

Serban Savu

Heroes, Saints and Other Figures

Opening November 23, 18 – 21 h

November 23, 2018 – January 19, 2019

Tuesday – Saturday, 12 – 18 h

Potsdamer Strasse 77 – 87, 10785 Berlin

Galeria Plan B is pleased to announce the solo exhibition of Serban Savu, to open on Friday, the 23rd of November 2018.

Serban Savu's skillfully rendered canvases capture the daily existence of people at work and leisure. The artist's realist depictions of life in urban and rural landscapes evoke the essence of a rapidly changing society. Characterized by empathy and close observation, reduction and re-composition, his paintings are capable of initiating an assessment of the present moment understood in a wider, historical sense.

The exhibition *Heroes, Saints and Other Figures* references the relationship between myth, religion and ideology, the paintings exhibited marking a change of perspective in the work of Savu. Painted in his new studio in Cluj, the works reflect an inward return of the way of looking, which for Savu had been mostly directed towards the exterior world so far. With a personal interest in ancient worlds and having always paid close attention to the human nature, Savu explores various layers of reality as filtered through art history, in a revival of allegorical and mythical situations inspired by contemporary daily life or recent events, such as the protest against shale gas exploitation from Pungesti in Romania. The link between these ideas and the artist's current interests are the main topics of an interview by Mihai Pop with Serban Savu conducted in Cluj, in November 2018:

"Mihai Pop: At some point, you said something very interesting about classicism understood as reality filtered through intellect. Can you develop?

Serban Savu: For example, what was happening during the Florentine Renaissance, when drawing had a pivotal role. Drawing as a projection of the mind. Colour was laid on this scaffold and drawing was a mode of grasping the world; and even if drawing was the consequence of the careful observation of the reality, in the end it was freeing itself from the reality becoming something else.

M.P.: More likely it was illustrating ideals.

S.S.: Yes, it was serving the world of ideas, not the physical world.

M.P.: But you are not a postmodern artist. You don't take this as a quotation or as a very tempting aesthetic formula. Driven by your goal you effectively use it, placing yourself in a certain ancestry, even a family.

S.S.: It's part of the language.

M.P.: Why do you use this type of representation highly connected to the Renaissance? I am thinking, more precisely, about the manner of the body, its positions, and attitudes. It's not just a simple reference, a collage. You see the world through this filter.

S.S.: I am not sure we can talk about a "why" here; it's difficult to explain a sensible choice. The fact that the Renaissance is occasionally a source of inspiration for me does not reflect something rational; but I think there are many similarities to how I relate to representation; I looked for a genuine source of inspiration.

M.P.: We had a series of talks during the last years, apparently following closely every exhibition or every new stage in your painting. Now it seems to be a significant change. Not necessarily formal, but from the point of view of the attitude. You said recently, repeatedly even, that you no longer look out of the window. You used to look out of the window very often, you watched the world, and

now it seems that you turned to the inside, you are not so much interested in the outside world, you radically changed the perspective, to put it so. Why did you do that?

S.S.: One of the reasons was that I moved to a new studio. My former studio at the Paintbrush Factory was in the middle of the events; every time I looked out of the window, I saw a painting—naturally, it was very tempting.

M.P.: You painted a lot what you were seeing and that was preponderant?

S.S.: I don't know if it was too much but I consumed that field and that type of looking. I used it up.

M.P.: From that angle, looking from above, from a position that allowed you to follow several scenes at the same time.

S.S.: And a larger space at the same time. A space that was defining for the characters, a space that encapsulated history and layers of accumulation but also a type of organization; the way the space was organized defined the characters.

M.P.: By symbolically lowering the curtain, by drawing the window curtains, does this enable you to access a world you carry inside? It's like saying: "I know what is outside; I don't need to look out of the window to say what is out there. By now I already have a knowledge amplified and supported by what I know from the art history and history in general." It's like the history is repeating itself, the situations repeat.

S.S.: Yes, it's true. Art history has always been a source of inspiration for me, even when I was looking out of the window. Now even more so...it's guiding me, and, definitely it provides the tools, the language...

M.P.: Could we say that you corroborated what you have been seeing for years outside with the art history? Were you able to find the same situations reiterated in a larger, stratified history that also includes the time factor?

