

Romanian contemporary art

Transition, trauma and the Cluj connection

For several years now, Romanian painting has been touted as the new big thing. The contemporary art world is, of course, constantly awash with talk of the next sensation, but where there's smoke there's usually some degree of fire, and the moody virtuosity of Romanian art is certainly worth serious attention.



In reality, recognition has been measured but steady; as slow-burning as the smouldering art itself. While the majority of names associated with new Romanian painting remain fairly low-profile, others, such as Serban Savu and [Adrian Ghenie](#) (deservedly the best-known, and whose work (left) requires no further introduction here) are already highly coveted by tuned-in collectors. And their successors, a younger generation of Romanian artists, are starting to prove just as compelling.

Also of interest, however, is the background to Romania's contemporary art renaissance, which shows striking parallels with the success of the Leipzig School, the former East German academy whose alumni were catapulted to international stardom at the start of the noughties.

Many of Romania's new artists are likewise connected to a particular institution: the painting department of the University of Art and Design in Cluj-Napoca, a small city located in northern Romania in the heart of Transylvania (below, left).

Under communist rule, Romanian art education adopted the rigorous figurative requirements of socialist realism; Cluj, always one of the country's most renowned academies, maintained these traditions after communism's fall. Its painters display the same virtuosity that contributed so highly to Leipzig's appeal, but it's at this point that comparisons start to falter.



The so-called Cluj School has its own, distinctive style: a looser use of paint; a less pronounced (though still evident) emphasis on surreal elements; and, most obviously, a far more sombre appearance. New Romanian painting tends towards darkness, both literally and metaphorically.

Many commentators have suggested that contemporary Eastern European art, particularly that from the Balkans, is still in the process of expurgating decades of trauma. The schisms created by years of communist rule followed by its sudden disintegration and the destabilising effects of capitalism are inescapably evident in the region's cultural production.

The generation of Romanian artists who grew up amid such uncertainties certainly document these tensions. Interestingly, however, several spent time abroad at key phases of their artistic careers - Serban Savu in Italy; Adrian Ghenie in Austria; Victor Man in Israel - a distancing which seems to have contributed to a more neutral - even sympathetic - appraisal of their heritage.

Their work frequently seems as wistfully elegiac as it does critical or uncertain, mournfully aware of the rupture between old and new and the difficulties of reconciling memory or nostalgia with history.

Indeed, in many cases the crepuscular light that infiltrates Romanian painting can be seen as representative of hazy indeterminacy rather than the bleak, condemnatory negation with which it is often associated. The motif of a deer dazed by headlights, one used by various painters, seems a particularly apt expression of this bewilderment.



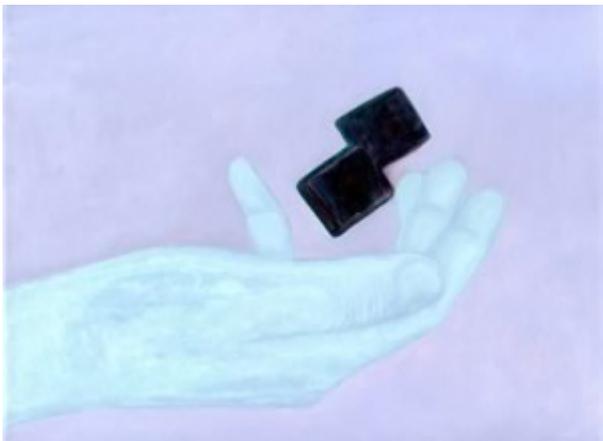
Mike Brennan, March 2009

Such an inheritance is difficult to surmount or ignore, and younger Romanian artists continue to express the difficulties of coping with tumultuous change.

Their approaches, however, are increasingly diverse: Veres Szabolcs, for example, focuses on Romania's classical artistic heritage to explore a contemporary state of mind. Figuration is still the dominant painterly mode, but often accompanied by gestural, expressionistic accents. And a growing concern with the portrait study - not only among emerging artists, but established painters such as Adrian Ghenie (left) - seems to attest to increasing interest in notions of identity less contingent on the politics or processes of reform.

So is Romanian art already the next big thing? Its international prominence is rapidly on the rise, but perhaps it's more instructive to view the roots of Romania's contemporary renaissance as a further addition to a global body of artistic response to unprecedented political and social transition. A theme which, from the likes of China, Poland, Iran, India has come to dominate the last two decades of art, but which never loses its relevance, or power to compel.

