

Remnants: Socialist Realism in Contemporary Romanian Painting

In December 1989, across several cities in the Romania, Romanian citizens, including students and workers, joined in protest against the socialist dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu. Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife were arrested, held trial, and sentenced to death by firing squad. The Romanian Revolution of 1989 is now in the past. But the post- Revolution period of the 1990s and 2000s did not create the expected economic and political accomplishments. With political corruption and economic decline, Romanians today are critically evaluating their socialist past and the outcomes of the post-Revolution. Romanian artists, for instance, are examining “the way the past is remembered or forgotten.”[i] The art of contemporary artists Stefan Constantinescu, Dragos Burlacu, and Adrian Ghenie is significant because it connects and confronts the Romania of today with its past history of socialism through an appropriation of the Socialist Realist style. Constantinescu, Burlacu, and Ghenie employ archival images of a socialist society and particularly of Ceausescu in order to express the uncertainty and nostalgia, which Romanians feel towards their socialist past.

Although counter-socialist art, such as conceptual art, did exist in Romania during the period of Socialist Realism, the dominant form of art was ideologically driven national art that promoted advanced industrial production and the heroism of the working class. For the Romanian Communist Party, Socialist Realism was an effective tool for instituting its socialist agenda on a population which was largely unconvinced with the socialist ideology of the Party. The Communist Party enacted its authority and gained supporters through the application of nationalism in every sphere of society. Scholars working for Ceaușescu supported a national culture within socialism because, as they stated, “in socialism, the national culture becomes fully integrated and can at last constitute a progressive force.”[ii] National culture was meant to inspire citizens to join together into a “progressive force” with fervent belief in the nation and the Communist Party. Theater, literature, film and painting were all used for propaganda as part of the national culture.[iii]

In the 1970s, the nationalist image of the heroic worker within the factory environment changed into an image of consumerism with nationalist undertones. With the increase in industrial production, the Romanian economy became more prosperous. The Communist Party no longer needed to convince citizens of its authority and the effectiveness of industrialization, or at least not as much as in previous decades. By the 1970s, there were plenty of factory workers; however, there was no reassurance that these workers would remain in factories. Socialist Realist images in 1970s Romania emphasized the prosperity of the individual and the family while minimizing the significance of the collective. Ceaușescu was credited for leading Romania into consumerist prosperity with his advancement of advanced industrial production and urbanization.

More than twenty years after the end of socialism and the death of Ceaușescu, Romanian artists are still using the Socialist Realist formal style and the Socialist Realist

propaganda images. Is the subject matter of the art of Constantinescu, Ghenie, and Burlacu political? Theodor Adorno states that committed art “is not intended to generate ameliorative measures, legislative acts or practical institutions, but to work at the level of fundamental attitudes.”[iv] Based on how Adorno describes committed art, the art of these three contemporary Romanian artists is committed art because it expresses the attitudes of Romanians today towards the socialist past. The art of Constantinescu, Ghenie, and Burlacu, although it uses political images, does not aim to instigate political action.

In his paintings, Stefan Constantinescu conveys a sense of nostalgia through the appropriation of images associated with Socialist Realism. His *Infinite Blue* series is based on archival images from “a time when there was housing and education for everyone, high-quality research, state-owned restaurants, and healthy habits for the working people.”[v] Constantinescu expresses the longing of Romanians to return to a past in which Romanians enjoyed more economic stability and a better quality of life than in the present. Constantinescu, however, is aware that the prosperous time of the socialist past was a “false utopia” projected by the Socialist Realist propaganda.



Stefan Constantinescu, *Pastry*, 2009-2010



Stefan Constantinescu, *Weaving*, 2009-2010

With his depiction of women in the *Infinite Blue* series, Constantinescu represents the changing environment of women in the socialist “false utopia.” In the *Pastry* painting, Constantinescu situates a group of women in what appears to be a cafeteria. The women are wearing semi-formal day dresses, which indicate that they are not factory workers taking a lunch break to eat some pastry. Constantinescu represents the women as either affluent professional women or housewives who are enjoying brunch in an inviting café located in a high-rise building. There is something off with the mood of the painting. The women in the café are not interacting with each other. The bright, cheerful color palette that Constantinescu uses for all of his paintings in his *Infinite Blue* series conflicts with the sunken, melancholic faces of the women. The women seem to be aware that they are living in a false utopia. The café scene is contrasted with the factory scene in the *Weaving* painting that depicts women workers in a textile factory. From the late 1960s onwards, women were represented as “consumers and housewives,” rather than factory workers working alongside men in the factory environment.[vi]



Stefan Constantinescu, *The Detergent Department*, 2009-2010

Alongside images of industrialization, Constantinescu depicts consumerism in Romania with his *The Detergent Department* painting. *The Detergent Department* is an example of the growing interest of Romanians in consumer products during socialism. Constantinescu presents consumerism in Romania in an absurd, exaggerated fashion with the excessive number of detergent products on the shelves. His paintings are a commentary on the way Socialist Realist propaganda exaggerated the prosperity of socialist life in Romania when in reality socialist life was less than ideal. With the light color palette and realistic style of Socialist Realist art, Constantinescu expresses the nostalgia of Romanians today for a socialist past that was only experienced in nationalist propaganda and the anxiety of confronting the real socialist past.



Dragos Burlacu, *U.H.8*, 2009



Dragos Burlacu, *U.H.9*, 2009

Meanwhile, Dragos Burlacu manipulates archival images of Nicolae Ceaușescu in his Understanding History series in order to simultaneously humanize the dictator and scrutinize the portrayal of Ceaușescu as a nationalist icon and father figure. Ceaușescu came to power in 1965 and ruled Romania for more than twenty years. Despite having few supporters among Romanian citizens in the 1980s, in the previous two decades of his rule Ceaușescu was seen as a national icon of prosperity and progress. In the 1990s, images of Ceaușescu began to appear on city streets, portraying him as both a clown and a tyrant.[vii] In his painting *U.H. 8*, Burlacu is referencing the post-revolution image of Ceaușescu and countering the nationalist image of Ceaușescu as the great socialist leader. As a clown, Ceaușescu is no longer feared or revered; rather, as a clown, he is ridiculed for his loss of power and respect. Burlacu places Ceaușescu in a comedic role, conveying the belief that the dictatorship of Ceaușescu was all a joke. Romanians of today no longer respect him. In the painting *U.H. 9*, Burlacu humanizes the image of Ceaușescu through the depiction of Ceaușescu playing ring toss with friends. In *U.H. 9*, he is not a nationalist icon floating in the sky over the Communist party but simply an ordinary person engaged in his hobby. In both *U.H. 8* and *U.H. 9*, Burlacu use the realist style of socialist realism to strip away the authoritative power of Ceaușescu.



Adrian Ghenie, *The Trial*, 2010



Adrian Ghenie, *Dada is Dead*, 2009

The art of the third artist, Adrian Ghenie, is much darker in tone and subject matter than of Constantinescu and Burlacu, despite working in a realist style. The art of Ghenie expresses the disintegration of the Romanian past. His two most significant paintings, in my opinion, are *The Trial* and *Dada is Dead*. *The Trial* painting is based on the image of Ceaușescu and his wife Elena at their trial following their arrest during the 1989 revolution. Unlike Burlacu and his clown depiction of Ceaușescu, Ghenie is not concerned with the relationship between Ceaușescu and the Romanian people. In the painting, the figures of Ceaușescu and Elena are not as significant as the disintegrating environment in which they are placed. Ghenie applies paint with a looser brushstroke compared to the controlled application of paint in the Socialist Realist paintings. The looser brushstroke allows Ghenie to express the deteriorating walls and floors of the room where the trial was held. The fragments of a chair, table, and of the two figures appear to be old remnants of the Socialist Realist past. Ghenie represents the bodies of

Ceaușescu and Elena as fragmented ghosts trapped in a room that is slowly disintegrating.

The same disintegration of place is conveyed in *Dada is Dead*. Ghenie depicts the exhibition space from the First International Dada exhibition of 1920. The space in the painting is identifiable with the Dada exhibition because of the figure of the German officer hanging from the ceiling in the corner of the room. However, Ghenie modifies the exhibition space through the inclusion of a wolf, which stares at the viewer from the dark shadows engulfing the crumbling space. Ghenie is referencing the association of Romanian artists, like Tristan Tzara, creating art before the advent of Socialist Realism, with Dada and the avant-garde. The title, *Dada is Dead*, implies a rejection of Dada, and, therefore, of the Romanian avant-garde. Socialist Realism followed the avant-garde in Romania and eliminated the avant-garde. Thus, the menacing wolf could symbolize Socialist Realism amidst the disintegration of the avant-garde in Romania.

Contemporary Romanian artists such as Adrian Ghenie and Dragos Burlacu were born after 1975 and were therefore not present during all the decades of socialism in Romania. Although each individual case is different, it can be argued that the younger generation did not experience trauma as much as, or if any at all, as the older generations of Romanians living through socialism. However, younger generations of Romanians have knowledge of the trauma of socialism and the Ceaușescu regime through their parents and grandparents. Thus, Ghenie is conveying not his own trauma of socialism but the trauma of older generations of Romanians.

Stefan Constantinescu, Dragos Burlacu, and Adrian Ghenie each appropriate the realist style of Socialist Realism and use archival images taken during the socialist regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu in order to convey the trauma, nostalgia and anxiety that Romanians today feel towards their socialist past. The purpose of Socialist Realist images in Romania was to encourage nationalist sentiments for the socialist industrial system and for the rule of Ceaușescu. Romanian Socialist Realist images were nationalistic because they were used for propaganda. Contemporary Romanian art discussed in this paper does not have a political purpose; its concern is to critically reinterpret and historicize Socialist Realist images twenty years after the end of socialism in Romania. It will be compelling to see how the next generation of Romanian artists who were born years after the 1989 Revolution appropriate Socialist Realism in their art.

[i] Caterina Preda, "Art and Politics in Postcommunist Romania: Changes and Continuities," *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 42 (2012): 117.

[ii] Ales Erjavec, "Introduction," *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition*, edited by Ales Erjavec (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2003), 14.

[iii] Denise Roman, "Aesthetics and Politics," *Fragmented Identities: Popular Culture, Sex, and Everyday Life in Postcommunist Romania* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003) 46.

[iv] Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," *Aesthetics and Politics* (London; New York: Verso, 2007) 180. [v] Preda, 123.

[vi] David A. Kideckel, "Economic Images and Social Change in the Romanian Socialist Transformation," *Dialectical Anthropology* (1987): 407.

[vii] Preda, 124.