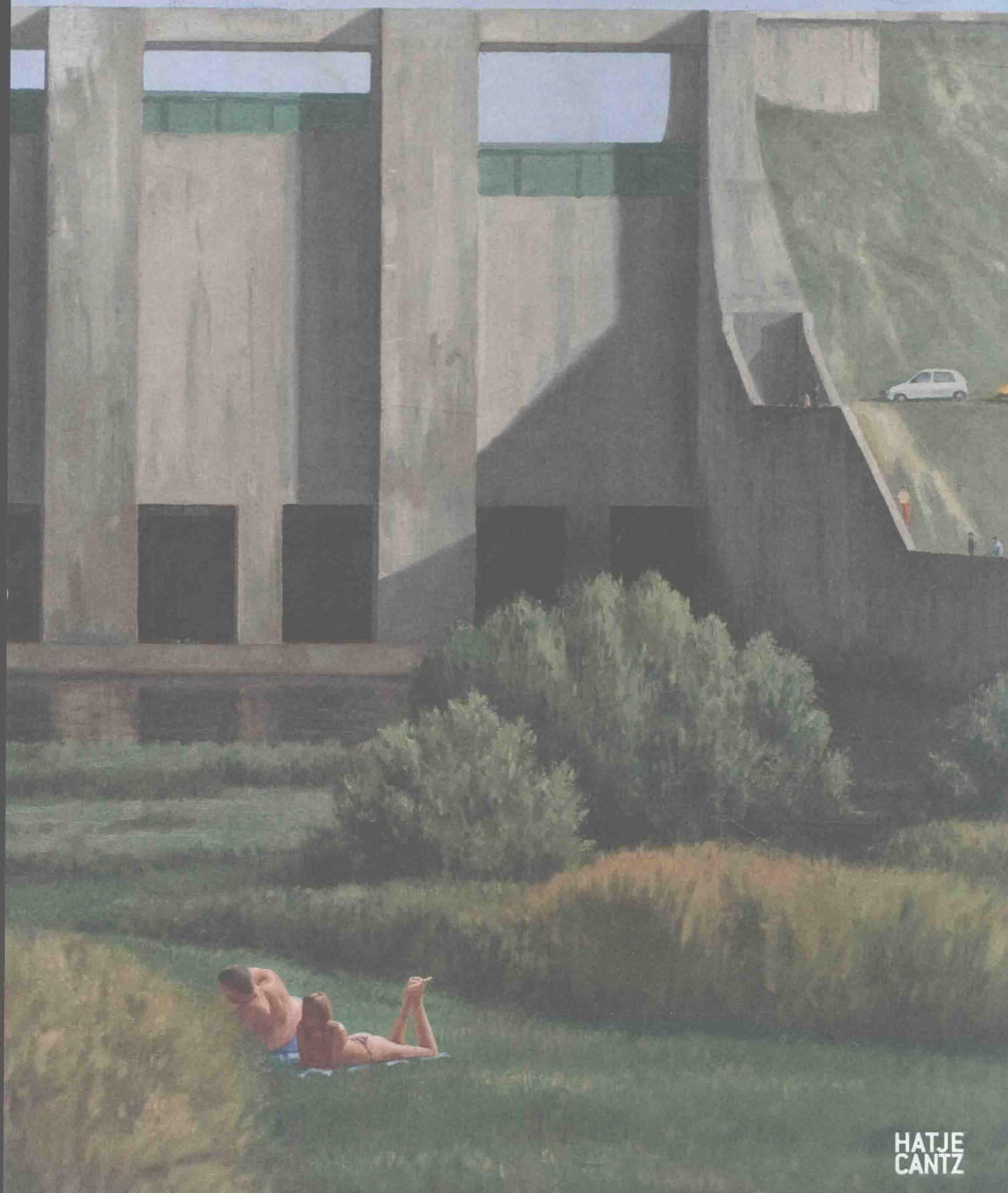
Şerban Savu



HATJE CANTZ

Şerban Savu

Paintings 2005-2010

HATJE
CANTZ

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Şerban Savu

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FRONT COVER: Detail from *In the Shadow of the Dam*, 2008, 57 1/2 x 48 7/16 inches (146 x 123 cm), Private collection, New York

