

STRANGE DAYS: AN INTERVIEW WITH CIPRIAN MUREȘAN

by Emily Nathan

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Ciprian Mureșan, *Choose* (split-screen still), 2005.



Ciprian Mureșan, *Choose* (video still), 2005.



Ciprian Mureșan, *Pioneer* (detail), 2010.

Romanian artist Ciprian Mureșan is celebrated for short, comic videos that double as allegories of contemporary post-Soviet life in Eastern Europe. He was introduced to New York audiences in the New Museum's 2009 exhibition, "The Generational: Younger than Jesus," and his first U.S. show is currently on view at David Nolan Gallery in Chelsea, July 7-Aug. 12, 2011. Along with drawings, an animation and several videos, the show includes *Wizard*, an enormous sculpture of a working gumball machine that dispenses colorful plastic balls for free, and the self-explanatory *Refrigerator*, a household object that has always recalled "a vertical coffin" in Mureșan's eyes, here embellished with a spray-painted stencil of a cross, suggesting perhaps death by gastronomic excess.

Born in communist Romania in 1977, Mureșan was 12 during the Revolution of 1989, when the Eastern Bloc collapsed; he came of age in the ensuing period of "catch-up modernization," which heralded Romania's shaky transition to capitalism. The last two decades, spent in Cluj, where he lives and works, have fostered in him both a sense of disillusionment with his country's institutionalized systems of misinformation and a healthy sense of irony.

His years as a sculpture student at the



Ciprian Mureșan, *Santa Claus* (video still), 2004.



Ciprian Mureșan, *Leap into the Void, after 3 seconds*, 2004.



Yves Klein, *Le saut dans le vide (Leap into the Void)*, 1960, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Ciprian Mureșan, *Untitled (Monks)* (video still), 2011

Academy of Fine Arts and design in Cluj-Napoca only sharpened his understanding of culture and its discontents, he says, with the school's limited and repressive approach providing a kind of anti-education. Critical and iconoclastic, Mureșan nevertheless approaches the global canon of art and history with a light touch, making good-humored works whose commentaries are subtle and smart.

He has been editor of the Cluj-based magazine *IDEA arts + society* since 2005, and has exhibited widely throughout Europe, at institutions including the Centre Pompidou and the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (NBK).

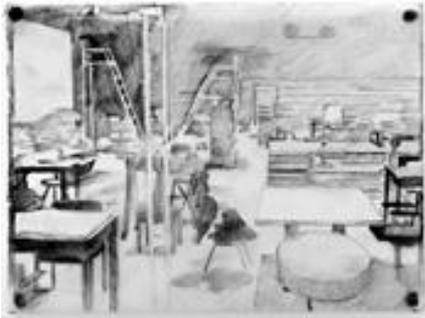
Before his return to Romania, we met at David Nolan Gallery to discuss his artistic foray into the Western world.

Emily Nathan: Your star rose in the U.S. when four of your videos were included in 2009's "Younger than Jesus" exhibition at the New Museum. A few of these works featured your young son, Vlad, engaged in some simple task, like tying his sneakers, a job he does with telling deliberation. Most popular was the video *Choose* (2005), a kind of "taste test" in which Vlad sits at a table with cans of Pepsi and Coca-Cola in front of him. He pours both into one cup, mixing them together, and drinks.

Ciprian Mureșan: This idea was generated from a conversation I had with my son. We decided that Pepsi and Coca-Cola have the same taste and are almost the same product, yet they are very distinct images. They are engaged in a sort of promotional advertising war, and yet they are basically identical. We joked about what sort of product we would get if we were to mix together two things



Ciprian Mureșan, *Untitled (Monks)* (detail from installation), 2011.



Ciprian Mureșan, *Untitled (Kippenberger)* (detail), 2011.



Ciprian Mureșan, *Untitled (Kippenberger)* (installation view), 2011.



Ciprian Mureșan, *Incorrigible Believers*, 2009.

that are both the same and different.

Pepsi has a place in Romania's Communist past, you know; somehow, the soda managed to enter into the country before the Revolution, and it had a small market. I don't know how it got in, since we were not supposed to have any contact at all with Western values and products.

EN: So the Pepsi can was like the Trojan horse? A hidden channel of Western influence into Romania?

CM: Yes, and it was all about hidden channels. In Romania, we were isolated from the other countries in the Eastern Bloc; it wasn't easy to travel to the USSR or East Germany, for example. The regime had given all of us the same system, but in Romania we didn't know much about the Czech or Polish methods for dealing with those shared limitations. We were isolated both from the West - - "the enemy" -- and also from our neighbors, who were ruled from behind the same Iron Curtain. Although the alienation was packaged differently, it was ultimately the same. Maybe *Choose* reflects that.

