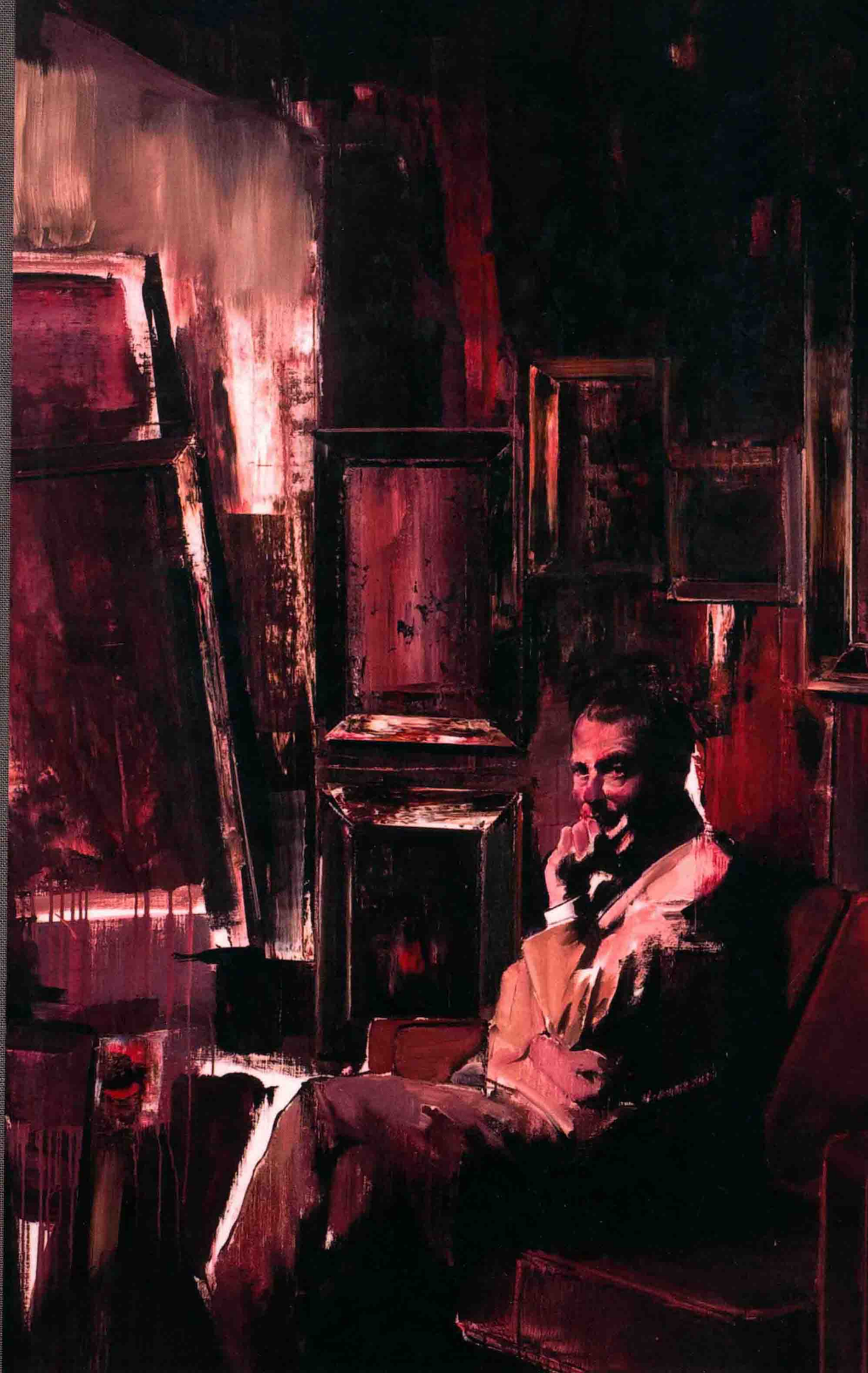
ADRIAN GHENIE



HATJE CANTZ

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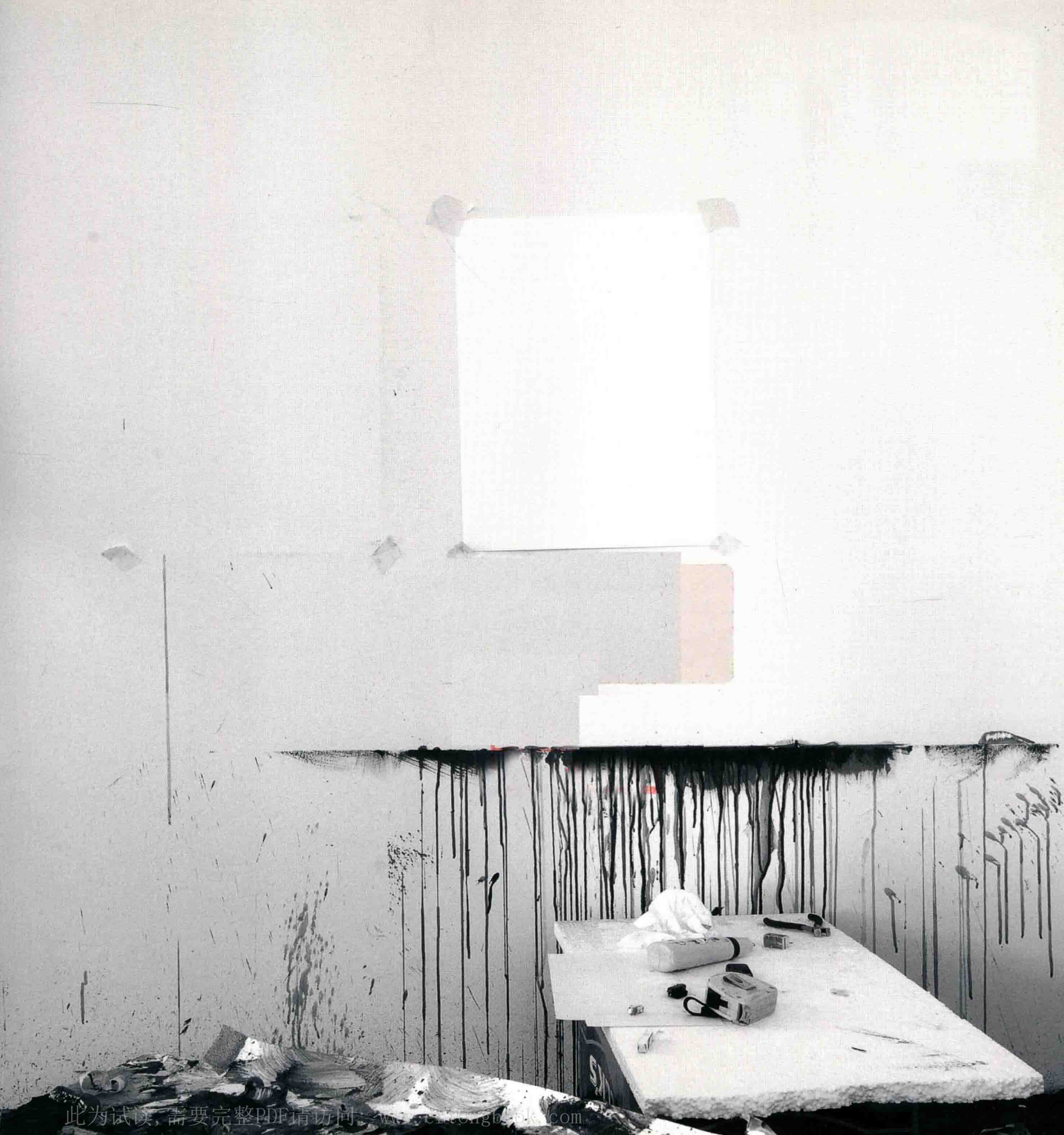

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CONTENTS

JUERG JUDIN

EAST BY SOUTHEAST

In October 2006 I travelled to Cluj in Romania to attend the opening of the first one-man show of a young artist whom, until then, I had not yet met in person—Adrian Ghenie. I was preparing a group exhibition in the Zurich gallery of Haunch of Venison that aimed at introducing Ghenie and six other young Romanians to a Western European audience. This project had been suggested to me by British curator Jane Neal, whose pitch ("Seven young artists from a small industrial town in Transylvania, friends since they marched together as ten-year old Ceauşescu Pioneers") did not exactly knock me off my feet to begin with. It sounded to me like the proverbial "four-hour documentary about striking Polish miners shot in black and white with a hand-held camera," that famous fictitious movie Hollywood producers like to cite in order to express their revulsion of projects that ignore the desires of mainstream audiences. I knew little more about young Romanian art than most movie producers know about class struggle in Poland, and did not feel compelled to remedy this lack. Luckily, though, Jane persevered and continued to ply me with new images. I thus discovered that among those Magnificent Seven were Mircea Cantor and Victor Man, two artists who had already achieved major success in the international art world—the others, Ciprian Mureşan, Cristi Pogăcean, Serban Savu, and Gabriela Vanga, would soon follow in their footsteps. And it dawned on me that Cluj, rather than being the end of the world, was in fact a hotbed of creativity.

