

Serban Savu

by Lloyd Wise

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Serban Savu, *New Road*, 2011, oil on canvas, 11 7/8 x 15 3/4.

Șerban Savu belongs to a loose-knit group of young Romanian painters based in Cluj-Napoca, a Transylvanian college town some eighty miles from Hungary. His subject is blue-collar work and leisure in contemporary Romania, and he portrays this quotidian reality with cool, masterly restraint. This focus draws on a range of precedents, from Bruegel to Millet—whom he has directly and indirectly invoked. But I always think of Edward Hopper. Like Hopper's nighthawks and lonely women, Savu's brick-factory workers and roadside bathers are kept at a strange distance, their bodies frozen in a melancholic stasis. Speaking of his painting *Office at Night*, 1940, Hopper said, "I hope it will not tell any obvious anecdote, for none is intended." Savu, too, tends to keep narrative sense at bay.

This show comprised work in two scales. Six paintings hung in the front room, all of them quite large; in the rear gallery the paintings were smaller, roughly a foot by a foot and half. Compositionally, they were generally consistent, with human figures in groups or alone, set in the middle ground, situated within landscapes rendered in grays, sky blues, and sedate green. The ambiguity of the images can be beguile and frustrate. I want to make out what, precisely, is happening in *Intervention Team* (all works cited, 2011)—a nighttime depiction of three men with flashlights handling a hose that extends from a municipal truck—but I can't. Their hunched-over activity, dignified by the cool, hard light of flashlights, reads as nothing so much as the plodding, repetitive activity of work itself. Equally opaque, *End of Program* shows a man and woman walking across a sunlit parking lot. And a raft occupied by nine figures is titled simply *Bulgaria*.

Though Savu's focus is contemporary, history is never far away; the concrete apartment blocks, dams, bridges, and other infrastructure from the Communist era are a ubiquitous presence in his paintings. In *The Card Players*—its title, perhaps, a reference to Cézanne—old men surround a table in front of a gray high-rise; a similar building looms behind fishermen in *The Ice Hole*. But

there is no *ostologie* here. There overdetermined structures—the soi-distant ruins of modernism—are an inevitable part of the landscape he depicts, the everyday backdrop against which people live, work, and play. And they are portrayed with the same subdued, affectless realism as are much newer elements of Romanian society: the glass-tower window washers and fast-food kitchen workers in earlier works; and, in this show, the public displays of religion prohibited during Ceausecu's regime (in the bleak *Epiphany* and *Epiphany II*).

When Romania joined the European Union in 2007, President Traian Băsescu touted the country's accession as the "road of our future." So far, though, progress has been slow. Take the Transylvania highway. Planned to connect Hungary to Bucharest (and pass through Cluj), the project was to initiate the transformation of Romania's network of deteriorating Communist-era roadways into something contemporary, sleek, wholly European. Yet since work began in 2004, only thirty-four of the planned 257 miles have been constructed. EU membership means access to new funds, but because of Romania's labyrinthine bureaucracy and pervasive, midlevel corruption, there's little shovel-ready work to absorb the money. This stagnation may inform *New Road*, which shows a small construction crew laying pipe near an isolated, bulldozed embankment, the road's future path extending to a formless brown distance. Savu himself has spoken of a national state of "lagging and sluggishness"—and the absence of narrative momentum in his paintings beautifully conveys the sense of a society stuck in a rut. Leisure, here, is not about chasing the euphoria of a summer afternoon; it's about passing time when there's nothing else to do.