EN: Your work *Pioneer* (2010) comprises a series of sketches for an animation in which children in white shirts and red scarves -- suggestive of Communist Youth organizations -- sniff glue out of small bags. I'm assuming the imagery alludes to a famous post-Soviet scandal in Romania, in which homeless children were found living in underground sewage passageways.

CM: It does. The image of the homeless child huffing glue became the symbol of the failed introduction of capitalism into Romania. But the truth of it is that the homeless



Installation view of *Ciprian Mureșan*, 2011. David Nolan



Gallery, New York

Ciprian Mureșan, *The Doomed City*, 2011.



Artist *Ciprian Mureșan* with *The Refrigerator*, 2009.

children were there during Communism as well as afterwards. They are not simply the casualties of capitalism; they co-existed with both systems.

Pioneer is, to me, the perfect image, in that it reveals both as myths and as systems of hypocrisy: you have very well-dressed, educated people who inhale, and at the same time you have drug addicts who wear uniforms. I am interested in the space where these two worlds meet. The presence of the myth in Romania's history is strong: it has been used again and again to give the people something to believe, and to retroactively justify the troubled and conflicted course of history.

EN: Religion is another motif that figures prominently in your work. Romania is overwhelmingly Christian, and religion has flourished since the fall of communism. Can you elaborate?

CM: Well, religion was forbidden before the Revolution. Ceaușescu came to power in the '60s and he changed Romanian Communism from Soviet Communism to a singular, nationalist brand: the Romanian Nationalist Orthodox Party. After Ceausescu's fall, people needed to fill the ideological void with religion, and many more churches were built. Once you have built a church, of course, you have to paint it. And of course you need people to do this. This is how we developed in the universities an entire department called "pictura monumentală," the painting of icons for religious purposes -- and these days, those departments are full.

EN: In your 2010 video *Santa Claus*, a baby in what looks like modern, secular clothing is baptized in a stark white room. Guests stand in the

background, and the holy water is contained in a blue plastic tub. The priest, however, has been replaced by a bearded man in a Santa costume. Was your intention to present an exaggeratedly modernized rendition of this very traditional ritual?

CM: It's a shame if you can't view that video with its soundtrack of the Santa priest's recitations and chants. The ritual is very archaic, and it's strange and even scary when you listen to the words -- I get goose bumps. I substituted Santa Claus for a real priest because they both have beards, and in Romania everyone has a beard. There is something revealing about the desire to envision the priest as this mythical, paternal figure -- and Santa Claus plays a similar role for people.

Well, in 2004 when I made that work, there was no institution or place for art in Romania. At that time, there was no other end for a "leap into the void" but this end. These days, you can see some small progress -- but it is very slight.

My video mocks the pomposity of these archaic traditions. Most of the actors are my friends, but for the Santa priest, I hired a professional. The interesting thing is that he said while we were filming that when we were done, he intended to go to a real priest and confess. I was shocked; I asked him, "If you play a murderer in a movie, do you go to jail when you are done filming?"

Then I realized how powerful religion is in Romania, on an individual level. It's scary; these days they want to allow old people to have healthcare only if they are religious; they won't let you into the old person's home otherwise. It's all a way of keeping the

power. So this work is a joke, but when you listen to the traditional chanting of the Santa and consider how much significance the ceremony, the words, and all they symbolize have for many people in Romania, it's also very serious. As I told you, filming it even upset the actor.

EN: Like a lot of artists, you seem interested in reinterpreting Western models for a more local, Romanian tradition. Your photograph *Leap Into the Void, after three seconds* (2004), which derives from Yves Klein's 1960 photograph *Le saut dans le vide (Leap into the Void)*, comes to mind. Your image pictures a man splayed face-down on the cobblestones of a small street, as if he has leapt from the window above. The sense of transcendence and liberation captured in Klein's image of the artist leaping from a window, frozen in mid-air with arms spread, is resolved tragically in your version -- 40 years and "three seconds" later -- as hope collapses and flight yields to gravity.

CM: Exactly. In my photograph, I created a parallel world that was specific to Romania, which represents how the situation looked for an artist in Cluj in 2004: nobody cared about the arts. Forty years after Klein made his seminal image of the emancipation of the artistic impulse in Paris, our stone streets could be anywhere in Europe, even in Paris -- but the difference between my world and the world Klein represents is embodied in those three seconds between the leap and the fall.

EN: Is Romania a world without hope for artists?

CM: In Romania, there is no institution or place for art. There is no other end for a leap into the void

but this end.

