

Flash Art

ADRIAN GHENIE

by Magda Radu

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Duchamp's Funeral (detail), 2009, oil and acrylic on canvas, 200 x 300 cm.

RISE & FALL

Prior to becoming the “Transylvanian rising star,” Adrian Ghenie co-founded, together with Mihai Pop, Plan B gallery, the epicente of the vivacious art scene in Cluj, Romania. He is committed to supporting the thriving artistic environment in this small Romanian town through his involvement in a new art space — a reconverted industrial hall housing several galleries and studios — that opened this fall.

MAGDA RADU: *You deliberately leave room for the intervention of hazard and for arbitrary choices when you paint. To what extent does this interfere with the control you have over the painting process?*

Adrian Ghenie: When I provoke an accident and I let the oil or acrylic paint leak over a surface, I get interesting results and satisfying solutions that I haven't thought about. Representational painting can be quite tedious when it comes to the painterly facture, when paint is applied with a brush in a conventional way. The mix of colors resulting from accidents endows the compositional elements with vibrancy and I use this type of execution when I paint the background. In my works, the space framing the figures has to be painted as loosely as possible.

MR: *There is a tension in your work between a carefully planned preparatory stage (the making of collages and models) and the actual process of translating that into painting. Can you comment on this?*

AG: An antagonism is embedded in my paintings, which is not something I was fully aware of. On one hand, I work on an image in an almost classical vein: composition, figuration, use of light. On the other hand, I do not refrain from resorting to all kinds of idioms, such as the surrealist principle of association or the abstract experiments which foreground texture and surface. If the distribution of elements is precisely premeditated, paint is nonetheless applied freely, with unbridled gestures. The oil paint medium triggers a range of technical possibilities, which I am committed to explore in various combinations. For example, I mix various colors on a trowel and I apply it directly onto the canvas. Then I wipe it off with something else. Quite often I paint with a house-painter's brush. I'm interested to see the outcome of such exercises.

MR: *You have started making large-format paintings and recently your palette has diversified. What brought about these changes in your practice?*

AG: I wanted to confront this diversity, to test the combinatory possibilities after a period in which I employed an almost monochrome tonal range that reduced the intensity of experimentation. The decision to adopt a larger format came out of the same curiosity. Looking at Renaissance painting, I was keen to explore pictorial issues regarding the construction of space, such as the succession of planes, the use of perspective. My inclination to investigate geometry and volume demanded — for me at least — a bigger dimension to work on. At the same time, I was drawn to the illusionistic power of the cinema screen.

MR: *Can you describe the impact of film on you and your work?*

AG: If you look at my works, there is a filmic quality in all of them. In my case, the film has provided the most important ingredient of my visual background. When I paint I have the impression that I am also involved in directing a film. Looking at a film made by Lynch or Hitchcock, experiencing the tension and drama of a thriller is at once realistic and beyond the ordinary. For me, the genius of cinema resides in its capacity to project an illusion. The emergence of every artistic medium relied on a technical invention that was originally designed to serve a practical purpose. At the beginning there was no aesthetic. All of a sudden one looked at moving images that previously existed only in one's imagination. The first films had a certain type of grandeur because they captured historic moments, stories and myths that had to be represented on screen. There was the need to create worlds, inaccessible in everyday life. In the same vein, when the van Eyck brothers invented the oil painting technique they realized that it had the capacity to render details, texture, volume with an astonishing accuracy. An accidental slip of the paintbrush could yield unexpected results, looking like sand or fur or the leaves of a tree. Once you discover the potential of such an invention you cannot resist it. To the 15th century spectator, the combination of religious subject matter with the illusionistic power of oil painting must have had a great emotional impact. The same effect was experienced by the viewer in the early days of cinema.



The Collector (detail), 2008, acrylic and collage on paper, 140 x 200 cm. Courtesy Plan B, Cluj/Berlin.

MR: *How do your works convey this cinematic feeling?*

AG: The cinematic impression is partly given by light and texture. The settings in my paintings seem real; they seem to have suffered a process of erosion, you recognize in them a diversity of textures. The background, enclosing human silhouettes, is made up of wet, burnt, damaged walls.

