

Adrian Ghenie

1 April – 13 May 2023

Opening: 1 April, 4 – 8 pm

New Address

Strausberger Platz 1, 10243 Berlin

Galeria Plan B is pleased to announce the fifth solo exhibition of Adrian Ghenie (b. 1977) and the first to open the new Berlin gallery space at Strausberger Platz 1.

After ten years on Potsdamer Straße, Galeria Plan B moves to one of the iconic towers on Strausberger Platz, also known as Haus Berlin. Based in the German capital since 2008, the gallery takes a leap forward and expands with new exhibition and office spaces spread across the ground and first floor of the 14-storey building.

Designed by the chief architect of East Berlin Hermann Henselmann and built during 1953-1956, Haus Berlin together with Haus des Kindes form the entrance to the Magistrale. The architectural complex, starting in Strausberger Platz and stretching down all along Karl-Marx-Allee, is on its way to become a UNESCO World Heritage-listed monument. Galeria Plan B resettles in close proximity to emblematic sites such as Kino International, Cafe Moskau, or Babette and joins the galleries Captain Petzel and Peres Projects in breathing new life into the culturally acclaimed neighborhood.

Adrian Ghenie (b. 1977) will inaugurate the new space with a presentation of his most recent paintings. With this exhibition, Plan B celebrates Ghenie's growth in the city, which is also home to the artist's studio.

Juggler with Still Life

The figures in Adrian Ghenie's recent cycle of paintings are time-travelers: time travels through them, affecting their constitution, their capacity to voice presence or narrate biographical continuity. The works portray quasi-protagonists – figures about to become grounds, grounds usurping the place of the figure by taking on a vaguely, convulsively anatomical form. Torsos are undone into spiraling flimsiness, skulls become baroque enclosures, limbs twist or twitch and eyeballs work like hinges in the rotations of an abstract, panoramic optics. The universe is very much in motion, seemingly pivoting on their body parts and sensory organs. The vitality of gestures and the torsion of postures in the paintings is not an occasion to compose movement as extension or purpose, as fragment from a destiny. Rather than propelled by an inner need, it seems to happen, catastrophically or at least begrudgingly, from the outside – as a force that is exterior to these brittle bodies, marionetted by their circumstances. Their appearance is laboriously decomposed, rendered as a swirling mass of expansions and contractions. Having received the stigmata – without source, ecstasy or recompense – of smudges and blurs, wounds through which they hemorrhage resolution, they toil at the borders of perceptual distinction, between a vanishing that is never reached, and a

coherence that their depleted vitality cannot guarantee. In this atrophied time, nothing ever ends and nothing really begins.

Ghenie work on this cycle of pictures grew out of his experience of the pandemic: Covid as an existential obstacle, confinement in an exasperated, vertiginous stillness, on the backdrop of a global malfunction in the fabrication, maintenance and distribution of the 'now'. It might be useful to recall that the beginning of the pandemic, when the news abounded in images of skies partly cleared of toxic plumes and of wildlife venturing into deserted city streets, brought about the compensatory, comforting rhetoric of a new beginning, where Mother Earth offered its prodigal offspring the occasion to start over. The tropes of metamorphosis, of the re-inaugurated world were initially precipitated by the crisis and quickly muffled by the calculus of victims and vectors of infection. If crisis is "an emergency in the reproduction of life, a transition that has not found its genres for moving on" (Lauren Berlant), 'we' were, it seemed in the beginning, to emerge from 'our' crisis transformed, as new selves released like chrysalids from cocoons of isolation, whose story was going to be told in a new genre, as a bucolic ecology rather than as a planetary elegy. As to Ghenie's figures, absorbed as they are in the streams of pixels emanated by the electronic devices that both constitute and delimit their quarantined world, or simply consumed by the task of having a body and being in the world, they can perhaps be examined from the vantage point of metamorphosis as a visual genre: the representation of two bodies in a single place, of contrasting states, interwoven to tear at the solidity of what had been a person.

Both peeled and turned outwards as bundles of nerves exposed to the outside world, and folded upon themselves to seek some imaginary interiority where their integrity would be sheltered, Ghenie's characters are not unlike the personages of metamorphic scenes that abound in art museums, figures that, having nowhere to run when met with an unsurpassable obstacle like the destructive passion of a god or the cruelty of fate, run out of themselves. Ghenie's discomposed, divided individuals belong in the in-between spaces of transformation, creatures of before-after, midway between the two corporeal templates that metamorphoses swap. After one body and in advance of another, they too are spasms of turning: the dismantling of a person, meshed with the creation of another person, in the shape of a person, like an anthropomorphic process of de-creation, as a maelstrom of remnants and potentialities. They might be made of the stuff – either anatomical or allegorical, but surely in pain – that shapes the interim between a former nymph and the tree that she will become, between the flight of a hunter and his future, inescapable pelt or antlers, as he becomes a stag that will be killed by his hounds. This intermediate space is that of the cut, in a cinematographic sense where distinct frames need to be reconciled in the imagination, but also a cut performed on a stage for vivisections, reanimations and magical bodies, saved just before being obliterated. The pastoral scenes where metamorphoses often take place would then need to be understood as plein-air anatomical theaters for the living, where myriad cuts and sutures, partitions and reassemblies are performed on bodies that are half-real and half-metaphorical, half-someone and half-no-one, and that scream in horror until their mouths are covered by bark or fur or shell. The notes below are premised on such a switch: taking metamorphosis allegorically but also literally, as a making-allegorical of actual pain and vice-versa, as a model for radically changing one's body and mind in the event of a crisis.

