title of his current exhibition at Pace Gallery in New York. The exhibition showcases nine paintings alongside three additional drawings. Ghenie's aim is to explore the role of rebellion with its eventual break from the past. But a careful analysis of Ghenie's oeuvre shows that the leitmotif of *Hooligans* is a constant that cannot be denied. Still, in this context, the word takes on the meaning of peaceful rather than violent rebels from the past. His works are often outcomes of reality's distortions, rooted in what the artist has defined as the echoes of the old world. A world now seemingly lost and forgotten, the one preceding the rise of globalization and the technological revolution.

To conceive his artworks, Ghenie first draws inspiration from the past of art and history, then combines them with pivotal aspects of modernism on the painted surface. In recent years, he chiefly investigated revolutionary figures from the nineteenth and twentieth century, such as Vincent van Gogh and Charles Darwin, using them as a point of departure rather than of inspiration.



Adrian Ghenie, Nickelodeon, oil, acrylic and tape on canvas, 238 x 414 cm, 2008, © Adrian Ghenie, Courtesy of Christie's

Following a rather chronological order, Ghenie's progress seems to coincide with selling to high-caliber art collectors, such as François Pinault, who reportedly bought *Nickelodeon* in 2008 for €60,000. The painting was resold on auction at Christie's in 2016 for almost \$9 million, establishing a record that still stands. *Nickelodeon* is visually compelling. It attracts the viewer with a sequential narrative, a left to right scan of the canvas being reminiscent of a movie scene. The techniques and layering of colors deliver an eloquent rendering of perspective and a sense of a dystopic world. None of the characters' faces are discernible. They are all melting down, desperately scraping their faces away, or in halves, symbolic of fading identities. The canvas is made up of two



separate panels, seemingly juxtaposing reality and fantasy. The atmosphere is dark and moody, despite a few brighter brushstrokes here and there, and the thick layering of impasto evokes a sense of drama that imbues the entire canvas with the awareness of passing time. Abstraction and realism blend in.



Adrian Ghenie, *Dr. Mengele 2*, oil on canvas, 49 x 43 cm, 2011, © Adrian Ghenie, Courtesy of Sotheby's

In 2013, *Dr. Mengele 2* achieved a new record for Ghenie on the auction market, selling for £121,250 with an initial estimate of £30,000 to £40,000. The strong painterly effect of a, again, virtually defaced subject with fading eyesight is the same, conferring energy and vitality to the flat canvas. An intense observation pervades the mind of the portrayed emotional status of the evil of Doctor Josef Mengele, the infamous SS officer and physician during the Holocaust, also known as the “Angel of Death.” Since that sale, Ghenie’s performance on the secondary market has risen exponentially, with over 25 lots sold in the seven-figure bracket.



Adrian Ghenie, *The Fake Rothko*, oil on canvas, 200 x 200.6 cm, 2010, © Adrian Ghenie, Courtesy of Sotheby's

*The Fake Rothko*, 2010, a signature artwork that sold for almost \$2.5 million in 2014, was a forerunner of the present topic of *Hooligans*. Ghenie takes art historical heroes of the past and deconstructs their mythological aura, inserting the characters into everyday-life situations. The large canvas shows a seated figure bending forward as if unwell. The backdrop consists of a wall with recurring motives of Rothko’s signature oeuvres. The psychological aspect is strong, and the meaning of the canvas unfolds on multiple levels. According to Ghenie, the artwork is also a deliberate elaboration on the biblical story of Saint Anthony of Egypt, whom the devil sought to tempt in the desert in a challenge to will power. The sick figure is Ghenie himself, and the situation a metaphor for the difficulty of finding and authentic approach to the appropriation of art history.



Adrian Ghenie, *Persian Miniature*, oil on canvas, 300 x 290 cm, 2013, © Adrian Ghenie, Courtesy of Private Collection

Ghenie is best known for his dramatic portrayals and moody as well as gloomy atmospheres, but he can also depict softer and lighter tones. At the 2015 Venice Biennale, he represented the Romanian pavilion within the Giardini through the project Darwin's Room. The message and aim were to explore and investigate 20th-century history and the evolutionary theories, to show where modernity has led to in the present. The focus indeed was the artist's vision of the contemporary world. On this occasion, *Persian Miniature* was showcased. Exhibited by Pace Gallery too, the canvas portrays the recurrent dialogue between the intangible and emblematic. The elements here are more environmental as opposed to the interiors of much of his previous works, and there is an intense search for a balanced aesthetic. The nuances are softer and contrasts smoother. The setting is somewhat daydreamy. Still, the painting exudes a stark sense of solitude and loneliness. In paradox to its title, this was the largest canvas in the series.

Ghenie is a master at blending the modern and contemporary, the past and present through a mixture of abstraction and realism, while unearthing embedded feelings of frailty and a desire to go back to a left dimension. He does so by mastering large scale canvases and mesmerizing layers of impasto, with a connoisseur's eye for historical and art historical details. And for as much as Ghenie's figurative world seems unreal and out of reach, it resonates with the people living in the dystopic contemporary world, trapped as in limbo, never ceasing to hear the incessant echoes of the old world.