



INTERNATIONAL EDITION
THE ART NEWSPAPER

First look at the pavilions: seven national presentations of note in the Giardini

by Louisa Buck and Georgina Adam

May 2015

Romania

Adrian Ghenie turns portraiture on its head in his much-anticipated exhibition in the Romanian pavilion, Darwin's Room. Lenin, for instance, is a fetching shade of blue in the image *Turning Blue* (2008), his solemn features made comic by his turquoise pallor. Charles Darwin is, meanwhile, blotchy and daubed in beetroot-coloured patches, far removed from more traditional and austere representations of the renowned English naturalist (*Charles Darwin as a Young Man*, 2013).



Various works by Adrian Ghenie (2012-14) in the Romanian pavilion

"These images are not your usual propaganda," says the pavilion curator Mihai Pop. "They are accessing a certain historical truth." Ghenie puts his own spin on history, he adds. "If you make a painting about an historical moment, the risk will be to illustrate it, to miss the connection with it." In *Opernplatz* (2014) Ghenie recreates the depraved atmosphere in which the Nazis burned around 25,000 books on 10 May 1933 depicting the suffocating storm that surrounded the burning as a miasma of colour and form.

Ghenie's paintings, drips and pours of paint, smeared surfaces, and indistinct masses make up his canvases, but figuration predominates in most of the works. In *Carnivorous Flowers* (2014) the Nazi physician Josef Mengele, seen arriving at his final destination in South Africa, looks on forlornly at a man-eating plant. Another work in the same section, which is entitled *The Dissonances of History*, depicts an encounter between man and beast deep in a delicately mottled forest (*Persian Miniature*, 2013). This layering of paint involves a considerable degree of dexterity.

Ghenie's work hangs in a newly reconfigured space that is based on the three original salons of the Pavilion, which was built in 1938. Natural light floods and frames the works dotted around the grandiose galleries, bringing a touch of tradition to the Biennale proceedings. "It is almost extravagant in Venice to have a conservative painting show," Pop says.