S.S.: Actually these situations unfold before my eyes. It's probably a sort of reflex that makes me connect the real world and the imaginary world of the art history.

M.P.: This explains why, although your painting has always been remarkable beyond its inherent quality, for the courage of bringing back to painting the metaphor, the symbol, you were never afraid of these things. But now it's more than metaphor and symbol, now it's allegory, mythology. The series of paintings we are looking at now, paintings from your next show in Berlin, is marked by the revival of allegorical and mythological situations.

S.S.: This is also closely connected to a specific interest I have in ancient worlds. I like to travel to the Mediterranean region, visit ancient sites and read mythology. To read *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* visiting the places that sparked the myths ... Mycenae, Troy, Ephesus, Corinth, and Argos...

M.P.: One of the works, *The Weeping Willow*, makes me think of Poussin, not only because of the painting formula, but also because of the manner you associate nature with allegorical themes.

S.S.: Poussin is one of the painters from whom I draw a lot of inspiration, and I am sure this painting can be considered a homage to Poussin. It's a dialogue between painting and photography. The character is in a painting and he can no longer discern the reality. Or the reality merges into the painting. He is actually inside Poussin's painting.

M.P.: The character went out in the middle of the nature and stands in awe of the spectacle of nature, of the tree struck by lightning, fallen down, contorted.

S.S.: A romantic feature.

M.P.: We find something in his cultural layers that tells him: "This is indeed something to take a picture of." He is the romantic admirer from the Caspar David Friedrich's paintings.

S.S.: At the same time, this awe of the force of the nature is something ancestral.

M.P.: The primal fears of the mankind.

S.S.: Exactly, the ones that generated the myths. Through imagination, the myths bring us closer to knowledge.

M.P.: In a sense, we go back to my question. You no longer need to look out of the window to have the confirmation, with every scene observed in the reality, of something that is inherent to our deep human nature; the myths and the ancient culture already provide you that. They give you an explanation, an interpretation. From this point of view, you seem to have tipped the balance in favour of the art history rather than the street.

S.S.: And yet, on the street, in my walks, I sometimes find the inspiration. The scene from *The Weeping Willow* is real. I went to the countryside and I saw it, I found myself in a romantic position, in awe of the force of the nature. And I made the same cultural connections the character from the painting makes. Even if I didn't depict myself, the character represents me; he is my alter ego.

M.P.: By painting the surrounding reality and paying attention to the human condition, to the worker, by using the power of abstraction and metaphor, you suggest a perspective that takes us back in the history. Another painting that is worth talking about is here in your studio, and we are actually looking at it right now. What I see here is an image with a double meaning. On the one hand, I see uniforms, boots, and truncheons—an aggressive situation. On the other hand, I recognize on the spot a scene from the art history. The disposition of the bodies, a certain rigidity of the characters, something frozen that goes back in the art history.

S.S.: Not by chance it is called *The Deposition*.

M.P.: You are telling me that we have here the soiling of the feet from the biblical scenes, the fixed disposition of the characters from Early Renaissance, but you are also mentioning the protests from Pungesti.

S.S.: The trigger was the protest from Pungesti; this was the starting point. It was happening a few years ago, a protest against shale gas exploitation. It was a demonstration of local people and activists. These people were brutally beaten by the police, it was a conflict much publicized at the time. I have seen some documentary photos and I was inspired by one of them. I started from there, from reality, with this character that is carried by the police officers and I instantly remembered a painting by Titian, now on display at Louvre, *The Entombment of Christ*. It was like superimposing two reversal films, one mental and one with the documentary photography. For me, it was something obvious.

M.P.: But how much of the social situation remains?

S.S.: It is transformed, because the language of painting has its own rendering space. This is fundamentally a universal scene, even if it originates in a very specific time and place. The medium of painting contains and amasses all the knowledge of the mankind in this field. It has such force and information in itself that you wonder why not to use it. In this sense, I relate with admiration and great interest to this language developed over centuries. For me, the language of painting is a tool, I am not interested in formal innovations, I want to say things by using this medium. The characters from the background of the painting, their proportion and the way they are depicted come also from the art history. I remember many paintings with characters in the background, with unnatural proportions, either too big or too small; and this gives the painting a playful or funny atmosphere, even though the theme of the painting is very serious.

