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THE ART OF COLLECTING

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BUCHAREST — Visitors to Romania's National Museum of Contemporary Art on a recent winter afternoon were greeted by a military guard, posted along a crumbling concrete wall.

Once waved in, they were still a long walk away from the museum's doors. Dodging large puddles in a muddy parking lot as they advanced in its shadow, they could see close-up the ostentatious design of a vast, cream-colored building.

Conceived as the "House of the Republic" and known today as the Palace of the Parliament or the House of the People, the building was the brainchild of the country's former dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu. Construction on the gargantuan palace started in 1984, absorbing an extravagant amount of resources and even claiming human lives.

A memento to Ceausescu's megalomania, the palace nevertheless survived the revolution that toppled its maker. It was completed and found a new purpose, hosting the two houses of Romania's Parliament.

A lesser-known occupant, in one of the rear wings, has been the museum, since 2004.

The unusual location has been both a hindrance and an asset. Central to the city, the museum remains isolated by the security requirements of the neighboring institutions. All floors except the ground floor have been stripped of the original floor-to-ceiling carved doors and stuccoed ceilings. The white-cube exhibition halls offer generous, well-lit spaces for shows.

“International artists are fascinated by these ‘Communist Rococo’ interiors,” said Calin Dan, director of the museum, which is known as MNAC.



An image from “Dialogue with Ceausescu” (1978) by Ion Grigorescu. The role of the dictator is played by the artist. Collection of the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest

The palace is less demonized today than it was in the past, Mr. Dan said. It surprises with its architecture and offers a new vantage point of the city from its roof terrace, which has been popular with locals on sweltering summer days.

But the museum’s management is ready to shake off the weight of the past. However closely the museum is associated with the building, it cannot take on the role of studying local history, Mr. Dan said: “The fact that we find ourselves in the House of the People can’t create an institutional agenda.”

Rather, Mr. Dan’s agenda lies in the five exhibitions that opened simultaneously late last year. They included a solo exhibition by the Lithuanian artist Deimantas Narkevicius, and a selection of works from the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade. The intention was to bring together artists from Eastern Europe and present Romanian art in a regional context.

The grand opening came after a lengthy interlude in which the museum stood mostly empty after the death of its long-time director, Mihai Oroveanu, in 2013. Mr. Dan took office a year later, and the opening attracted a crowd of over 4,000, raising hope that the usually low visitor numbers would climb.

The past, however, might prove difficult to do away with, as is shown in the central display on the first floor, which draws from the museum's collection. "Artistic Education in Bucharest and Romanian Art After 1950" explores six decades of creation and 147 artists from different generations who have been professors and students at the University of Arts in Bucharest, through Nov. 29. The most successful names of Romanian art, like the graphic artist Geta Bratescu, appear next to works of less-known artists, including early projects they made as students.

The curator, Adrian Guta, associate professor at the university and a former student himself, stressed the eclectic nature of the show and recommended it as a "free stroll among our art from the past six decades." The works, ranging from sculpture to video installations, are loosely organized around movements, remarkable professors and classes.



"The Lesson of Ressu," by Geta Bratescu, part of an exhibition on art education in Romania after 1950. The caption describes the artist's studies with the Romanian painter Camil Ressu in the 1940s. Geta Bratescu/Ivan Gallery, Bucharest/Photo by Bogdan Bordeianu

Even though not explicitly stated, the political and social upheavals of the past decades have a powerful presence in the show. One example is the way artists tried to elude censorship and the official dictate to produce idealized works on Ceausescu and his wife, Elena, and on the supposed progress socialism was making in the country.

Some artists, like members of the "80s Generation" who grew up as the regime toughened, chose to hide in plain sight. "They practiced alternative art as an attitude towards official art," Mr. Guta said, "but they also chose a language that counted as alternative at that time."

“It’s true that at lectures you couldn’t speak of contemporary art in the clearest terms,” said Mr. Guta who studied art history. “Still, those lectures were very dense culturally.”

In the show, daring underground performances are represented in “Dialogue with Ceausescu” by Ion Grigorescu, from 1978. In a projection reminiscent of archive newsreels, the artist asks the dictator a series of questions about the state of the country. Ceausescu, also played by Mr. Grigorescu, answers with his characteristic gestures. The dialogue was only played to the general public after 1989.

The revolution itself is present, with chants from the protests in December 1989 echoing through the main hall. In 2006, Irina Botea, working with students at the Art Institute of Chicago, filmed “Auditions for a Revolution.” In it, students re-enact a series of events filmed at the time. “Artists after 1989 emancipated themselves including in political commentary and criticizing consumerism,” said Mr. Guta.

Alexandra Croitoru, who is known for her feminist works, poses in large photographs with political and cultural figures of the past two decades. In one picture she stands next to Adrian Nastase, a former prime minister embroiled in corruption scandals. In another, she stands above members of the local hip-hop group Parazitii.

From the youngest generations, the most recently established photography and video department stands out. The photographer Nicu Ilfoveanu, who graduated among the department’s first students, focuses on marginal communities in Romanian cities. His work, like that of Alexandru Patatic, whose videos are like psychedelic walks in Bucharest, shows artists’ continuing preoccupation with the desolate, post-industrial urban landscape.

Igor Mocanu, an independent art critic, welcomed the exhibition as a rare glimpse into the museum’s collection and a snapshot of Romanian contemporary art including a great variety of art forms from painting to video.

The collection itself, he explained, contains a large body of works from mandatory donations by artists before 1989. Ranging from homage to dictators to experimental pieces, it has only been revealed to the public a handful of times in the last two decades.

But to Mr. Mocanu, the show illustrates a gallery of education and not education as a process.

**“I would have liked to see not only graduates but dropouts, unfinished works and fragments,” he said.**

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