Looking at art-historical representations of metamorphosis, of bodies encountering a limit they cannot overcome, imagination diffracts between planes of comprehension, macro- and micro-fictions. A supplement permeates and exceeds the contemplation of any of the countless

representations, for instance, of myths from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The cataclysm of change bifurcates into two distinct planes of understanding: on one hand, an overview of a scene where a god's assault is somehow resolved, poetically pacified in the fact that the victim turns into a laurel tree, from which the god can then make a crown to celebrate his – ambiguous but now laureated – omnipotence. On the other, there is the agony of Daphne, the nymph that endures all this corporeal and symbolic ravage. To stay a bit longer with one illustrious example out of many, turning into a tree to escape Apollo, she survives as an emblem, as a 'macroscopy' of male desires in competition with one another and with history, but also as the 'microscopy' of pain: one epidermal enclosure made of wood pierces through one made of skin and ultimately supplants it, her dilated pupils are covered in tree bark, and thousands of artists volunteer to solve the puzzle of her suffering. (I do not attribute such tonal pathos to Ghenie's paintings, whose mood is ironic compassion. He seems mildly amused by the travails of the characters, skeptical and curious about their pirouettes, on the threshold of tragic caricature. This affect, where disbelief melds with derision, and skillfully orchestrated bathos with pity, is not necessarily reserved to 'others', but infiltrates the many possible self-portraits in the exhibition.) Tonal difference aside, I think of his recent paintings as correlates of the figural operations that those classical examples build upon, especially through the Renaissance and Baroque. Ghenie works switch decisively between scales, between the broad and wavering outline of the body and the countless breakages that compose it, reconciling dissonant data into a plausible general organism, whose tortured emergence is always threatened or eclipsed by the multi-directional accidents it weaves together. Everything, with the notable exception of logo on shoes or computers, seems to be made from cuts and interruptions, from the endless addition of divisions and subtractions, from more of less. Figures and spaces negotiate a frenzy of particles in mutation, limbs without a metabolic order and organs without body.

Halfway between that which transforms and that which the transformation brings about, there is a zone of indistinction where dissimilar forms coexist, twined in reciprocal disfiguration and mimicry: the future tree, heifer, river, star or spider dash towards the present, animating the scene with their difference and silencing it ominously with their own languagelessness. The speech of the identity that transforms is lost, its inscription in the world too is radically altered: both figure and ground are transformed in metamorphosis. Such events-as-persons, like Ghenie's variously splayed, skinned or torqued bodies, are, for a time, not more than conjunctive tissue, tendon or ligament extended between a former body and a new position in the world, between a shed skin and a new fiction embraced in order to make a crisis livable. In the paintings here too, the vectors of metamorphic vitalism are bent into circles, wrestling with meaning and nonsense, connection and isolation. That which a Renaissance or Baroque depiction of metamorphosis would compress, the almost abstract interregnum where, between two bodies, there is no body, so that a nymph's fingers can seamlessly ramify into branches and foliage, is here rendered as duration and spasm. As opposed to being accelerated to the point where it does no longer matter, the split second where the two forms collide becomes a timeline. The event of metamorphosis is here a chronic condition, a sickness perhaps. Ghenie's paintings work as a conduit between two segments in the history of metamorphosis, his characters' feverish drive to become themselves as an occasion to review two important chapters in the historical representation of becoming other. Otherwise put, anxious isomorphism in contrast and in lieu of incorporating difference, instances where becoming-oneself, without a script and a horizon, resembles the vagaries and violence of becoming-another.

In modern art, metamorphosis loses its Ovidian quickness and endlessly polymorphic capacities in favor of a different guise: a heavy mask, weightier than the body that wishes to disappear behind it.