M.P.: Or maybe it suggests the idea of fiction or allegory.

S.S.: Exactly, of fiction.

M.P.: There are different layers, the characters are not all in the same plan (or the same landscape, for example), they are all put together, although they come from different contexts, strengthening actually the image with their presence and adding drama to the situation.

S.S.: And giving it purpose. Those characters are there for a reason; it's not like when you take a snapshot and you catch things on the camera that although they are very natural, they make no

sense for the construction of the image.

M.P.: I would like to talk about another work, the one with the mosaic from the bus station in Chisinau (*The City is Being Built and Flourishes 2*, 2017), with the people sitting in front of each other, waiting for the bus.

S.S.: They are in a moment of transition, in a state of transition.

M.P.: In this work, you practically confront two worlds: one ideal and one real; one imagined by the previous generation—an ideal one—, and one of the immediate reality surrounding us.

S.S.: It's the utopic image of the previous regime, well represented in the official art. Like in the case of the classical painting (we go back to the topic we discussed today), El Greco or Titian for example, it divides the world into different registers, the real world in lowest part of the painting, the sacred world in the upper part. It's not the only work in this series. With these re-enactments I made during the last years, I wanted to put myself in the shoes of the artists from the past, to duplicate their works and understand their limitations, what is authentic and what is propaganda, where censorship comes in, what the limit of artistic freedom is, and where the political agenda starts. I don't know if I managed to answer these questions, what I know is that I started to regard differently the monumental Socialist realist works, trying to look at them as I look at Greek or Roman frescoes and mosaics. And I believe they are essential testimonies for what had happened during the recent past, just like the Roman-Greek art tells us a lot about the world of Antiquity. Many of these socialist realist works are literally disappearing, as it was the case with the mosaic on the façade of the factory *Steagul Rosu* from Brasov, a mosaic I have reproduced or reinterpreted in several of my works.

M.P.: What can you tell us about another work of yours, *The Giant*, a key work in the show?

S.S.: The starting point was a short story by Mircea Eliade. I read it when I was in high school and it stayed with me, as I was fascinated about the way reality is distorted by the means of a writer's skills, just like the yeast makes the dough grow. I remember it was about a middle-aged engineer who suddenly started to grow. The man goes to a doctor who diagnoses him with *macranthropy*, a genetic disorder, but who also assures him that it will stop. But our character doesn't stop growing and, as he grows larger and larger, he can no longer live in the city. He takes refuge in the mountains, a friend brings him clothes, blankets, food; and as he grows even bigger, the peasants chase him away with stones. Later he vanishes and he is last seen by the seaside entering into the water and disappearing on the horizon. It is a short story that explains how the reality turns into myth. The myth of the giants is present in the culture of many people. I wanted to paint a miniature giant but the scale is the one that offers the key here. The character is very small compared to the size of the painting and the size of the painting is small. The trick of the perspective, which is the power of the art, is what gives him the stature of a giant."

The complete text of the interview is also available in the printed leaflet of the exhibition.

Serban Savu, born 1978 in Sighisoara, Romania, lives and works in Cluj. Solo exhibitions include: *Serban Savu*, Museo Pietro Canonica a Villa Borghese, Rome (2018); *Pictures at an Exhibition*, Galeria Plan B, Berlin (2015); *Daily Practice for the End of the World*, Plan B, Berlin (2012); *Close to Nature*, David Nolan Gallery, New York (2011). Group exhibitions include: Ciprian Muresan and Serban Savu, *L'entretien infini*, Centre Pompidou (2018);... *HOUNDED BY EXTERNAL EVENTS ...*, Maureen Paley, London (2016); *Landscapes After Ruskin: Redefining The Sublime*, Hall Art Foundation, New York (2016); *Appearance and Essence*, Art Encounters Biennial, Timisoara (2015); *Tracing Shadows*, PLATEAU, Samsung Museum of Art, Seoul (2015); *Defaced*, Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, Boulder, Colorado (2014); *Romanian Scenes*, Espace Culturel Louis Vuitton, Paris (2013); *Hotspot Cluj. New Romanian Art*, ARKEN Museum for Modern Art, Ishoj, Denmark (2013).

For more information, please contact the gallery at contact@plan-b.ro and +49.30.39805236.