

frieze

Cornel Brudaşcu

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Cornel Brudaşcu, *Untitled*, 2010, oil on canvas, 50 x 60 cm.

Cornel Brudascu, now in his 80s, never considered himself a pop artist. That was until he was brought to international recognition as part of 'The World Goes Pop' at London's Tate Modern in 2015. The Romanian painter's latest showing of works, at Galeria Plan B in Berlin, opens with a portrait from 1970 that was included in that very exhibition. It depicts a friend of the artist, Ion Munteanu, who is elevated to the status of celebrity icon in a hazy, shrill green. Brudascu's engagement with international pop culture would have been sparse in communist Romania – a kind of mirage half-lived through imported German magazines. With Munteanu's portrait he stretches towards that glossy image, but underscores it with a certain sadness. It is not, however, the Warholian alienation intrinsic to consumer society, but something far more immediate. Munteanu committed suicide. Brudascu's is a picture of private mourning, and testament to the curbed creativity of a generation of artists living under the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceauşescu.

This fluorescent canvas stands in stark contrast to the exhibition that follows: a collection of small oil paintings in dark burgundy hues, dipping in and out of abstraction, and simple graphite sketches. All untitled and produced, for the most part, at unspecified points throughout the last 15 years, the works appear as part of a continuum; truly 'a body', expanding and receding with the ebb and flow of breath.

The display could be interpreted as a deconstruction of the painter's process: drawings taken directly out of Brudascu's sketchbooks and isolated details minutely depicted on tiny canvases like preliminary studies for larger works. But if what we are seeing is a process, it is one for which there is no finished product. Each motif is presented alongside the next in such eclectic styles that it only

adds volume to the showcase, rather than fills out a blank. In one drawing, two bodies, perhaps midway through somersaults, have a cartoonish humour to them, while in another the high drama of the Russian ballet is frozen in a pose. A third recites a simple desire for affinity: two figures seen from behind in half-embrace. As such, the sketches achieve an unmeditated intimacy, like spontaneous imprints of the artist's psyche, scattered yet naturally coherent.



Cornel Brudașcu, *Portrait (Ion Munteanu)*, 1970, oil on canvas, 120 x 91 cm.

Brudascu's fascination with dance and movement is reminiscent of that found in post-impressionist painting, but his works are tinged with a distinct homoeroticism that is both tortured and tender. This ambivalence is especially pronounced in the dim oil paintings; in a couple of works, the pale bodies of young men slung across a rug of royal purple could be either resting or unconscious, romantic or tragic. It is not vital to the paintings to know that Brudascu came out as gay during this rather late period of his life. However, to see this reflected in these works is to witness a slow, poetic journey of coming to terms. Not combative and public, as minority struggles have otherwise been, but dream-like and tentatively longing.

Best at capturing this sense are the more abstract paintings. With wild brushstrokes, Brudascu portrays sensuous and saturated interior landscapes, which find their hinge to shared language through subtle kinship with the graphite sketches. Alone in the exhibition's last room, hanging on the reverse of the wall that displays Munteanu's portrait, a small watercolour of a pastoral scene acts as a bright green bookend. Together, they elegantly make up a false proscenium to frame the privacy established in the other works. As ever, the most convincing expression of intimacy is that performed on a stage.