MR: *What about the historical avant-garde and the way it is insinuated as a subject in your paintings? You conjure up the Dada Berlin exhibition or Duchamp.*

AG: The state of painting today prompted me to choose this subject. The ongoing debate about the “death of painting” may be intellectually stimulating, but I think it is also anachronistic. There is enough evidence to conclude that painting is not dead. And yet, I wanted to return to the historic context in which this problem was first articulated. I view key moments and personalities of the avantgardes like Duchamp from a great distance and from a reversed perspective. Although I recognize the liberating effects produced by the outburst of the avant-garde movements (of which I am also a beneficiary), I can’t help but notice the extent to which some of their ideas — exposed in time to manifold appropriations — have imposed themselves with such forcefulness as to become canonical. I simply want to question this state of affairs without making accusations. But I feel I have the right to see idols like Duchamp or Dada in a different light.

MR: *There are also references to the history of the 20th century, to figures like Lenin, Hitler or Goering. Do you invoke them because you want to address contemporary issues?*

AG: We inevitably live in a post-WWII epoch, which means that we constantly have to look back to that watershed moment in order to understand our present condition. Rather than historic figures, Hitler and Lenin appear as ghosts in my paintings. Indeed, I chose to paint them in very few instances and their presence is not conspicuous at all. It was a period in which I tried to depict their residual image in the collective unconscious, painting after such clichéd photographs like the ones with Lenin lying dead, an image familiar to millions of people. With Goering — whose portrait was featured in “The Collector” series — the motivation was slightly different. I was more interested in his personality; for me, he truly embodied the archetype of the rapacious collector. I tried to grasp the psychological complexity of this man driven by a collecting bulimia, which in the end was totally compromised by his power.



Dada is Dead, 2009, oil on canvas, 220 x 200 cm. Courtesy Haunch of Venison, London. © Adrian Ghenie. **Hunger, 2008**, oil on canvas, 40 X 30 cm. Courtesy Mihai Nicodim, Los Angeles.

MR: *Your work is often discussed in relation to Communism. Last year you appeared in a video-film painting a portrait of Ceaucescu. To what extent does your work deal with the legacy of Communism?*

AG: I am particularly interested in the state of exceptionality that characterizes everyday life in totalitarian regimes, not just Communism. In such circumstances everything is being distorted. However, in terms of subject matter, national-socialism is more present in my work. But there are more subliminal, subterranean ways in which I was marked, for example, by early memories of my life lived under the Communist regime. The basement of our family home was a space which contained many objects that were discarded, and this space represented for me the true receptacle of personal memories. The painting

Basement Feeling (2007) is one of the few autobiographic works that captures this melancholic encounter with my past. The work with Ceaucescu is a project by Ciprian Murecan; he wanted me to paint an official portrait of the dictator, giving me indications to comply to all the parameters of a conventional and neutral posture, as if an artist of that epoch had received this commission. The overwhelming majority of such portraits were horribly painted and ridiculous, so we wanted to find out if, given the imposed iconography, it was still possible to make an aesthetically passable work. It is an open experiment; the portrait turned out ok, but still, we didn't exactly live in those times.

Magda Radu is a Ph.D. candidate at Université Paris 1 and a curator at MNAC, Bucharest.

Adrian Ghenie was born in 1977 in Baia Mare, Romania. He lives and works in Cluj and Berlin.

Selected solo shows: 2009: MNAC, Bucharest; *Haunch of Venison*, London. 2008: *Plan B*, Berlin; *Nolan Judin*, Berlin; *Hussenot*, Paris (with Serban Savu and Ciprian Murecan); *Tim Van Laere*, Antwerp. 2007: *Haunch of Venison*, Zurich; *Rüdiger Schöttle*, Munich (with Jānis Avotiņš and Andrew Palmer); *Mihai Nicodim* (former *Chung King Project*), Los Angeles. 2006: *Plan B*, Cluj.

Selected group shows: 2009: *After the Fall*, HVCCA, Peekskill (US); *Prague Biennale 4*. 2008: *Liverpool Biennial*. 2007: *Prague Biennale 3*. 2006: *Cluj Connection*, *Haunch of Venison*, Zurich.