BACK COVER: Detail from *The Silent Factory*, 2010, 78 3/4 x 69 11/16 inches (200 x 177 cm), Collection Craig Jacobson

The Paint Brush Factory, Cluj, December 2010 © Bertha Savu

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2009, Farmland close to Cluj, Ciprian Mureşan and Şerban Savu, shooting session for video *Untitled*, 2009 © Mihai Pop

Foreword

I first encountered the work of Şerban Savu in 2006 in an exhibition curated by Jane Neal entitled *Cluj Connection* at the Zurich gallery of my friend, Juerg Judin. The work of Şerban and his fellow Transylvanians (Adrian Ghenie, Ciprian Mureşan, Cristi Pogăcean, Victor Man, Gabriela Vanga, Mircea Cantor) made an immediate and very strong impression on me.

After the opening we all retreated to James Joyce's favorite bar (Şerban was particularly excited about retracing Joyce's steps) where I discovered the dark humor and quick wit of these cosmopolitan and extremely sophisticated young artists. Raised in Romania, a country rich in cultural heritage, with Cluj geographically situated at the crossroads of one of Europe's most important thoroughfares of the Roman, Ottoman, and Austro-Hungarian empires, the artists were quite aware of their unique history. Cluj has allowed them time to reflect on the world, and the closeness of their relationships has fostered a common view of Western society, having witnessed the fall of an unusual vision of Communism under the dictator Ceauşescu. They also share the common bond of having studied at the same art school.

The following autumn I visited Cluj for Şerban's one-man show at the famous Plan B Gallery, which passionately supports the work of Şerban and his colleagues. This exhibition once again demonstrated that the small-scaled, seemingly quiet paintings of this twenty-eight-year-old painter could not be digested properly in one perfunctory viewing; I visited both the exhibition and his studio several times. All of that, coupled with walking through the city that inspires Şerban and his friends, helped me to better understand the unusual light and the questions of reality that pervade his paintings. A calm and controlled determination lurks beneath the surface of these masterful works.

The thoughtful and perceptive essays by David Cohen and Rozalinda Borcila provide context and give further insight into the works of this measured and ambitious painter. I would like to thank the artist for his trust and patience throughout this project, as well as his wife Bertha, Mihai Pop of Plan B, Mihai Nicodim of Los Angeles (a pivotal and early supporter), Eric Hussenot in Paris, and Robert Storr who provided important advice early on. I would like to extend my gratitude to Cristina Steingräber of Hatje Cantz, Berlin, for believing in this project from the outset, and to her colleague Julika Zimmermann. I am also grateful to Dan Miller, who has been great to work with over the past ten years and who has once again helped to create a wonderful book.

David Nolan

"Moderate and grave with dignity and truth" The Paintings of Şerban Savu

David Cohen

> "One word says everything about the people from whom I come and to whom I remain faithful because I find in myself all their defects: *minor*. It is not an 'inferior' people, it is a people for whom everything turns out small scale, in miniature (not to say caricature), even misfortune."[1]

E.M. Cioran (1911–1995), the author of this observation, works at the task of defining Romanian identity from an opposite corner (historically and geographically) to the contemporary painter, Şerban Savu (born 1978). Cioran lived in self-imposed exile, in a Parisian garret, wallowing in bitter self-reproach for his youthful embrace of Iron Guard fascism. One of his books, indeed, is titled *Syllogisms of Bitterness,* and he describes Romania as a "Spain . . . without a Don Quixote of our bitterness."[2] Savu, by contrast, chooses to live where he grew up, in Cluj, the main city of Transylvania, in the north-west of the county, even while many of his fellows of the post-communist generation opt (as he certainly could have done, for his reputation is international) for New York, London, or Berlin. His enigmatic work is permeated by what could be termed a dark charm. But he favors anecdote over syllogism, description over didacticism. However melancholy his vision gets to be, it is never bitter.

