

# ArtReview

**Adrian Ghenie**

by Jane Neal

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Referencing slapstick cinema, art history  
and the annals of totalitarianism,  
**Adrian Ghenie**'s paintings  
find ways of confronting a 'century  
of humiliation'.

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ADRIAN GHENIE'S PRACTICE HAS CHANGED dramatically in recent years: there has been a sudden increase in scale and a more confident, at times aggressive, handling of paint. Although the thirty-four-year-old Romanian now works predominantly on a scale of 2 x 3m or bigger, four years ago, when his paintings were first exhibited internationally, they were fairly small (usually well under one metre square) and featured delicately rendered, intriguing *mise en scènes* of twentieth-century dictators in peculiar and often darkly humorous circumstances: Hitler and Lenin hanging out by abandoned swimming pools (*Ironie History I*, 2006), or Hitler in front of Lenin's tomb, teaching his little dog to sit (*Ironie History II*, 2006). The works play to the age-old tendency to ridicule once-feared figures of authority through banalisation, humour and caricature from a position of safety: in this case, the future, where a grown-up Ghenie can exact revenge for the fear his parents and grandparents were subjected to in their youth.

The paintings also reveal one of Ghenie's key sources of inspiration: the slapstick of early cinema, most notably Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940). Indeed, Ghenie's preoccupation with his paintings' relationship to cinema finds expression in both subject and form as he translates motifs such as pie fights into paint and attempts to recreate the quality and atmosphere of early black-and-white film, with its punctuation of intermittent, cross-screen lines and flickering light. The influence of these old films has become increasingly apparent since the scale of his canvases increased to mimic the format of screens found in small, provincial film theatres. In his studio earlier this year, Ghenie tells me that, back in 2006, "I was actually more concerned with finding ways to combine my fascination for recent and ancient history, while still making works that were relevant to a contemporary audience".

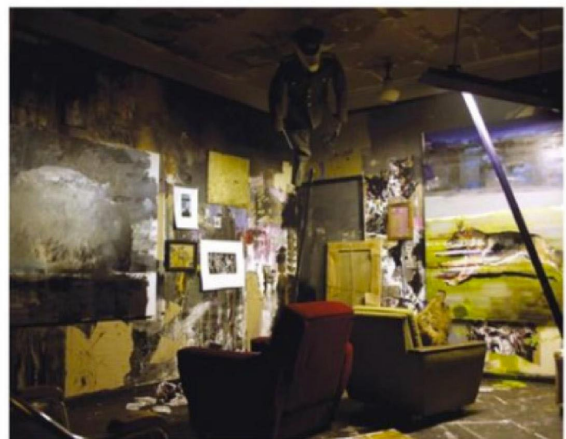
The resulting paintings were part of a series entitled *If You Open It You'll Get Dirty* (2006), featuring grey tomblike structures half-buried by flurries of ash, collected in the shadows of underground chambers. The initial reading of the work suggests an epochal volcanic eruption – Pompeii, say – but there is also a latent political dimension to the paintings, a connection being made between the destruction of a great civilisation and what happened to Eastern Europe under communism, when all the colour and vibrancy of this culturally rich region was smothered and greyed under an ideological dust. While Ghenie obviously draws inspiration from history – notably that of Europe over the past 60 years – he rejects attempts to label him a 'history painter': "People have talked about me being a 'history painter', but I'm not – not in the nineteenth-century Romantic sense. Yes, I might have nostalgia for a golden age of painting, but my work takes me on much darker journeys into our collective imaginings of other stories – real and fictionalised. I'm simply trying to paint my vision of those times – a giant curiosity."

This "giant curiosity" of Ghenie's involved his reading up on psychoanalysis, particularly ideas of the collective unconscious, and experimenting with Jungian exercises to try to remember all kinds of 'ordinary' scenes and objects that might take on 'extraordinary' significance, such as the specific angle from which a room is viewed, or the presence of a lamp in a corner. The artist became fascinated with how the subconscious can merge physically encountered images with those received from cinema and television, so that both lived and virtual experiences become

part of our memory banks. Towards the end of 2006 and into 2007, as Ghenie's work took on explicitly psychological themes, it became tonally darker too: "As soon as I changed the motive and the scale of my work and started to explore the collective unconscious, I became the subject, like Flaubert's line: 'Madame Bovary, c'est moi'. I have in my brain a double life, constantly between two worlds."

