

## Out of the Zoo

by Matt Price

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Adrian Ghenie in his Berlin studio, 2009. Courtesy Adrian Ghenie and Plan B Cluj/Berlin.

The Romanian painter Adrian Ghenie was just 12 years old in 1989, when the military trial of the ousted Communist president Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife, Elena, took place. Hanging on Ghenie's classroom wall, as in many schools and institutions around the country, was a portrait of the president looking suitably youthful, kindly, and forthright. The televised images of the trial came as a shock to him. "We didn't really believe it was Ceaușescu because he looked so old," says Ghenie. "Looking at their faces during the trial, you could see the human dimension of these people." On a trip to the National Museum in Bucharest, site of a solo exhibition of his work, the artist takes the opportunity to show his guests the museum storeroom, which is filled with thousands of commissioned, largely propagandistic portraits of Ceaușescu. In contrast to these, Ghenie's painting *Nicolae*, 2010, shows a man who seems not to really know what's going on; his face, only loosely and lightly defined, in flesh tones dirtied by gray, reveals a suggestion of eyebrows raised in mild confusion and small pale eyes evincing bemused resignation. A picture of Elena, also as she appeared during the trial, portrays her as more doleful and forlorn, rendered in Ghenie's trademark palette of sepia, brown, and black. According to some accounts, Nicolae's last gesture before the pair's hasty execution at a military base was to sing *The Internationale*; his wife simply said, "Fuck you all." Ghenie smiles. "At least she realized it was over."

These portraits of the living, if doomed, couple are something of a departure for Ghenie, who has previously painted totalitarian leaders as lifeless bodies, including, in *Found*, 2007, Lenin lying in state. "The image of the dead Ceaușescu is an image that I will never use," he explains. "It's too vulgar somehow. There's nothing I can do with it." The scene of their execution, however, fueled his imagination. Ghenie saw a documentary made by an American news team that discovered and filmed the abandoned military base where the couple was shot; it was still intact though clearly decaying, with plants growing inside and stray dogs wandering freely. This scene inspired Ghenie's *The Trial*, 2010, portraying how he envisions the couple's day in court. The painting shows a shabby interior that, with its shoddy floorboards, rust-red wooden paneling, and curtain seemingly the worse for wear, looks like a run-down social club. The accused sit huddled in the shadows of the makeshift courtroom, wedged into a dark corner by two cheap trestle tables. Facing them are a simple wooden chair and a strangely incongruous floral-upholstered armchair, both empty, positioned as if awaiting an interrogator or torturer. The couple, the only figures in the scene, seem

more like squatters than dignitaries. Elena wears what appears to be a tiger-skin coat, symbolizing the extravagant lifestyle she once enjoyed. According to Ghenie, she would often appear in public wearing rare furs, rumored to be from zoo animals she had had killed but more likely to have come from the African dictators with whom Nicolae was friends.

Elena's coat ties *The Trial* to *Berlin Zoo*, 2009, both of which were first presented at Mihai Nicodim Gallery, in Los Angeles, this year. A beautiful male tiger commands the foreground of the second work, which depicts a zoo whose ruinous state is reflected in Ghenie's brush marks, which slide from figuration to abstraction in unreadable passages of paint. The tiger's body twists toward a lioness that is lying on the ground and could be either asleep or dead, although the striations of blood-red paint running down the picture plane and over her body make the latter more likely. On the left side of the painting another lioness, with meat in her mouth, looks on from a cage that is only partially barred, implying that she is free but has not yet ventured out. A monkey can be discerned amid blurry marks, scraped pigment, and exposed canvas. The scene is claustrophobic, as if it were a grotty basement rather than an open-air zoo. This impression is enhanced by a thick, heavy-looking chunk of rusty metal or masonry hanging in the air above like a roof blown apart by an aerial assault. Indeed, a ghostly MiG fighter plane emerges from the forbidding gray wall that recedes into the shadows behind the figures. Ghenie is clearly inviting the viewer to make a connection with the well-documented bombing of Berlin's Tiergarten during World War II. In a related image, *Berlin Zoo II*, 2009, an almost monochrome baby rhinoceros can be seen peering through a hole in a wall. "Everyone thought that all the animals in the zoo had died," explains Ghenie, "so when news emerged that a baby rhino was still alive, people started a campaign to feed it, even though there was a major food shortage at the time."