My first visit to Cluj began in CinemaScope. The airline that would take me "across the forests" (the literal translation of Transylvania), to safely drop me off in Cluj, was called Carpat Air. An indulgence, I thought, for all those who only know this part of the world from Roman Polanski's famous *The Fearless Vampire Killers*. The tiny terminal was bustling with life and laughter as my fellow passengers were greeted by their friends and families. I was to be picked up by Adrian Ghenie, without even knowing what he looked like. I was indeed on something of a blind date—and at first nothing at all seemed to happen. All the travelers were gone, and the terminal descended into a ghostly silence. I had no way to contact Adrian and did not even know which hotel I had been booked into. I started to feel like Claudia Cardinale in that great opening scene to Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West*. After what appeared to be an eternity, a rickety car appeared, driven by Serban Savu, from which an apologetic Adrian Ghenie emerged—a striking-looking thirty-year old with a slightly mocking but friendly smile.

We drove directly to Plan B, the gallery led by the charismatic Mihai Pop, where Adrian's exhibition was just being hung. Also an artist, Mihai has placed himself at the service of his friends and runs Plan B as the group's own gallery—with by now significant international success. Four of Ghenie's then only seven paintings were done in a somewhat indefinable monochromatic color and seemed to depict a mysterious burial site, probably from the early middle ages, which in turn appeared buried beneath a thick layer of ash. They radiated a refined sense of history—and suggested that one should in fact know whose grave this was. But although one of the paintings was titled *Stalin's Tomb,* the first impression had been entirely misleading: in the gallery's exhibition room there stood, ugly and in everyone's way, a large, green-tiled stove. For

a previous exhibition, Victor Man had simply covered it, top to bottom, with a thick layer of black pigment paint. In the white room, it must have looked like an enormous misplaced lump of coal—making it much more bearable. The "tomb slab" in Ghenie's paintings was nothing but one of the oven's cast-iron hatches seen from above. These first paintings spoke of an irrepressible desire to examine, and to master, surface and texture; they seemed like brilliant practice runs, and at the same time mature portraits of a banal item, free from all artistic connotations. They were a self-confident and exciting promise of the paintings that were to come. And yet it is almost eerie that only some three years have passed between *Stalin's Tomb,* the first painting in this catalogue, and *Duchamp's Funeral,* the last group of works in this publication.

From one painting to the next, Ghenie has increased the complexity of his compositions. While at first sight the works are reassuringly figurative, abstract elements increasingly force us to revise our initial, spontaneous interpretations. He is a natural storyteller. His stories often emerge from his own autobiography, but are then left to the viewer to complete. He cites twentieth-century history with as much ease and knowledge as he does sixteenth-century art. He moves the subjects thus borrowed backward and forward in time, unencumbered by chronology, and in the process produces compositions whose gravitation the viewer cannot resist. Last but not least, there is his painting technique, his by now individual, unmistakable style. Like a scriptwriter who leaves his protagonists to improvise their dialogue, Ghenie entrusts his compositional ideas to the dynamics of his ultimately uncontrollable way of applying color.

Adrian loves movies. In his youth he consumed them in large quantities—good ones and bad ones—during "video nights" organized within the neighborhood. Film is probably on an equal footing with history and art history when it comes to serving as an inexhaustible reservoir of ideas for his paintings. I would argue that Adrian could probably be very successful as a director, too. He would be more like Hitchcock than Godard. His movies would take the audience's intelligence seriously but would mislead them at the same time. They would be elegant and smooth—but always a bit uncanny. Rather than relying on slapstick, their refined humor would feed off the absurdity of the human condition. They would ultimately be very satisfying but leave the audience wondering, on their way home, if they had *really* seen, and understood, everything. In other words, as with Adrian's paintings, the viewer would want to see more. Still, I am glad that Adrian has chosen the career of a painter—all of us interested in art have much to look forward to.

In this exciting first stage of his career, Adrian Ghenie has enjoyed the support of a group of wonderful galleries. I want to thank my colleagues Mihai Pop of Plan B, Ben Tufnell of Haunch of Venison, as well as Mihai Nicodim and Tim van Laere for their enthusiasm and support. I am indebted to Jane Neal for bringing this great artist to my attention. Anette Hüsch and Matt Price have contributed revealing essays that offer great insights into the artist's complex thoughts and motivations. Adrian joins me in thanking Cristina Steingräber and Julika Zimmermann of Hatje Cantz for taking on this project—and keeping it on course. It has been a great pleasure working with them. As the designer of this book, Anja Lutz has created a subtle and stylish framework for Adrian's paintings, while Johann Hausstätter spent countless hours with the artist to ensure that the reproductions capture the mood of his extraordinary color palette. Finally, I would like to thank Adi for entrusting the production of this publication to me. It is a privilege to have the opportunity to work with him.