Furthermore, in riposte to Cioran's talk of "smallness," the Romania of Savu's childhood, and the present-day Romania he describes, was and is the victim of colossal hubris. He was eleven years old when, in the revolution of 1989—less than velvet compared with other East European countries—Nicolae Ceauşescu was deposed and executed, ending his quarter century dictatorship and four decades of communist rule. The sufferings to which Ceauşescu subjected his country were anything but diminutive. An obsession with driving down national debt and a determination to destroy peasant culture led to years of economic stultification, the physical eradication of half the country's 13,000 villages, the demolition of swathes of historic city fabric and the permanent scarring of the land with mindless and humongous structures, whether the utterly absurd House of the People, in Bucharest (at three times the size of Versailles, it was, in the words of Tony Judt, "a monstrous lapidary metaphor for unconstrained tyranny"[3]) or conglomerations of mass housing, the "agro-towns" to which dispossessed peasants were sent, incongruously placed in the middle of nowhere. Economic mismanagement and social atrophy stunted and shortened lives. Corrupted alcohol of the later Ceauşescu period, for instance, accounted for an epidemic of liver disease, one victim of which was Savu's father, the novelist and editor Tudor Dumitru Savu. Similarly, at least 10,000 women died under the dictatorship undergoing abortions illegal thanks to a population drive. Minor and small are most surely the wrong words, therefore, for Ceauşescu's ambitions and legacy alike, however well they could have described his intellect and imagination, or the rectitude of his lackeys.

In response to false grandeur, Savu often paints buildings and industrial structures that are imposing and drab. The eponymous edifice in *The Gray 10-Floor Block* (2008) leaves no room for the sky above it, nor do the abutting blocks in the corner of *Unveiling the New Furniture* (2010). The wittily titled *Space, the Final Frontier* (2006) pits window cleaners in a cradle against a flat expanse of pastel-hued windows that create a modernist, "all over" grid out of the façade of a contemporary office building. *In the Shadow of the Dam* (2008), meanwhile, is a landscape that collides the pastoral and the industrial. We see figures sunbathing in the grass, or parking their Ladas high up on an escarpment to make their way down to the valley below, but the verdure is off-set by a hulking mass of concrete, the dam of the title. The composition clearly evokes the classicism of Claude Lorrain or Nicolas Poussin but with a mammoth twentieth-century structure assuming the place of Graeco-Roman temples, the hydroelectric dam being a central planner's equivalent of the

temple, as symbolic as it is functional, sacred to the principles of the Republic.

Ilinca Zarifopol Johnston, Cioran's biographer, writes of his view of nature in a way that resonates eerily with this painting: "But history, like a snake in the lush grass of this natural world, lurks in the shadows of the idyllic picture, darkening them with a different meaning."[4] And yet, Savu avoids heavy-handed editorializing. We are free to imagine the enforced labor of collectivized peasants that went into the dam's construction, with all its attendant human cost, but there is no indication of ambivalence on the part of the lounging couple towards the past that molded the landscape in which they luxuriate; their obliviousness recalls the fishermen in Poussin's *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* who carry on their business while tragedy unfolds beyond their view.

Savu's attitude towards communism's ubiquitous housing projects is ambivalent. His paintings often acknowledge the stoic dignity of its drab modernism. His brush finds hidden beauty in decaying concrete comparable to that discovered by the eighteenth-century Welsh painter Thomas Jones in the back streets of Naples. The arrangement of browns and grays in the cropped segment of façade in *Parking Sunday* (2008) has a quiet poetry akin to a still life by Giorgio Morandi. But beyond aestheticism, his accommodation of brutalist buildings into soft, lyrical landscapes, such as *Ludus* (2009) for instance, seems to carry a spiritual argument with its non-judgmental juxtaposition of an old village and an agro-town. This sweet and sour image is rich in possible meanings, but at various levels it is cathartic, a consoling message to his countrymen. It seems to say that nature can heal wounds, that the disruptive and also potently symbolic dichotomy of these two settlements on different sides of the river and all they represent about futures and pasts can nonetheless blend in some kind of post-historical picturesque.

