

IN THE STUDIO: Romanian Painter Adrian Ghenie's Sinister Mythology

by Rachel Wolff

March 2013



Adrian Ghenie in his workspace in Cluj, Romania. Courtesy of Adrian Ghenie.

Adrian Ghenie's Berlin studio is located in a space that once housed the Nolan Judin gallery, the site of his first local show. It's a bit tricky to find, tucked away in a cluster of postindustrial buildings down the road from the city's Hamburger Bahnhof Museum of Contemporary Art, in the area that preceded Mitte as Berlin's primary gallery hub. The studio may be a bit haunted, too — not only by the ghosts of gallerinas past, but perhaps, Ghenie tells me, by something more sinister as well. Indeed, there's a rumor circulating among those who have worked in and on Ghenie's studio building that its basement once served as a Gestapo prison. Whether or not that's true, it's a supposition that might have spooked another, more superstitious artist. But for Ghenie, a ghost story of this caliber suits the dark and stirring mythology he constructs on canvas — one that encompasses the layers of history, the clichés surrounding its most horrific figures, and our collective and personal memories of how it all went down.

Structurally, the Romanian painter didn't change a thing from the space's Nolan Judin days. (The gallery, which still represents Ghenie's work in Berlin, relocated to a light-filled flagship on Potsdamer Strasse in 2011.) But upon entering, there is a distinct morning-after vibe uncharacteristic of a pristine white cube. Cigarette butts and other assorted scraps and garbage cover the poured-concrete floor; empty beer and water bottles are clustered atop what once served as the gallery's front desk; and bountiful stacks of aggressively rifled art and history books and pixelated printouts are strewn about. The mess continues deeper inside, in what once served as the gallery's primary exhibition space. Squeeze bottles of acrylic paint and craggy mounds of pigment-soaked paper towels lie in front of Ghenie's paintings-in-progress — moody, unstretched canvases pinned to grubby, workaday white walls.



A work in progress on the wall of Adrian Ghenie's Berlin studio.

Ghenie's studio in Cluj, a small city in northwest Romania that's lately been colonized by artists, is nearly identical, he tells me. It's a former gallery too, and he spends three or four months there each year, working alone, as he always does. These blank, open spaces suit his technique, which is increasingly built on layering several colors and then scraping them away to create singular patinas on the haunting figures and ambiguous interior spaces he tends to depict. The flat walls are crucial, he explains, to counter the pressure of his metal scraper.

Abandoned showrooms also suit Ghenie's work habits, providing a sterile environment that could never be mistaken for the coziness of home, amplifying his self-imposed separation between work and life.



Such structure and discipline were critical of late as Ghenie prepared for a series of high-profile exhibitions, including his first museum show in the United States, where he had shown only in galleries. "Pie-Fights and Pathos" closed in January at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) Denver. And on March 8, he will make his New York solo debut at the Pace Gallery's 534 West 25th Street outpost. That show will continue in the same vein, with expressionistic renderings of spectral figures, some of which are frozen in mortifying vignettes as they use their fingers to scrape whipped cream off their faces — and seemingly, at times, their skin along with it.

Ghenie's ascent has been rapid by any measure. It's all the more impressive given that he started painting in earnest only in 2006, earning his first museum solo in 2009, at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest, and placements in the collections of MOCA Los Angeles and SFMOMA. He was an arty kid and studied the medium at the University of Art and Design in Cluj. But a long bout of painter's block left him discouraged. He was making "very classical, very Symbolist, very 19th-century, anachronistic paintings" at the time, he says, and when he graduated, in 2001, he felt as if his work had no place in the contemporary art world — which he didn't totally understand, anyway.

Growing up, Ghenie was aware of Rembrandt and the Old Masters, he says one afternoon late last spring, "but I had no idea that Francis Bacon existed, and it's not just me, it was my whole generation." We're sitting in a back room of his Berlin studio, surrounded by towering rolls of raw canvas. Ghenie's hooded sweatshirt, Nikes, and jeans make him look younger than his 35 years. He taps ashes on the floor from his constant stream of American Spirit cigarettes. Things changed a bit with art school — not to mention the dawn of the Internet age — and Ghenie gained a vague awareness of an interdisciplinary, idea-driven art world beyond the academy. "I knew there was something outside of that, this rhetoric against paintings, against commercialism, but I knew not how to access it," he says. "I was really well trained in terms of skills and classical technique. But this 'art world' was sending all these confusing signals. So I decided to quit."

In 2002 Ghenie moved to Vienna, where he was intent on living "a very ordinary life." He made a few "crap paintings" during that time, he says, but nothing serious. He found himself perusing the local gallery scene as well, once he no longer felt pressure to contribute to it. "I was looking slowly," he says, "to try to understand what the hell is going on." But after two years, Ghenie says, "I had failed completely. I was just sitting in this shitty apartment with no money, no business, eating 50-cent tuna salad, so I went home. I thought I will probably have the same life, but at least I will have friends to laugh about it with."