Victor Racatau



Born in 1967, Victor Racatau completed both under-graduate and post-graduate studies at the Cluj University of Art and Design, making him in many ways a quintessential exponent of the so-called 'Cluj School'. The inscrutability of fate and hazardous nature of chance is a dominant theme in his work, exemplified by motifs such as the throwing of dice (left).

Labyrinths and maps also occur frequently, used by Racatau to represent the attempted ordering of psychological and historical space. Confronted by his subjects with trepidation and uncertainty, the demands for definitive decision-making that such structured

demarcations infer often appear overwhelming.



Combining brooding grisaille with instances of intensely luminous colour, Racatau's chromatic schema serve as a literal rendition of metaphorical light within darkness; the flickering brilliance of insight and possibility glimpsed from within a dark cloud of unknowing.



Mircea Suciu



Born in 1978, Mircea Suciú considers his work "painting for 'voyeurs'", and as we gaze at subjects engrossed in their own activity, backs to the viewer or unaware of being overlooked, it's a definition that captures the sense of intrusion his works intend to evoke.

Our own focus on the act of looking is frequently mirrored within the canvas itself, with Suciú's protagonists searching or observing, rapt in inexplicable pursuits.

Darkly tinged with the surreal, these paintings - despite their relatively simple composition - provide plenty for the voyeur to consider.

'Ghost' (2008, below) enfolds viewer and subject alike in the dazzlingly-worked drapery of a sheet; in another canvas, the period attire of a seated audience propels us into the past. We can only guess at the reasons.



Images © Mircea Suciú

Cantemir Hausi



Born in 1976, Hausi's family was highly politicized, subject to surveillance by Romania's communist regime and continually under the threat of interrogation. Little wonder, then, that uncertainty and paranoia are strongly reflected in the artist's work.

Hausi's tenebrous chromatic scale is matched by his reluctance to fully delineate and reveal. Secretive gesture and semi-obscure lie at the heart of Hausi's world, a place marked by past shadows and his own disinclination - or inability - to fully emerge from them.



Images © Cantemir Hausi

Radu Comca



Forest glades filled with grazing deer; looming mountains; the moon. Radu Comca relentlessly strips away the romantic potential of such subjects to create images in which 'appropriate' emotional registers seem uneasily absent - even a comparatively lush landscape (below left) is revealed to be a diorama.

Is the world really this disquieting? Comca may have alternative visions, but his work consistently refuses to find serenity and solace in the places most would expect to find them.



Images © Radu Comca

Oana Farcas



Born in 1981, Oana Farcas is one of a newer generation of Romanian artists associated with Cluj, where she began her studies in 1999.

Farcas describes her work as "my own private collection of bits and pieces of recycled memories and visual information".

While this approach to art-making has become increasingly, even predictably, routine, Farcas consolidates this sense of an "imaginary museum" by frequently producing miniature works alongside larger pieces.

These tiny paintings assume various roles; as hand-held objects, curiosities, or jewel-like mementoes.

Displayed in cabinets or vitrines, their proximity and arrangement within a discrete, self-contained space allows for particularly intimate viewing and narrative potential.



Images © Oana Farcas

Serban Savu



Born in 1978, and educated in Cluj-Napoca from 1996-2001, Serban Savu is one of the better known representatives of recent Romanian art, as well as arguably among the most talented.

His paintings depict ordinary Romanians at work and play in equally ordinary surroundings tinged with omnipresent urbanity.

Motorways bisect nondescript riverside vistas; unremarkable streets are dominated by bland, communist-era architecture. Even the most apparently rural of his landscapes are agricultural, destined to supply the towns and cities which somehow feel close at hand (Savu's flat horizons give nothing away, refusing to indicate what might lie beyond).



Yet despite the dreariness of the locations in which he chooses to place his figures, Savu's subjects seem unoppressed by their surroundings, sunbathing, swimming, working, walking; all providing a glimpse of the resolutely quotidian.

Nevertheless, Savu's impressive figuration blinds us to various manipulations. His technique of isolating figures within wide expanses of land or cityscape creates dramatic compositions powerfully at odds with the mundanity of his subject matter. We assume, too, that his works depict the present, when in fact most could easily portray the communist Romania of twenty years past - Savu specifically keeps temporal markers hidden.