Savu confronts profound historical issues with disarming modesty. In making quiet, somewhat mysterious pictures that nonetheless touch on real and felt concerns he sets himself doubly apart from most contemporary art in which decisive formal presence trumps genuine social significance. His are big themes but from oblique angles. In many ways he is an old-fashioned picture maker. Like the renaissance artists or old masters from whom he often borrows compositional details or devices, he works essentially within the paradigm set by Leon Battista Alberti: his paintings are windows onto the world, and he aspires to the genre the Florentine painter placed at the top of the hierarchy, *istoria*—that is to say painting that tells a story. "The *istoria* which merits both praise and admiration will be so agreeably and pleasantly attractive that it will capture the eye of whatever learned or unlearned person is looking at it and will move his soul," Alberti writes in his 1435 treatise, *On Painting*.[5] For Alberti's immediate readers, edifying sources of *istoria* were the Bible, newly recovered Greek and Roman literature, and the medieval Golden Legend. For Savu, the big story is Romanian communism.

But to tell a story that is "moderate and grave with dignity and truth,"[6] in Alberti's phrase, Savu cannot adopt the techniques of academic history painting. To do so would be to submit to the official, anachronistic, oppressive aesthetics of the very regime whose national vandalism is the subject of his tale. It could, of course, be done ironically, a well-trodden deconstructive path familiar from the work, to take one of many possible examples, of the partnership of New York expatriate Russian artists Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid (they worked together from 1972–2004). But irony is precisely the kind of bombastic, didactic approach that militates against Savu's quietude and subtlety, his dark charm. What happens, therefore, in a typical Savu image is a kind of displaced *istoria*, an *istoria* in which the narrative thrust is diffused, in which displacement itself is the narrative.

Alberti advocates that at least one figure is literally pointing towards the central defining action that encapsulates the *istoria*, while all the protagonists express emotions that channel towards it. In *The Football Game* (2007) the figures are caught off guard, in a plausible yet anti-Albertian moment in which the scene has lost its organizational thrust, with individuals or small groups looking this way and that. *After the Flood* (2009) is a title, and scene, that can be taken literally or in a literary-historical way, as in *Après moi, le deluge*. Variously attributed to Louis XIV and Madame de Pompadour, this phrase is appropriate to a country in recovery from an *ancien régime*. The figures are inspecting damage caused by flooding; they are each so absorbed in their own thoughts,

however, that the four men look in at least three directions. They recall an uncharitable phrase of Cioran's in which his countrymen are described as "fond of their torpor and practically bursting with dazed mindlessness."

The characters in these Savu paintings are comatose, as if in shock at the course of history, indeed, the end of history. *The Edge of the Empire* (2008) has a group huddled as if waiting for a bus but in an unmarked, unlikely-looking spot, on a precipice, an unmarked road where the arrival of a bus is anything but certain. The title, which Savu also adopted for an exhibition in 2009, refers at one level to Romania's historic identity as the last Roman province to be added in Europe and the first to be abandoned in the wake of barbarian invasions. It also hints, in a melancholy way, to a fusion of this national self-image with an existential condition, a sense of being on edge.

It is tempting to coin some neologism for Savu's insistently skewed narratives—*mistoria*, perhaps, or *distoria*. In effect, however, his way of telling stories is a synthesis of American critic Michael Fried's opposition between theatricality and absorption. The socialist realist tradition of history painting derives from an arch-Albertian image like Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii* (1785). Even paintings of happy workers eschew the spiritual absorption of, say, Jean-François Millet's *The Sower* (1850) in favor of expressions of collective, dynamic enthusiasm more akin to the Horatii. The genres of absorption, epitomized by such artists as Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin and Jean-Baptiste Greuze, tend to the domestic, the interior, and often to feminine pursuits. Remarkably few Savu images are set indoors; the enclosed, derelict industrial space in *Genre Scene* (2008) is half-interior, half-exterior, thanks to the intrusion of muddy ground. He gives us atriums (*Dawn* [2006]) or work spaces with large windows with the viewer positioned outside and looking in, like the chef in her strip-lighted kitchen in an untitled painting of 2007—quasi interiors that are semi-public spaces. Scenes of quiet domesticity are incongruously set outdoors, as in *Unveiling the New Furniture* or the makeshift arrangement of *Summer Kitchen* (2009), as if to enforce a breakdown of private versus public space. Even when crowds are united in a purposive activity, such as the mythically, aptly, and ominously titled *Icarus* (2008), where a group is pushing a bus stuck in a field with a grim modernist town on the horizon, the three bystanders who, for whatever reason (a bad back, there is no more room, class superiority) abjure the spirit of collective effort, enforcing a sense of forlornness. Protagonists in public scenarios who are self-absorbed rob the situation of its theater.

