

Adrian Ghenie

by Valerie Knoll

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Adrian Ghenie, *A Farewell to the Western World*, 2007, oil on canvas, 250 x 200 cm.

In "Berlin Chronicle" (1932), Walter Benjamin equates the act of remembering with archaeology: Both involve digging to recover a buried past. The motifs favored by Romanian artist Adrian Ghenie are almost without exception oppressively hermetic interior spaces, subterranean realms whose architecture and contents are characterized by anachronism. His paintings allow us glimpses into the depths of evocative sites in which nebulous images from Eastern European history grip the viewer with uncanny force. The sharp chiaroscuro and a predilection for lighting effects reminiscent of film noir give many of these images a dramatic quality and transport the gaze into impenetrable zones of shadow. A recent cycle of pictures, "Shadow of a Daydream," painted during a stay in Berlin, shows Ghenie working with large-format images and increasingly integrating human figures into his spatial topographies.

In *That Moment* (all works 2007), two pairs of legs, female and male, protrude from a coffinlike box tipped on its side; the edge of the box leaves the corresponding torsos surreally cut off. To the left, a Greek statue of a discus thrower dominates the image. This bizarre arrangement is set in a bunkerlike room, where nuances of gray create an illusionistic effect of dustiness and corrosion, evoking the aura of past epochs. In these surroundings, the discus thrower not only recalls the famous classical statue but also the Aryan physical ideal of National Socialism--the icon admired by Adolf Hitler and glorified in Leni Riefenstahl's films. The half-figures seem to be an allegory of the eradication of the memory of a dark past, or of the deaths of Hitler and Eva Braun.

Christmas Eve, too, is set in an uncanny, shadowy underworld. At the right of the canvas, two figures, male and female, are pursuing ordinary activities. At its center stands a nativity scene composed of animal figures and two-dimensional mock-ups that, like silhouette cutouts, suggest human figures and cast shadows. According to Pliny's myth about the origin of painting, in which shadow takes on the role of mnemotechnical prop, the zones of darkness in Ghenie's works can be interpreted as a metaphor for making the absent present.

The only work in the show that offered a view outside the catacombs was A Farewell to the Western World. Inspired by a photograph from the 1939 New York World's Fair, it shows some small architectural models that evoke iconic New York skyscrapers such as the Empire State Building and the Chrysler, with a figure in a white smock sitting among them, a scientist or painter. We can vaguely make out what might be ancient Greek sculptures in the background.

The entire scene is placed within a sort of military trench architecture, inspired by the Berlin subway system, but with a clear view of a gray sky. One might make various associations: with the migration from Old Europe to the New World during the Nazi regime, or else with stereotyped collective Soviet images of the West as a site of destructive utopias. Ghenie's works - images of the past located halfway between fiction and appropriation - translate time and space and, as Benjamin writes, can be exposed and fathomed, like ruins, only by means of perpetual digging.

Translated from German by Oliver E. Dryfuss.