In a continual elision of past and present, he transforms all manifestations of the utilitarian and ordinary into moments that surpass the sum of their parts.



Images © Serban Savu

Victor Man



Victor Man's painting, sculpture and installation alludes to Transylvania's folkloric and mythical traditions while simultaneously constructing its own universe of esoteric significance.

Perhaps inevitably, it's a stance that also nurtures popular associations with the land of Vlad the Impaler: packs of wolves, animal pelts, ghostly forms and eroticised imagery are a staple of works that seem dark in just about every sense.

But Man's practice stubbornly resists interpretation, despite indicating that threads of specific meaning support his work- his generally small-format paintings are often conceived as groups rather than single works, for example.

Hinting at worlds and systems beyond familiar experience, the artist's development, in particular, of paintings on glass that reflect the viewer as well as spectral forms produced by the play of light, wrap spectators in the uncomfortably uncanny: clusters of association that insinuate rather than narrate

in the usual way.



Images © Victor Man

Marius Bercea



Born in 1979, and a graduate of Cluj Art Department, Marius Bercea draws inspiration from what he describes as "an intensely personal archive" of memory, artefacts and oral history.

In marked contrast to much other Romanian painting, however, the scenes Bercea records are filled with light and innocent good humour. Playful recollection drawn largely from childhood is depicted with an attendant glow of nostalgic warmth.

Yet Bercea's washed-out chromatic scale not only evokes the distance of memory, it hints, too, at its subjectivity, the possibility of its failure to accurately envisage the world.

Bercea is paradoxically elegiac and critical, closely mirroring the stance (and indeed technique) of many Eastern European artists.





Images © Marius Bercea

Ioana Iacob



Ioana Iacob's paintings are intimate both in scale and content. Born in 1987, she is one of a younger generation of artists whose focus is less on the past than the present - and in Iacob's case, a present that reflects the lives of young women just like herself.

Iacob's canvases depict the absolutely everyday - washing set out to dry; a make-up bag; brushes and cosmetics.

And in many ways, these would make for unexceptional works except for the fact that Iacob's scrutiny evokes shades of nuance far beyond what is depicted.

There's a certain poignancy, for example, in the emphasis on routines which are never shown to bear any particular outcome. Iacob's largely unseen protagonists prepare themselves for everyday eventualities - a

night out; a day at work; time with friends - which, since they remain unseen, may not even occur. The presence of partners or lovers is equally impossible to determine, although sometimes hinted at.

Although anyone can recognise, and empathise with, the daily routines Iacob presents, the emotional tenor of the life (or lives) behind them remains almost entirely mysterious.



Images © Ioana Iacob

Sergiu Toma



The virtuoso skills with which Cluj painters have become associated are especially evident in the work of young artist Sergiu Toma.

Influenced from a young age by 17th century masters, many of Toma's early portraits were concerned with "creating spectacularly realistic images" in homage to great painters of the past.

More recent works, however, place emphasis on atmosphere, an adjustment which seems to have paid dividends in the form of moodily suggestive paintings replete with "evocative power".



Images © Sergiu Toma

Ana Maria Micu



A formidable figurative painter, Micu's practice has undergone numerous revisions since her graduation from Cluj University's painting department in 2004.

Micu is fascinated by gesture and body language, a concern that appears in early portraits which are cropped to exclude the faces of subjects. Later works reprise this theme by focusing on the movement of hands, such as a series of paintings depicting sign language.

In more recent works, the need to interpret has been complicated further, with added texts or the device of paintings within paintings forcing viewers to extract meaning from seemingly disparate sources and assess their interconnection.





Images © Ana Maria Micu

Veres Szabolcs



Another of Romania's emerging younger painters, Veres Szabolcs was born in 1983 and studied in Cluj-Napoca, where he currently lives and works.

Over the last few years, Szabolcs's stylistic approach to painting has undergone various revisions, progressively becoming far more fluid and expressive.

Szabolcs' work revisits dominant themes in Romanian art history, such as hunting scenes and portraiture, but fractures the resulting compositions into highly-charged, gestural surfaces. As distinctions between forms are frantically broken down, landscape, human and animal merge into a grotesque cacophony of impasto marks.





Images © Veres Szabolcs