This series is part of Ghenie's long-standing exploration of animals out of context, but it was also inspired by the filmmaker Emir Kusturica's 1995 black comedy *Underground*. The film follows two Yugoslav men from World War II through their country's violent breakup in the 1990s. In an early sequence, Belgrade is bombed by the Nazis, after which all kinds of animals are seen roaming the capital's streets, indicating that the zoo has been hit. "As an image, it's so powerful," says Ghenie. "A central European set with exotic animals." This scene is key to interpreting the connection between the artist's depiction of the Ceauçescu trial and his Berlin Zoo paintings: Exotic animals in the streets symbolize the strangeness following dramatic political change, whether through revolution or war, for those experiencing the breakdown of their familiar social structures.

"It was very weird growing up during the revolution years," Ghenie says. "Nobody really understood what was going on." The power vacuum left by Ceauçescu's death led to a period he describes as regrettable and yet liberating. "It's always like that when a system collapses and the new leadership is under construction: They let you get away with whatever you want. In 1993 you could stand up in public and say whatever you liked. Nobody was arrested, because the authorities would do nothing that made them seem too much like the old regime." Many people left Romania at this time, hoping for a better standard of living. This emigration, along with the period's anarchy, was one of the themes underpinning Ghenie's concurrent 2008 exhibitions at Nolan Judin Berlin and Plan B Berlin. "A lot of people survived doing bad things," he says. "They weren't all bad people. You would be amazed by the transformation if you put a nice guy in the wrong context." Ghenie's paintings often tend toward melancholy and regret, abjection and anomie, and his Ceauçescu and Berlin Zoo works are no exception. Although not devoid of hope (let's not forget that baby rhino), they are saturated with the loneliness, darkness, disillusionment, and repression that characterizes his oeuvre. Underneath the exoticism and surrealism, he offers a bleak vision of the Eastern bloc, a disturbing psychological account of the history of communism in Europe. The wall of the zoo, clearly a metaphor for the Berlin Wall, is linked as well to the wall of the courtroom where the Romanian dictator was tried. The zoo becomes a symbol for both East Berlin after 1945 and for Romania under Ceauçescu.

The theme of the Berlin Wall also runs through a series that Ghenie started for his solo show at the Tim Van Laere Gallery, in Antwerp, last winter. Inspired by *Les Très Riches Heures*, an illuminated book of hours created in the 15th century for the duc de Berry and featuring in some of its illustrations a castle wall, Ghenie's *The Blue Rain*, 2009, depicts a concrete wall receding under a

cobalt sky, in front of which are sunbathers, an apparition of Elvis, and an alert German Shepherd. It is an obscure image hinting at the rise of popular Western culture in an impoverished postwar East Germany rapidly coming to terms with its communist present and perhaps taking a step back toward its feudal past. "There are elements of a story, a story with a '50s or '60s smell," the artist says. "But there is no story per se."

The shadow of World War II and the cold war lies over many of Ghenie's paintings, including those in his two key solo exhibitions of 2007: "They said this place does not exist," at Wohnmaschine, in Berlin; and "The Shadow of a Daydream," at Haunch of Venison in Zurich. Although the places in the pictures displayed could be anywhere, it is hard not to read them as referring to Ghenie's homeland.

In his work, the artist has attempted to come to terms with the Romanian dictator Ion Antonescu's persecution of Jews and Roma during World War II, his country's Soviet occupation, and its severe economic difficulties under Ceaușescu, subjects that often appear as oblique or latent subtexts. The Ceaușescu works exhibited in L.A. this spring mark a watershed in this process, bringing contemporary Romania into focus amid the swirl of postwar Europe's political, social, and economic turbulence.