*Shadow of a Daydream*, as the ensuing series of works from 2007 came to be known, owes much to Ghenie's first long stay in Berlin. While the work contains references to Europe outside Germany, and to America, it is the period of Berlin in the 1940s that dominates these paintings in terms of subject matter, although some of the references can be subtle. Hitler and Eva Braun can be found in one work, *That Moment* (2007), but their identity is obscured by their sitting partway inside a coffinlike box, their heads and shoulders hidden in the shadow of the casket's open lid. The clue to their identity comes in the form of the *Discobolus Palombara*, a Roman copy of the lost Greek sculpture of the discus-thrower, which stands prominently and incongruously in the painting, and which Ghenie discovered was coveted and eventually purchased by Hitler from its Italian owners. In *The Nightmare* (2007), meanwhile, a sleeping Ghenie is watched over by the spectre of Hitler. This painting is the most explicit in terms of imagery and in some ways the most straightforward, even though the scenario is the most fantastical. The object of Ghenie's fantasy might be peculiar to him, but the scenario – a 'bogeyman' creeping up on people as they sleep – is familiar to all.

In 2008 Ghenie produced *The Flight into Egypt*, a series that merged his fascination for the collective unconscious with his interest in early cinema and its impact on both society and painting as a whole. In the darkly evocative *Babe in the Wood* (2008), which plays to a small-town film-screen format, it seems at first glance as if the child is centred in the clearing of a wood, poised on an ominous-looking platform. Closer inspection, however, reveals the wood to be walled in by a sinister-looking shack, leaving the viewer to determine whether the child has emerged from this strange, forested 'room' or is about to be sucked into it. "Most people share the experience of having





dreamed they were abandoned in a wood", says the artist, "maybe because we've all seen so many of the same films". That's possible, but Ghenie also plays on the common dream of passing through a series of rooms, as if propelled by some unseen force. He perceives this process as a descent from the upper levels of consciousness into the depths of the subconscious. "The first room contains images and offers situations familiar to many, but the successive rooms or deep subconscious hold a person's darkest private fears."

Ghenie slides back from his discussion of Jungian psychoanalysis to the role of the cinema in shaping the twentieth century. "If you think about it", he says, "the ritual of going to the cinema in the 1930s was religiously observed. Never before or since has a whole generation of people observed the same images and seen the same stories together at the same time. Now, through television, we have so much choice – we can watch a myriad of different programmes on our own – but then there was this unique moment of shared experience. And what did people see? For the most part they went to see slapstick – so actually, what the audience was witnessing on a regular basis was ritual humiliation. Think of the typical scenario: the 'nice, middle-class lady' in her fur coat, minding her own business, only to be hit in the face out of the blue by a custard pie. When you really think about it, it's quite unpleasant... And you know the strangest thing – it's almost like a precursor to the rise of fascism. This was meant to be funny, but for millions of ordinary people who were simply minding their own business throughout Europe, life was about to change in the most shocking and unexpected way. They were about to be humiliated and destroyed – and the rest of the world couldn't believe it and didn't seem to have really seen it coming. Maybe the directors and actors could feel this – even before it began to become known."

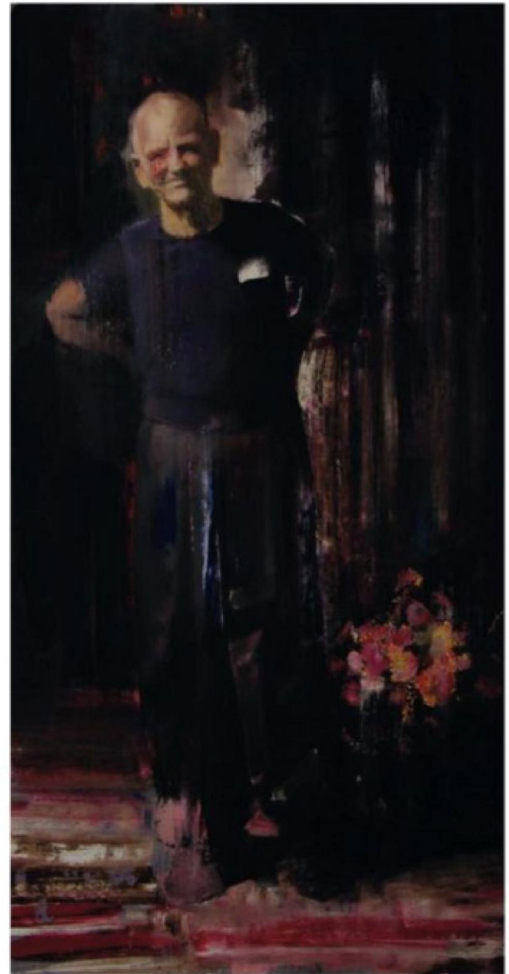
Some of Ghenie's most important works to date – *Nickelodeon* (2008), *Laurel and Hardy* (2008) and a number of what he describes as his pie-fight studies, commissioned for the 2008 Liverpool Biennial – directly reference early cinema. *Nickelodeon* features a bedraggled group of men and women. Though expensively dressed in fur, the figures are in a sorry state, desperately trying to wipe off the cream dripping from their faces. It is disturbing on many levels, but when viewed in light of the



prominent role played by Jewish émigrés in the creation of neighbourhood movie theatres, known as nickelodeons (and from which the US cartoon channel took its name), the scene becomes a chillingly brutal metaphor for the realities of anti-Semitism. "I was struck by how powerful the scene becomes when you translate the black-and-white film into the medium of paint", says Ghenie. "For one thing it becomes static, so you are forced to look at this one scene for much longer; for another, the colours and medium of paint lend the subject a weight and force it formerly lacked in celluloid. The experience becomes actual, physical."