EN: In your video *Untitled (Monks)* (2011), you parody that mainstay of medieval knowledge, the copying of manuscripts by monks holed up in monasteries. The work presents actors dressed as monks copying Western art books, whose topics range from Joseph Beuys to Structuralism. Contemporary art trends are treated like the word of god; I take it you are being ironic?

CM: As always. This video is about the tendency to copy only forms, not content. Repeating, imitating, worshipping, without understanding the substance of what you're copying.

But there is more to it: the monks are copying out of a catalogue, copying something that is already a reproduction. This is an idea that appealed to me: we often copy or imitate based on reproductions of a given artwork -- not from the original. There is this disconnect between ourselves, our present, and the history that we are supposed to digest. To express and experience this, I created the video animation *Untitled (Kippenberger)* (2011), by copying each frame from a documentary about Martin Kippenberger's installation *The Happy End of Franz Kafka's 'Amerika'* (1994).

I didn't go stand in front of the actual installation to make my drawing; I worked from a distillation of the work, through film. I tried to find a segment of the footage in which the installation moves just a tiny bit, and you see this slight movement in my animation. The result is that the animation reads like a fragment, like a broken LP which comes around again and again, and there is a nice symmetry in this for me. The work has been removed from

its context through reproduction, and reproduction of a reproduction, so it also has basically been reduced to a mere fragment of history.

EN: This week the New Museum opened "Ostalgia," a survey of art whose subject is life in the former Soviet bloc -- and the tendency to retroactively fetishize it. What's your reaction?

CM: Romanian nostalgia for the '30s is a good example of the way that people romanticize the past and create myths to justify and explain history. That period is often considered to have been something of a Romanian Golden Age, casting Bucharest as "Little Paris" -- but in fact that period coincided with the arrival of the Fascists in Romania. Poverty was rampant. This is the sort of paradox that we see now so frequently. When one ideology fails, you have to replace it quickly, to fill in the gap in people's minds and to immediately give them something else to cling to. People need to believe in something.

But for me, this has always been confusing: the history we were taught seemed to conflict with itself. With my art, I try to isolate these kinds of contradictions and to put the question to the viewer: which of these is true, if any of them are?

It is one thing to consider the past critically, to conceptualize and problematize it, and it is entirely another to simply select an image or idea from the past and present it as it is. This constitutes a sort of romantic nostalgia in which ideas or objects exist only insofar as you remember relating to them -- they are for you only, part of your personal past.

Nostalgia can be a dangerous trap which enables the over-simplification of symbols and icons. I think this is a tendency in Romania, and we must be wary of these reduced images, which might be used to seduce or persuade.

EN: Your work *Incorrigible Believers* (2009) comprises an installation of black church pews and an altar, on which sits a copy of Kafka's unfinished novel *The Castle* (1922); in Kafka's story, the protagonist, "K," struggles to gain access to the rulers of a castle who mysteriously have power over the village. You completed the narrative in two short pages, leading K to realize that his desire to help is futile and that people are ultimately enslaved because they want to be.

CM: My idea was to use my own very simple prose to somehow embody Kafka's perspective; it isn't necessarily expressive of what I personally think about people. I do agree in some ways, but I'm not quite so pessimistic or cynical as the character in the book -- or, I think, as Kafka.

EN: So, people are driven to adhere to some system, like religion or politics? Are you suggesting that we are all incorrigible believers?

CM: Yes. You can't tell from the reproduction of the work, but I actually made these benches the size of small children. The idea was to parallel the play-places created for children in shopping malls. But here, a viewer comes into the gallery to see the exhibition, and these small benches are there for his or her child to play on -- or, rather, to *pray* on! It's a self-reflexive, perverse work. Who is the incorrigible believer?

EN: Dark and ironic humor typically is expressive of a hidden discontent or

difficulty. Are you more about serious commentary or making jokes?

CM: I think it's a combination. Bulgarians seem also to have many artists who use humor; the artist Nedko Solakov, for example, works only with irony and satire. We also have the Romanian artist Dan Perjovschi, who makes social and political commentary via caricatures. Countries of the former Eastern Bloc seem to share this sensibility; perhaps you're right, it might be a way of relating to painful things with some distance; it is perspective, after all, which allows us to re-envision things as they are, and gives us critical capacity.

EN: Do you ever feel burdened by history, or worry that you might rely too much on reference and allusion?

CM: This is a difficult question. But in terms of producing, I feel that the world is full of so many products, like art, which are already in circulation. Why not use the tools and materials that we have already, applying new focus or perspective to analyze and understand them in new ways, to create works that recycle and develop instead of starting from scratch? I don't consider any work of art to be finished. If there is an artist who left works of art behind him, I think it is part of the world's prerogative to take the work's ideas or images or meaning, and to continue it, to develop and build upon it. I don't think art making needs to be static; it's not a closed system.