Reunited with his art-school friends in Cluj, Ghenie found himself in good company: They had failed too. "There was nothing — no infrastructure, no market, no galleries, no institutions," he says. "And we had already been outside; we had turned to the West and we were total losers. But we learned something. We decided the only thing we can do is open a gallery for ourselves." So Ghenie and the multimedia artist and curator Mihai Pop founded Cluj's scene-making Plan B gallery to show local artists, fellow rising stars Victor Man and Ciprian Muresan among them. (Plan B, which expanded to Berlin in 2008, remains a critical local resource; the gallery was tapped to organize Romania's pavilion at the 2007 Venice Biennale)

In 2006 Ghenie was inspired, once again, to paint, and staged his first solo show at Plan B. He was promptly picked up by Haunch of Venison in London and by Antwerp gallerist Tim Van Laere, followed by Mihai Nicodim in Los Angeles and Pace, in December 2011. The artist was propelled by an acute interest in 20th-century European history — "what happened with Communism, Nazis, all of this," he says. "My generation, we were all losers historically, economically. There was no culture of winning. Winning under a dictatorship is to make a deal with the power, which is a moral dead end. A black hole." He continues, "I realized how complicated the history of Eastern Europe is from a moral perspective, from a psychological perspective, because almost everybody was, at the same time, both killer and victim."

Having grown up under Nicolae Ceausescu, who was executed on national TV on Christmas Day in 1989, Ghenie was especially interested in the contradictory ways in which history is recorded

and experienced. He looked to his mother, who came of age during the height of Communism: “She lived in the worst period of the 20th century, but when I asked [her] about it she said that it was great because it was her youth,” the artist says. “I realized that people’s perspectives about history are automatically cool. And it’s very sick. They don’t care that it was the Stalin years. They just remember that they were young and they had this energy and they fell in love.”

It’s this gap between fact and subjective memory that Ghenie sought to explore through his work. The paintings he’s made since that realization apply a dreamlike veil to historical figures and events. Faces are fuzzy; moods are grim; and surroundings are abstract, surreal, and otherwise off. When he wasn’t sure how to communicate these psychologically fraught tableaux, he says, “David Lynch came along and gave me the solution.” Hitchcock, too. “In terms of composition, colors, atmosphere, I borrow many things from cinema,” he says.

Early on, Ghenie limited his palette to black and white, as in *That Moment*, 2007, which introduced themes and imagery that persist in his work today. The 50-by-70-foot canvas features the legs of a lifeless man and woman sticking out from beneath a black couch-table hybrid; a marble statue of a classical Greek discus thrower hovers nearby. The moment in question is when Adolf Hitler and Eva Braun purportedly took their own lives as Allied forces closed in. “It was never documented, never even confirmed,” says MCA Denver curator Nora Burnett Abrams. “But it’s a moment that exists in everyone’s mind.” “Adrian is fascinated by episodes of history that will never be resolved,” Abrams continues. “He knows that he will never resolve them either, but he attempts to address them.”

Ghenie’s compositions have become more and more complex over the years as he’s turned increasingly toward color and abstraction to shape figures and construct space. He relies on drips, scrapes, and splatters — “staged accidents,” the artist calls them — to impart texture. He makes preparatory collages combining art historical images and documentary photographs to plot out the rest. When I arrived in his Berlin studio, Ghenie was working on another Third Reich–inspired image: a rendering of Hitler perched on a deck at his Alpine retreat, his jet-black comb-over and mustache are barely discernible on his abstract and bloodied face. (Titled *Berghof*, the 2012 work was included in the MCA Denver show.) For Ghenie, Hitler is a means to an end: “I really like to work with cliché,” he says.



Adrian Ghenie, *Berghof*, 2012.

The other set of recurring images in his work seems almost flippant in comparison: hapless suckers covered in pie, their mugs culled from screen grabs of the Three Stooges and Laurel and Hardy on YouTube. The Internet is a constant source, Ghenie says. “I like democracy in terms of access to inspiration.” When frozen, these slapstick moments of impact and shame are deeply unsettling. “When I cropped these images from the films, I realized it was a very psychological, very powerful image,” Ghenie says. “It’s also about humiliation, which is a very strange ritual in the human species and still one of the most important features of a dictatorship. The best way to terrorize people is to humiliate them.”



Adrian Ghenie, *Pie Fight Interior 4*, 2012.

Ghenie’s first pie paintings were poignant studies, formal portraits of men whose faces are disfigured by impasto swirls of white paint. He later expanded these into larger, more ambitious compositions, such as the 10-foot-wide *Turning Point*, 2009, in which a four-way pie fight erupts. The artist’s most recent pie paintings, several of which will go on view at Pace, where his prices range from \$75,000 to \$350,000, are striking tapestries of color and texture. He’s pushing the abstraction — those staged accidents — further and further to achieve a visceral effect, to bring the viewer almost physically into this cringe-worthy scene.

Ghenie recently started rendering female victims of pie fights as well. “It’s even more disturbing,” he notes. By clothing them in 1940s and ’50s garb, he evokes an era when a woman was expected to have the family dinner on the table promptly at six; instead, someone off-canvas smashes a day’s work into her face. It’s a fraught and ambiguous narrative. Is it a prank? An accident? An act of terrorism? Is it the consequence of domestic upheaval, the punishment of a tyrannical regime? Of course, we’ll never know who threw the pie.



Adrian Ghenie, *Pie Fight Study*, 2012.



Adrian Ghenie lifts source photographs, such as this, from books and the Internet.