A favored theme in Savu is paintings of a solitary figure, usually a worker, who dominates his or her setting: the railway guard in *No Train Coming* (2009), the machinist taking his sandwich in *A Moment of Silence* (2009) and the smoker in *His Father is an Engine Driver* (2007). The guard is a portrait in an unusually full and achieved realism, whereas the other two, more loosely painterly compositions, have the workers sink into their respective workplaces. All three, however, are lost in thoughts that seem remote from the work at hand. Blasphemously, these socialist workers are alienated from their labor.

There are two striking, seemingly contradictory features in the half-decade span of Savu's short career: an unmistakable Savu look, and significant diversity. Mood and purpose are consistent, but touch varies almost from canvas to canvas, determined by pictorial content and scale of each image rather than some stylistic progression. He works from photographs, some found in the media and others taken himself, which he assembles into working sources in Photoshop. His locales are all actual places he knows and studies. In some paintings there is a tough tightness to the realism, whether of the figures or buildings; in others there is painterly relish, as if within the last five years there are distinctions of touch as marked in Savu as in the extended career of the German nineteenth-century realist Adolph Menzel, who veered from early impressionism to a finessed classicism. Savu's smaller canvases, which often focus on a single figure and a singular observation, are among his most immediately pleasurable pictures.

The more ambitious works, the multi-figure group compositions, are more forcibly touched with an element of incongruity yet they too hold back from full-blown absurdity, or even Surrealism. The Ceauşescu regime was so "surreal" in some of its manifestations—the surveillance techniques of the Securitate, the publishing of Elena Ceauşescu's pseudo-science, the cult of leadership that dubbed Ceauşescu "the Genius of the Carpathians, the Danube of Thought"—that

Surrealism presents itself as an option to writers like Nobel laureate Herta Müller who, in one of her novels, has an apple tree that grows a mouth with which to devour its own fruit. Even at his most outlandish, Savu is closer to the incipient oddity of Giorgio de Chirico, say, than the overt weirdness of Salvador Dalí or the punning illogic of René Magritte. Indeed, it is the degree of credibility in the scenes he depicts, and the slow unfolding of futility or misguidedness, that lends his scenes their charge. He comes close to a symbolic uncanny (akin to the moral of folly in the inverse building construction of Brueghel's *Tower of Babel* [1569]) in his painting *The Old Roof* (2009) in which four boys play soccer on the roof of a building whose center is dominated by a perilous two-story courtyard. There is a hint of the supernatural in *Life after Death* (2010) with its cadaver in rigor mortis on top of a tombstone, a young man wandering unconcerned a few gravestones behind. In both cases, however, there is still the possibility of a rational, prosaic explanation as to what is going on: the cadaver had to be dug up and placed on the tomb for irrigation reasons; the boys are engaged in a dare-devil game in which the chasm of a courtyard adds gladiatorial risk to proceedings.

While Surrealism is a valid option for Müller in stories directly confronting the horrors of the Ceaușescu regime and the consequences of offering it resistance, to Savu and his close-knit circle of peers who were at art school together in Cluj, and whose study and launch of career take place post-1989, something more subtle and diffident is called for to describe the numbed state of reconstruction, of discovering normality amidst the ruins of a failed regime, and of coming to terms with the past as children of its last years, and of parents who had simply to keep their heads down and survive. They are a generation that seems skeptical of big gestures and grand narratives. It is telling that many of them have exhibited with the Cluj gallery Plan B whose very name betokens a bemused sense of what to do next. Savu's close associate, Ciprian Mureșan, works in a variety of conceptual and traditional modes but consistently in ways that send up the hubris of systems and situations with a gentle, comic understatement: exquisite pastiches of socialist realist drawings of young pioneers blowing into plastic bags; young school children reading Ionesco's *The Rhinoceros*; a wall text, using vinyl cut from old LPs, that says, in English, "Communism Never Happened." Mureșan's gentle provocations seem intended to place him out of the market of big gestures. There is, likewise, a wry and diminutive sensibility at play in Cristi Pogăcean's sculpture, *Modernist Bird House* (2005–07), where the rationalist, functionalist architectural style adopted by the Party in mass housing units takes on markedly different attributes in this dainty, effete folly.

Savu's delicious painterly touch is too assured to equate with the dazed and confused state of mind of the characters and situations he depicts, and yet there are elements in his style—his quietude, understatement, eclecticism, lack of flashiness—that relate to the shellshock mood of the post-1989 generation.

Though he attended the prestigious art school in Cluj, Savu is largely self-taught in his realism. There is a common misconception about contemporary Eastern European artists that somehow, like Russian or Chinese artists, they must automatically be steeped in the language and techniques of academic socialist realism as if these are residual skills still enforced in art schools. Savu's professor at Cluj in the 1990s was the neo-romantic painter Ioan Sbarciu, a colleague of the German neo-expressionist Markus Lüpertz and now a senator in Romania's parliament, who would certainly have had no reason to enforce redundant styles. Savu's older colleague, Victor Man, took himself to Jerusalem to study at the small, independent atelier of expatriate American painter Israel Hershberg, the Jerusalem Studio School, to learn the old-master techniques he craved. Savu found his technique from close study of renaissance painting during an extended residency in Venice in 2002–04 (as recipient of the Nicolae Lorga postgraduate research grant) and this perhaps accounts for the relative primitivism in his handling of form, which is anti-academic. In Cluj, while still a student, Man had sought out the underground painter Cornel Brudașcu, an artist who had been persecuted by the regime for his sexual orientation and painted in eclectic styles. Excelling as a flower painter, Brudascu became a personal hero to Man, Savu, and a third young painter, Adrian Ghenie, simply for his determination to do his own thing. Savu's painterly language, therefore, should not be read as an ironic riff on socialist realism in the way that makes conceptual sense in relation to the German

Neo Rauch, who studied at Leipzig in the 1980s and makes skillful use of appropriated, anachronistic painting modes.

This argument does not preclude symbolic significance in elements of Savu's style. There is almost a willful dullness in his invariably subdued palette and a certain chalkiness in the texture of his paint that matches his pervasive melancholy. That concrete is so prevalent a motif lends an odd associative feeling that somehow dust has rubbed off the buildings into the very pigment. His dry, slow, carefully modulated paint application contrasts with the oily flourishes favored by Man (in earlier works) and Ghenie. Savu's literal lack of slickness accords with the temper of his paintings.

Introducing art theory to the distinction between scale and size, Alberti exhorts his reader with the words: "*Istoria* gives greater renown to the intellect than any colossus."[7] Savu's paintings are a profound record of a society in recovery from colossal errors of governance. Recently, he has embarked on what are for him large paintings, but most typically, he is happy with a modest scale, and as has been suggested, a modest touch, pace, and emotional distance. He works in an idiom that is in two distinct senses "out" of history: it is his-torically derived (though without constituting a quotation or pastiche of a particular moment) and it is out of step with current expectations. In much the way that artists Elizabeth Peyton, Paul, or Duncan Hannah adopt an illustrative, knowingly slight language that matches their penchant for nostalgia and infatuation, and within whose limiting confines there is nonetheless space for expressive growth, so Savu adopts a plainspoken style that risks blandness for the sake of empathy with his subject and as an antidote to the bombastic imposition of grand schemes. This suggests, in contrast with his meteoric career successes as an artist collected avidly around the world, a kind of elective minority, a willingness to occupy a small corner of painting. Savu has found a niche where he can observe a future for his countrymen and work one out for his art.

1. Quoted in Ilanca Zarifopol-Johnston, *Searching for Cioran* (Bloomington, 2009), Kindle edition, location 637.
2. Ibid., location 663.
3. Judt, Tony. *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*. (New York, 2005). Kindle edition, location 13819.
4. Zarifopol-Johnston 2009 (see note 1), location 565.
5. John R. Spencer, ed., *Leon Battista Alberti On Painting* (New Haven, 1966), p. 75.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p. 72.

Savu's studio, The Paint Brush Factory, Cluj, December 2010 © Bertha Savu

1. **Labour Protection I** 2005