More recently Ghenie has been delving into the world of the obsessive collector. One figure in particular has lastingly captured his imagination: Hermann Goering. The artist points to a work hanging in his studio, *The Collector 2* (2008), depicting the Luftwaffe commander-in-chief holding paintings in both hands while looking longingly at another. "There he is surrounded by everything he could literally get his hands on – but he still wants more", says Ghenie. "He's sacrificed his humanity for his obsession." Goering's face is painted a shade of puce: a sick colour,

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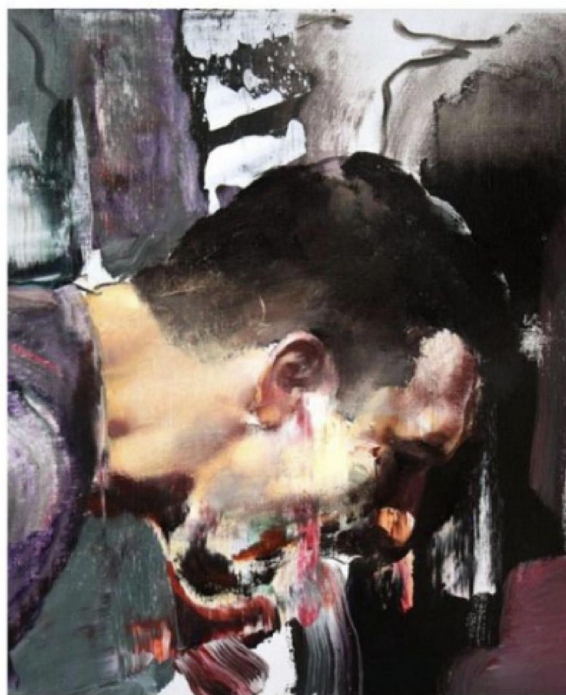


and intended to be read that way. The violent reds and angry purples are strongly suggestive of a slaughterhouse, and there are deliberate nods to Bacon's screaming popes. "As I was painting this", he continues, "I wondered what a contemporary collector would do if they found themselves in such a powerful position and could help themselves to anything they wanted in the name of 'confiscating it for the good of the people'. Don't you think if they were passionate enough they'd be tempted to do the same?"

And what of the artist? Ghenie's amusing yet derisive self-portrait as a decidedly unhip onstage Elvis suggests that the young art stars occupying a space in the lives and courts of the new super-rich have become 'acts' in themselves. The artist's portrait as a figure of shuffling ridicule makes it clear this is not a position Ghenie himself is comfortable occupying. This discomfort is intensified once you know that the self-portrait is also an homage to the artist's father, to whom Ghenie bears an uncanny resemblance. An Elvis impersonator in his youth, Ghenie senior never understood the words he sang or really grasped the Presley phenomenon, but Ghenie felt his father would nonetheless have enjoyed the 15 minutes of fame this work now brings him.

Despite that revelation, the artist would rather the motivations behind the painting remain more veiled than explicit: "I don't want to give the viewer everything", he says, "but when people look at my work, I want them to think about what they're looking at and to feel something. I'm not a history painter, but I am fascinated by what happened in the twentieth century and how it continues to shape today. I don't feel an obligation to tell this to the world, but for me the twentieth century was a century of humiliation – and through my painting, I'm still trying to understand this." ■

New work by Adrian Ghenie will be on show at SMAK, Ghent, from 3 December to 27 March, and at Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp, from 27 January to 12 March



#### WORKS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

*Pie Fight Study II*, 2008, oil and acrylic on canvas, 55 x 59 cm, Collection Hammer Museum, Los Angeles

*The Dada Room* (detail), 2010, mixed media, 120 x 600 x 500 cm, Courtesy Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp

*Laurel and Hardy* (detail), 2008, oil and acrylic on canvas, 200 x 95 cm (Laurel)  
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*The Nightmare*, 2002, oil and acrylic on canvas, 148 x 200 cm, Collection Blake Byrne, Los Angeles

*Nickelodeon*, 2008, oil and acrylic on canvas, 230 x 420 cm, Collection François Pinault Foundation

*Laurel and Hardy* (detail), 2008, oil and acrylic on canvas, 104 x 200 cm (Hardy).  
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*The Collector I*, 2008, oil and acrylic on canvas, 200 x 290 cm, Hall Collection, New York & Düsseldorf

*Selfportrait, The Devil*, 2010, oil on canvas, 48 x 40 cm, Courtesy Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp