



SERBAN SAVU

18 Journeys Forged in Communism

Art can be very good at illuminating history, showing how shifting geographies, ideologies and violent upheavals have real but often hidden effects on individuals. That, in a sense, is what the exhibition “After the Fall,” at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art in Peekskill, sets out to do. The show features 18 artists from six countries in Eastern and Central Europe, most of whom were born under Communist rule but

came of age “after the fall.” It’s a great premise, but in the end a very academic show.

MARTHA SCHWENDER
ART REVIEW

What do I mean by “academic”? One definition might include art based on the mediums, styles, techniques and theories espoused by art institutions. It can also mean methods and styles used so many times that they become stultifying templates: overly recognizable, ready-made devices that, in particularly bad moments, feel like gimmicks. “After the Fall” is in this latter category, with a large number of paintings borrowing the techniques and ideas developed by Gerhard Richter and Luc Tuymans.

For these two painters, who came of age during the postwar and post-modern periods, photography and print media became effective ways of mining traumatic histories. For Mr. Richter, it was Nazi Germany and later violent radical politics in 1970s West Germany; for Mr. Tuymans, a Belgian, it was the brutal colonialism practiced by King Leopold II of Belgium in the Congo, among other subjects.

You see the “Richter Effect,” as it has come to be called, studiously employed in many of the paintings on view here. Zsolt Bodoni, an ethnic Hungarian who grew up as part of a minority population in Romania during the last years of Nicolae Ceausescu’s

“After the Fall” is at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art, 1701 Main Street, Peekskill, through July 24. Information: (914) 788-7166 or hvcca.com

EMERGING ARTISTS
Clockwise from above: “An Unimportant Day,” by Serban Savu; “Green Uniform,” by Zsolt Bodoni; “My Beloved Bucharest” by Ion Grigorescu; “Ethical Ideal Cabinet,” by Marius Bercea are among the works on display in “After the Fall,” a show featuring 18 artists from six countries in Eastern and Central Europe.



ZSOLT BODONI



MARIUS BERCEA



ION GRIGORESCU

cu’s rule, uses it in a painting of Tito, the Yugoslavian dictator, in a military uniform, and in “Tito’s Cadillac.” Both works, from 2010, have the dark, fuzzy, Richter-esque, painted-from-photographs look — a technique engineered to make us think about the relationship between images and history (and, by extension, the relationship between photography and painting). Why Mr. Bodoni paints Tito, rather than Ceausescu, isn’t explained.

Where Mr. Richter’s early paintings relied on a gray-scale palette that approximated black and white photographs and television screens, Mr. Tuymans’s coloring has tended toward the muted, sickly hues of faded snapshots or cheap print media. The paintings of Marius Bercea, a Romanian artist, seem very indebted to Mr. Tuymans, particularly works like “Ethical Ideal Cabinet,” from 2009, which suggests some kind of sinister goings-on at the voting station or party office, or the banal tourism of “Black Sea Tan,”

from 2009. Also picking up the Richter-Tuymans thread are Serban Savu, a Romanian, and Elvis Krstulovic, from Croatia. Mr. Savu’s paintings — “An Unimportant Day,” “Three Friends” and “The Shepherd” — feature snapshot-like views of exactly what the title of the first canvas suggests: banality, the mundane and the quotidian. Mr. Krstulovic’s paintings from his “Blurred Narratives” series rely on snapshot and film sources, although they are coated with enamel lacquer, giving them an antiqued look.

Other painters, like Josef Bolf and Daniel Pitin, both from the Czech Republic, beef up the drama in their photo-noir paintings with oozing blood, half-painted bodies and eerie, half-suggested narratives. Alexander Tinei, from Hungary, takes Tuymans-mania into more punky, Surrealist territory, while a drier, more sterile take comes from Adrian Ghenie, a Romanian, who offers a portrait of Ceausescu. Marin

Majic, of Croatia, veers in his paintings from old peasant nostalgia to images of Communist bureaucracy.

The few videos in the show look fresher than the paintings — even when, as in the case of Ion Grigorescu, the oldest artist in the show, they aren’t remotely new. Mr. Grigorescu’s “My Beloved Bucharest,” from 1978, looks as if it were filmed with a pinhole camera. Poor quality, faded color images of the city, shown at jerky, irregular intervals, create a perfect portrait of a place — and suggest the same Richter-Tuymans idea of photographic images as faulty documents of memory and history.

Other videos that deserve mention are Ciprian Muresan’s “Dog Luv,” which appeared in the Romanian Pavilion at the 2009 Venice Biennale and centers on a group of dog puppets discussing the odd ways of humans, particularly their penchant for causing other humans pain; “Corpus,” by the Croatian artist Goran Skofic, a five-channel video installation from 2009 that features Mr. Skofic multiplied in every frame to create a (utopian?) society of himself; and Mr. Pitin’s evocative “Dinner With Malevich”

and “Lost Architect,” which digitally tweak Communist-era film and photographs.

The show does not include any women, although the curators, Marc and Livia Straus, the founders of the Hudson Valley center, said they went to great lengths on their travels through Eastern Europe to find worthwhile works by emerging female artists.

The overall problem with “After the Fall,” however, might be the Strauses’ criteria: The exhibition’s catalog stipulates that the artists “live and maintain studios in their hometowns.” The idea of the local versus the global is central to the exhibition’s aims, and yet, how does this work when art from a specific region in Europe — five painters hail from Cluj, Romania, most of them were trained at Cluj University — is transplanted to the Hudson Valley?

The tale of two Europes is over — although, as the historian Tony Judt has suggested, the separate and “non-communicating stories” of Western Europe and the Soviet bloc were more “accidental outcomes of history” than ironclad realities. For millennia, artists have flocked to large urban art centers, both inside and outside of their own countries. Great work by artists from the former East has been exhibited in galleries, museums, biennials and art fairs both in Europe and this country.

“After the Fall” has been limited by its own premise, which might explain why the work here is generally competent rather than great — or, for the seasoned art viewer, looks academic rather than something befitting a new era in Europe’s political history.