

## BOOK REVIEW:

### **Anca Bodea and Ioana Olăhuț (eds.), *Cealaltă față a lumii / The Other Face of the World*, Idea Design and Print, 2023, 184 p.**



The volume *Cealaltă față a lumii / The Other Face of the World* highlights a small group of Romanian contemporary female painters who have been formed professionally in Cluj-Napoca at the University of Art and Design, between 2002 and 2015. Published with the support of the Hassium Cultural Association, it is edited bilingually, in Romanian and English, by Anca Bodea and Ioana Olăhuț, both artists and professors at the aforementioned university. The structure of the volume allows the reader to get acquainted with the state of the Romanian contemporary art world and with the works of nine Romanian women artists who have stood out in recent years through their relevant and constant activity in the competitive field of contemporary painting: Ana Maria Micu (b. 1979), Ioana

Olăhuț (b. 1979), Anca Bodea (b. 1982), Ioana Iacob (b. 1987), Mirela Moscu (b. 1986), Anca Brânzaș (b. 1986), Oana Năstăsache (b. 1991), Roxana Ajder (b. 1991), and Andrea Tivadar (b. 1991).

The volume challenges and attempts to answer questions regarding the relevance of painting and how it asserts itself in the diverse mediums of



expression of art today. It also raises the question of whether there is a women's perspective or not on the painting produced in Cluj in the last twenty years. The analysis has been emphasized by the inclusion in this book, in addition to a rich portfolio of the aforementioned nine Romanian women artists, of an interview and three studies that attempt to provide a deeper insight into the raised matter.

The interview, titled *The Other Side of the World*, stands for an introduction written by the editors of this volume, Anca Bodea and Ioana Olăhuț. It gives an accessible overview of how the two artists relate to the creative process, on what they think about painting now. Here, the reader discovers directly from the Romanian women artists the various and complex perspectives of their artistic process. For Anca Bodea, painting is a long series of decision-making, followed by a process of synthesis, concluded with the build-up of a visual language made up of the remaining elements. On the other hand, Ioana Olăhuț asks herself questions about what, why and how it is worth painting now, her art being a reaction to what surrounds her. Another relevant aspect brought to light is the way in which these Romanian women artists perceive gender identity in relation to the art they produced. The artists emphasize that they are not looking for identity art, which they perceive as limiting. More precisely, they just want equal opportunities, arguing that good art is legitimized only by itself, not by gender identity. The publishing of this volume can thus be seen as necessary to enrich the very vast cultural background of Cluj-Napoca, the range of Romanian women artists included here being a subjective yet pragmatic selection, as the editors attest and with which one can agree.

The next part of the book, and the most extensive one, is organized as an art album. For each of the nine women artists included, there is a photograph, a brief biography, a list of selected exhibitions, a statement, as well as reproductions of some of the artworks, accompanied by the title, technique, size, and year of production. Such a way of featuring the works is a well-chosen endeavor through which Romanian women's art asserts itself. It can be regarded as a way of discovering and engaging both the specialized and the broader audience with their works.

The main topics of the artworks range from still-life, landscape, scenes of figures in motion, collective portraiture, to the depiction of ideas, opinions and emotions. In particular, the works and manner of expression of each woman artist included in this volume are analyzed and contextualized from three perspectives that are reciprocally amplified and reinforced in the studies accompanying the book: *The Last Painting* (by Adriana Oprea, art critic and curator, museographer at the National Museum of Contemporary Art Bucharest), *Women's Work* (by Alexandra Chiriac, art historian) and *Color-Impasto-Shade-And Other Essentials* (by Liviana Dan, art critic and curator).

The first study, *The Last Painting* by Adriana Oprea, contextualizes and justifies the persistence of painting as a medium today, while offering a succinct analysis of the works produced by the nine women artists included in this book. The author starts by examining how the subject has been treated in previous art historiography, comparing the international discourse around the practice of painting and its so-called “death” with the situation in Romania. While Adriana Oprea points out that there have been some endeavors going on, in particular recalling the work of Benjamin Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss or Barry Schwabsky, in the case of Romania, she remarks that there have been no art critics or art historians particularly concerned with this subject. Anca Oroveanu is the only Romanian art historian concerned to some extent in the 1980s with the practice of painting as a medium and the so-called death of painting, as she dialogued with the artist Horia Bernea on this matter.

Furthermore, Adriana Oprea delivers a necessary overview of what has been going on in Romanian art in the last few years in terms of an existing trend of recovery, confirmation and reCanonization of women artists, but, from the author’s point of view, this fact is hardly visible in the Romanian painting. She argues that, unlike in other areas of artistic production where women played a more prominent role, there does not appear to have been a distinct female tradition in Romanian painting. Thus, the author concludes that there are relatively few women artists working within the traditionally male-dominated field of painting in Romania, and those who do stand out as exceptional precisely because they are the exception rather than the norm. Referring to the School of Cluj, the author believes that the painting of women artists, of female graduates, has not been properly recorded for reasons related both to the complex and contradictory condition of painting as a medium of expression today, and also due to the problematic condition of women artists in the history of art in general.

Another relevant and quite essential aspect stressed by Adriana Oprea deals with the distinction between feminist painting and simply overall painting. The reader thus learns that the nine women artists included in this selection do not wish to define themselves as feminist artists. Therefore, the painting of the artists featured in this volume is meant to be serious, professional, and valid, without the implications of feminist deconstruction. In this case, one can agree with the author of the study that there is nevertheless a feminist dimension, perhaps not in all of the artworks displayed, but certainly throughout the whole book, which paved the way for a discussion on the feminist implications in the Romanian world of art.

