

Central and Eastern European Artists Emerge in KMA's 'After the Fall'



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AFTER THE FALL: Josef Bolf's "Gymnasium," part of a new exhibit of contemporary Eastern European art at KMA, tells a complex and private story.

To consider Marc and Livia Straus ordinary art collectors or curators underestimates their passion for discovering new talent. In *After the Fall*, a new exhibition at the Knoxville Museum of Art, their devotion to helping further the careers of 18 artists previously unknown in the West is as evident as their refined sensibilities. In order to procure featured

paintings and photographs, the Strauses visited hundreds of studios, as well as art schools, galleries, and museums in formerly Communist countries. Their resulting knowledge of the artists selected (and the places where they live) is palpable, given the way works in this show come together.

Originating at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art in Peekskill, N.Y., *After the Fall* represents an exceptional opportunity for Knoxville, seeing that ours is the only other city to exhibit this particular grouping of artists. Romanians and Croatians dominate with 11 contributors, followed by Hungarians and Czechs, and finally one artist each from Latvia and Slovenia. All are men, and almost all are in their 30s, born during Soviet domination. (The Strauses have expressed concern about the current dearth of art produced by women in the aforementioned countries; women are, for whatever reasons, still not really in on the action.)

Due to space limitations, there are fewer works on view at KMA than those originally exhibited at the Straus-founded Hudson Valley Center. However, 18 paintings, primarily oil, and a smattering of photographs and videos make for a satisfyingly diverse and coherent show. Beside the two-dimensional pieces' biggish scale and the impressive virtuosity of their execution—an odd word choice if describing Adrian Ghenie's portrait of Romania's Nicolae Ceausescu—they are, at the same time, strikingly narrative and mysterious.

For instance, Josef Bolf's "Gymnasium" obviously tells a story, but the story seems complex and private. His bubblegum pink paint is jarring, and cartoon-inspired school children gushing blood in a gym practically leap off the canvas as flames blaze beyond windows. The stunned-looking pupils and two imaginary creatures symbolize (according to the curators) the artist's childhood fear of imminent destruction, yet for some viewers, the scene might evoke a specific incident or something else altogether.

Alexander Tinei's "Europe" depicts a woman lounging on a docile bull, its realist leanings reminiscent of mid-19th-century Pre-Raphaelite painting. But here the figures are defaced with blue and purple marks, including diamond shapes on the two heads, the female face practically obscured. Which brings me to the question of

realism in *After the Fall*. Although strictly abstract paintings are absent, the often photographic feel or surveillance camera perspective of numerous paintings, alongside twists in style (such as the superimposed markings in “Europe”), lend what initially appear to be subject-driven images an abstract quality. Furthermore, the handling of paint in most works seems more like that of Willem de Kooning than it does Edward Burne-Jones.

The artists in *After the Fall*. certainly know how to paint. The few photographs included, specifically those by Matija Brumen and Ion Grigorescu, are somewhat like paintings, perhaps due to their large sizes and uncluttered content. Whereas the former exhibits a stunning pair of color prints—“Container,” with its green dumpster, and “Periskop,” featuring an odd metallic box of sorts—the only other print included is a black-and-white self-portrait of Grigorescu titled “Artist on the Roof.” (Revered for his creativity during a time of extreme censorship in Romania, Grigorescu, at age 66, is by far the oldest artist taking part in the show.)

Grigorescu’s “My Beloved Bucharest,” a 14-minute DVD with once-forbidden footage of street life in 1978, is shown on one of four monitors. The other screenings are contemporary works presenting dogs in conversation, a continuous multiplied shot of an artist in a tuxedo, and documentation of the creation of the aforementioned Ceausescu portrait.

Among the stand-out paintings is Zsolt Bodoni’s image of bronze horses hung upside down on their way to being melted down—a painting I was thrilled to learn has been acquired by the KMA. Referring to the elimination of monuments from a past regime, the scene at first looks like an abattoir, suggesting that although we might think something is gone or transformed forever, substances like bronze can always be recast in forms resembling previous incarnations.

Both Elvis Krstulovic’s “Blurred Narratives/Stalker” (à la Andrei Tarkovsky) and Leonardo Silaghi’s untitled canvas featuring what seems to be a decrepit bus are also memorable. Incidentally, the settings in *After the Fall* are predominantly urban, but even when they’re not, they convey a sense of isolation. Repetition of this theme contributes much to the exhibition’s coherence, a thread running throughout that’s not unlike what holds together the kind of symphonic or tone poem associated with Hungarian composer Franz Liszt. Yet thanks to global connectivity, artists presented aren’t necessarily that isolated. Their dedication to remaining in their countries of origin, and the originality of their work, has little to do with knowing or not knowing major trends in art produced in the West. Rather, they appear to care little about them. And that’s a fine, fine thing.