If metamorphosis had always been a rhetorical subterfuge for death – a prettying-up of a ruined body as opposed to its mourning, a celebration of the perpetrator’s morphological prowess, a consolation with destruction in a world premised on change –, there rhetorical processes are jammed in modern art. Death moves closer to the foreground in modern conceptions of metamorphosis, which un-veil its presence and grasp. More so perhaps than old allegories, modern reconfigurations of the body interests Ghenie, who is an avid observer of the ways in which German expressionism, for instance, responds to the horrors of war, picturing lacerated skin as an interface between a devastated world and a wrecked self. Modernist metamorphoses equate physical transformation and irretrievable loss, change without compensation and without last words, change which cannot be mistaken for an oblique salvation or metaphorical triumph. Especially in literature, their common narrative thread is the exhaustion of a body which, having consumed its protean capacities of adaptation, awaits its end in a world that, like itself, can no longer transform. There is of course a world of difference between Ovid’s hyperboles of animation, the vitalism of the classical canon of metamorphosis, and the deathly inertia that Raymond Roussel’s crazed mechanical contraptions attempt to conquer, or the static stupor of Gregor Samsa waking up as a beetle, confined between bodily identities and deprived of the speech that could tell of his condition. That which does not make sense in classical metamorphosis, a difficulty – the resistance of bodies that are not as plastic as they should be – over which the genre prevails in the sheer vivacity of description, in the fact that another metamorphosis, with its own stupefying anatomy and vanquished incredulity, is always about to occur: that split second of impossibility and suspension is indefinitely lengthened, looped with itself and turned into a duration. The magic of instantaneous substitution, that Ovid’s countless illustrators emulate in the attempt to grasp the moment when two recognizable bodies seem to protrude one out the other, becomes either an atomist protraction, a slow shedding of skins in a diminished world, or a smashing of bodies against one another until there is nothing left. The history of metamorphosis as genre changes when modern writers and artists halt or hijack the symbolic machine at the very moment when it could project a rhetorical plenitude, the drama of a changed body against an eternity of changing shapes and worldly forces in flux. Modern art turns metamorphosis into the production of a perplexity without resolution, of an inertial, counter-metaphorical time that is either just before death – and thus resembles it –, or that has eluded death by abandoning most the characteristics of the living.

Ghenie’s scenes of exhaustion, angst and confusion, imagined in a world that does not transform but that is rapidly and violently deteriorating, have something in common with both modalities of conceiving transformation. Characters erupt into scenes whose confines are swelling and heaving, into those space and simultaneously out of the framework and relative certainties of their own bodies and contours. A frantic internal animation denatures them, countering their efforts to ‘keep it together’: to persevere, light up another cigarette, start another painting, press the button for a video call. When they do act, they swivel away, restlessly seeking a point where they might be done with all the animation and drama, the Archimedean point to make it all stop. A charcoal drawing included in the exhibition dramatizes this ambivalence explicitly: its three bulbous protagonists find themselves in a museum, in a conflicted relationship with a nearby painting that they alternately turn to and away from, both hypnotized and repulsed by the solar glare it depicts. The scene is co-produced by desire and refusal, expressed in tropes of fascination, rapture or epiphany, as the painting on the wall of the museum exudes a supernatural aura, and in the resistance of these opaque bodies which might flee the gallery before they are affected by the otherworldly force, deserting the place of a possible transfiguration. The technologies and screens that consume – sometimes quite literally and palpably, as a luminous union of sender and receiver – their attention

in other drawings and paintings are surely not an indictment of the cultural poverty of social media, but perhaps a comment on a residual space of transformation, which the works often locate between an oversized eye and a bright screen, interlocked in shimmering transmissions. The characters might be building endless inventories of possible metamorphoses, the limitless body of what they could be. What we're seeing is perhaps the shiver induced by that limitlessness, its vertigo.

Mihnea Mircan

Note: *Juggler with Still Life* is the title a 1905 gouache by Pablo Picasso, held at the National Gallery of Art in Washington. Taken as an indication of paused action, one just concluded or that might resume at any moment, Picasso's title captures a distinctive trait in Ghenie's project: the conflation of energy and exhaustion embodied by characters who juggle with the parts of their own makeup as bodies and persons.

Adrian Ghenie, born 1977 in Baia Mare, Romania, lives and works in Berlin.

Selected solo exhibitions: The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg and Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice (2019); The Romanian Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale (2015); Contemporary Art Center (CAC), Malaga (2014); Museum for Contemporary Art, Denver (2012); S.M.A.K. Museum, Ghent (2010); The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest (2009).

Selected group exhibitions: Bonnefanten Museum, Maastricht (2022); Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow; Tempelhof Airport, Berlin; Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2021); Fondazione Nicola Del Roscio, Rome (2019); Centre Pompidou, Paris and Metz (2018); Fondation Vincent van Gogh, Arles (2016); MAK, Vienna and The Metropolitan Art Center, Belfast (2015); MoMA, San Francisco (2014); Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin (2013); Palazzo Strozzi, Florence (2012).

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