



Art of Communism Aftershock

By Abby Luby

Political upheaval, like the tumultuous revolt in Egypt last month, always realizes new creative energy in its aftermath. The turbulent protests in downtown Cairo saw the once-forbidden stenciled graffiti art now appearing on the street, depicting Mubarak's face with the word "Leave." Here in the United States, in the 1960s and 1970s American artists expressed their disdain for the Vietnam War and the unstoppable shift toward a corporate culture, and spoke to the surge of feminism and the inequality of minorities.

Today, thousands of miles away in Eastern Europe, young artists are bringing us face to face with the aftershock of Communism and the agonizing ascent out from under its autonomous grip. Theirs is a startling movement of self-discovery in the shadow of post-Communism angst, and a body of this revealing work can now be seen at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art (HVCCA) in Peekskill in a show aptly named "After the Fall."

For the better part of a year, HVCCA founders and avid art collectors Livia and Marc Straus, scoured Eastern Europe in search of a cohesive body of art that reflected the vivid memory of communism and its rippling affect. They checked out over 350 artists in some 1500 studios, galleries, art schools, alternative spaces and museums. The 18 emerging artists hail from Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Romania and Slovenia. Though the work is mostly large, figurative paintings, the exhibit includes video and films, photographs, and a slide show.

"There seemed to be this crazy kind of theme in the work," says Livia Straus. "It was as if they were coming out of a fog and being followed by ghosts of the past."

Many of the paintings hold a certain "grayness" pushed by a rough, hard-edged reality that conjures a clashing dissonance reminiscent of music by the late Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich. In *Ethical Ideal Cabinet* (2009), an oil painting by Romanian artist Marius Bercea, we



reaching the bovine, as if their veins intertwined. *Statue of a Proper Hand Position* (2010), by Budapest-based artist Attila Szűcs, depicts two men atop a pedestal, frozen and forever humbled, bent from the waist, twisting to face each other. The statue presents as a tombstone partially covered with overgrown, cascading, coral-colored ivy, which seems to slowly encroach on the genuflecting duo.

A motley cast of characters mid-step, ambles towards us along a bleached out dirt road in “Parade”(2010) by Marin Majić, an artist from Zagreb, Croatia. Holding assorted banners, signs and a towering puppet on stilts, the small crowd is diminutive against the overshadowing hulk of textured mountains, suggesting on one hand that their parade is isolated and taking place in a void, or their protest is on its way to another town.

Isolation is a recurrent theme in many of these paintings; living under military rule robs a population of their individuality, slowly being reclaimed among the skeletons of former dictatorships. In many paintings, massive buildings, monuments, old cars and tanks—the toys of tyranny—sit idle as indelible reminders of the social clamp choking the rights of citizens. Loneliness plays like a psychological magnet in *The Shepard* (2008) by Șerban Savu of Cluj, Romania; a man holds center frame in a green field, shearing a sheep, looming in the background is a faded gray sprawl of non-descript buildings, a crypt of humanity, an empty alternative to the solo of farming life.

Straus notes that the artists are surrounded by lasting elements of their country’s history. “But they still move on,” she says “They are recording history through different types of art, telling us how they grew up and where they are now. They have become interpreters of society.”

Though the history of the Iron Curtain is multi-layered and complicated, HVCCA helps parse it out with a clearly delineated time line of each

see the back torso of a man passing through thick, gray curtains to vote. Small portraits of the candidates line up across the top of the canvas, all as devoid of personality as the voter: casting a ballot may have no real consequence.

The large, dark canvas *Europe* (2010) by Hungarian painter Alexander Tinei, has a lightly clad, long haired woman astride on a hulking, brooding bull. A blue diamond is translucently painted over the faces of both human and beast, an indelible mark of some cosmic power. A sketched, disjointed blue line segues to purple, strings down her arm

country starting from the end of World War II. Most artists in this show are in their 20s and 30s, but there are a few who experienced the oppression first hand. Sixty-four year-old artist Ion Grigorescu of Bucharest is revered by the younger generation for holding out under Communism, taking great risks to continue his photography and create videos. His striking black and white photograph *Artist on the Roof* (2008) is the epitome of the unrelenting, lone artist, undeterred from his creative passion. A man is lying on a metal roof, partially on his stomach, one exposed foot lagging behind. His hunched back blocks us (and assumed authorities) from seeing what he is doing, covertly intent on his work. (The show also includes a 1978 film by Grigorescu called *My Beloved Bucharest*.)

A series of photographs called *Nachtobjekte*, by Matija Brumen, includes *Container* (2008), a pigmented ink-jet print that is a minimalist, pristine form. Goran Škofić's five-screen video *Corpus* (2009) is a loop of the artist cloned as a multiple persona, repeating ad infinitum such acts as scuba diving, endless applause at a performance, jumping over a wall, addressing the unshakable connection of non-identity.

Straus says they came up empty handed for work by women, because it seemed that many women artists are involved mostly in performance art. The artists in the show include Elvis Krstulović, Marin Majić, Goran Škofić, Josip Tirić, Zlatan Vehabović, Josef Bolf, Daniel Pitin, Zsolt Bodoni, Alexander Tinei, Attila Szűcs, Jānis Avotiņš, Leonardo Silaghi, Marius Bercea, Adrian Ghenie, Ion Grigorescu, Șerban Savu, Ciprian Mureșan and Matija Brumen.



This show is well worth seeing and stands up to repeated visits since there is a lot to take in. The work exudes a fervent energy drawn from the stigma of social upheaval. It speaks to repression and loss of freedom, themes that have been virtually nonexistent for decades in American art. The work in "After the Fall" just might be a catalyst here in the U.S., inspiring artists to become less insular and connect more to their political and social landscape.





“After the Fall: Emerging Artists from East and Central Europe” runs through July 24, at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art (HVCCA), 1701 Main Street, Peekskill, www.hcca.org, 914.788.0100. Open Sa/Su 12-6 PM and by appt.