A great asset of this study is the additional stylistic analysis made by the art historian, which facilitates the reading of this book. Therefore, for Adriana Oprea, the painting presented in this volume is both a painting about painting

in the sense of its history as a medium of expression, as well as a painting immersed in a contemporary imagery, a painting that is immediate and relevant to our modern society. She distinguishes at least three ways in which the women artists included in this book paint: those who develop one and the same obsession with imagery from one work to the next over the years (Roxana Ajder, Mirela Moscu, Andrea Tivadar), those who create one cycle of works after which they begin another (Anca Bodea, Ioana Iacob) and those who create works with relatively similar themes, but who operate subtle shifts in technique, subject, format or genre (Anca Brânzaș, Oana Năstăsache, Ioana Olăhuț, Ana Maria Micu).

Alexandra Chiriac's contribution, the study entitled *Women's Work*, is a further addition to the already outlined art historiography discussed earlier. While Adriana Oprea's analysis examined painting as a medium of expression and the perception of women's art, this second study shifts focus to the historiography of how women artists have been integrated into the canons of art history. It explores the distinctions between the image of the woman as an artist and as a muse, and seeks to understand the broader female experience within the art world.

The author exposes the issue of the invisibility of women artists and their absence from the canons of art history by giving a brief retrospective of the art historians who have addressed this issue, among whom we can mention Griselda Pollock and James Elkins. In Alexandra Chiriac's opinion, the invisibility of women artists in Romania is due to the widely used strategy of aligning the geographical peripheries to the Western pre-established values, of trying to belong to the artistic narratives envisioned by a Vasari or Greenberg. This is exemplified by the recent events that took place in Timișoara, in the context of the celebration of the city as the European Capital of Culture in 2023, when a series of prestigious exhibitions were dedicated exclusively to male artists such as Constantin Brâncuși or Victor Brauner.

The text signed by Alexandra Chiriac takes a personal approach to the subject. One can even consider it an attempt to understand the female experience in general in the art world through a feminist perspective. The author directly embraces this aspect, while wondering whether the concerns she raises in this paper are necessarily shared by the artists featured in the book. This gesture is highly relevant to the foray. Upon a closer look, the reader finds that the author critically analyzes the way in which women artists are allowed to express themselves in the art world: both the artworks and the artists are good when they are doing well on their own, when they do not become obvious, they are present, yet mysterious. She argues that female artists who gain recognition in the art world often do so under the premise of exceptional or mitigating circumstances—such as dramatic life stories like those of Artemisia Gentileschi

or Frida Kahlo. The author also outlines a brief stylistic description of the included artworks that could be coded as female. One can consider this a useful addition to the stylistic description made by Adriana Oprea, as an additional way to perceive the art of those nine Romanian women artists. She concludes that the history of art looks different through female eyes. Due to the presence in this book of artworks depicting female figures made by women artists, the long tradition of paintings that served the male gaze is overturned. So it is no longer a question of who is watching who, the painting of these women being rather a powerful painting, which instead of being consumed can now consume the unwitting beholder.

The third and last study included in the book, titled *Color-Impasto-Shade-And Other Essentials* by Liviana Dan, briefly exposes the situation of women artists from the perspective of the philosophy of art. She discusses Immanuel Kant, who is considered to have been the most relevant figure in conceptualizing art and aesthetics, his approach changing the way of understanding and experiencing art by using concepts such as the artist's genius or the sublime experience. The author outlines the feminist approach stated in the 1960s and 1970s, highlighting how Kant's philosophical legacy was increasingly seen as problematic in the context of interpreting women's art. A revision of art history is also highlighted in the paper by mentioning Linda Nochlin's contribution to the field. Due to the fact that it is concise, and also the last to be included in this book, Lavinia Dan's paper serves as a conclusion piece that invites the reader to further reflect on the condition of art production and on how women artists are able to make art nowadays. As she emphasizes in the end, the problem of limitation successfully becomes a problem of choice, with which one can absolutely agree.

The inclusion of a comprehensive portfolio of the women artists, a proper art album, and an introductory interview offers readers a fresh opportunity to explore the Romanian contemporary art scene from the direct perspective of women artists. It also provides insight into the work of nine Romanian painters who have stood out in recent years through consistent and significant contributions to the competitive field of contemporary painting. The integration of the stylistic analysis and of the three historiographical perspectives also provides a better overview of the topic. Thus, both the specialized audience and the broader audience are invited to discover a painting that is extremely relevant today. Furthermore, the publication of this volume timely completes the very comprehensive cultural framework of the city of Cluj-Napoca, the artists featured here being a small group of Romanian contemporary female painters who have been professionally formed in Cluj-Napoca at the University of Art and Design.

Thus the question of whether there is a distinctly female perspective on painting in Cluj over the past two decades is addressed indirectly through the content of all three studies. While the women artists featured in the book do not

seek to align themselves with a specifically feminine or feminist viewpoint, their work aspires to be serious, professional, and legitimate on its own terms, and is intended to possess universal relevance, beyond the boundaries or limitations often associated with the feminist perspective.

It can be reiterated here, once again, that one can also agree with all three authors of the studies (Adriana Oprea, Alexandra Chiriac, Liviana Dan) that in a certain way, the feminist dimension of this book is being highlighted partly through the artworks displayed, and most certainly through the very act of publishing it. This publication opens the door to a broader discussion about what it means to be a woman in the art today. Consequently, the volume *Cealaltă față a lumii / The Other Face Of The World* is certainly a great step forward in the Romanian art historiography, which has not properly recorded the painting of women artists, of the female graduates of the School of Cluj so far, for reasons related both to the complex and contradictory condition of painting as a medium of expression today, and also due to the problematic condition of women artists in the history of art in general.

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