ANETTE HÜSCH

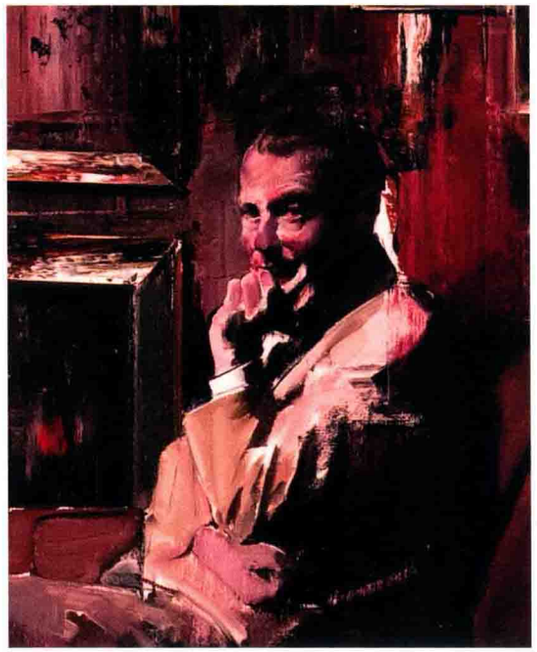
HEAVY STUFF: ADRIAN GHENIE AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE UNCANNY

But the raven, sitting lonely on the placid bust, spoke only
That one word, as if his soul in that one word he did outpour.
Nothing further then he uttered—not a feather then he fluttered—
Till I scarcely more than muttered, "Other friends have flown before—
On the morrow he will leave me, as my hopes have flown before."
Then the bird said, "Nevermore."
Edgar Allan Poe, *The Raven*

It seems as if heavy fabric is draped over everything, as if the room has lost its clarity, as if the bodies shown were oppressed by the burden of their own depiction. This impression initially results from the color palette selected by Adrian Ghenie. Black and gray shadowing predominates, and even when another color is added—dark red, for instance, as in *The Collector I* (2008; ill. pp. 63–64)—it drips ponderously down the surface of the picture, like partially coagulated blood.[1]

Even so, this impression of "heavy stuff" is also created by the artist's unconventional application of paint. Since Ghenie works the surface of the canvas not only with a brush but also a palette knife, he gives the paintings an idiosyncratic surface texture, a mixture of individual technique and mechanical strokes. Elegant, delicate surfaces alternate with lush, raised zones. We sense that the paintings are composed with great concentration, but then executed rapidly, as if the space and the figures had emerged straight out of the painterly gesture and found their way onto the surface of the painting all by themselves. Frequently, the eye cannot gauge or place the scenes; they remain spaces of sketchy memories, entirely vague, articulated only as much as is necessary for the viewer to recognize the image as a depiction. Here, the medium of painting functions like a semi-permeable visual sound-absorber that simultaneously presents what is represented and keeps it hidden from the viewer, as if the artist wants to show us the scene and yet keep it at a distance.

Ghenie is a virtuoso painter. His manner of handling paint and creating a visual atmosphere stem indirectly from studying the great masters of the Baroque era and the dramatic effect of chiaroscuro.[2] All of Ghenie's works share an emotionalism associated with the theater, a melancholy hopelessness, although they also demonstrate a visibly nonchalant gesture. Where does this come from? And how do the pictures achieve this sense of distance, of sadness, of the uncanny?



Detail from: *The Collector I*, 2008

THE MANTLE OF HISTORY

"The mantle of history" is a dramatic figure of speech, which is why it goes so well with Ghenie's paintings; it is not just their execution that recalls the heavy substance of the mantle of history, but also their content, which is narrative without telling a clearly defined story. The paintings are almost uniformly like mental snapshots of crime scenes taken by an uninvolved observer who sees something, remembers, and yet is aware that much is still concealed from him. The figures portrayed are rarely individual types; more often they are faceless, anonymous bodies—discarded, forgotten, or controlled and herded together: their faces are either covered or only rudimentarily defined as in *Pie Fight Study II* and *Pie Fight Study III* (ills. pp. 74, 75). Bodies, like those in *Wasted Generation* and *That Moment* (both 2007; ills. pp. 43, 33), are either obviously lifeless or rendered in stock-still poses as in *The Collector II* (ill. p. 71). Even when the de-individualized figures in works like *Dutch Interior* and *Christmas Eve* (both 2007; ill. pp. 27–28) are involved in doing something, each action looks frozen, as if the protagonists had, of their own accord, struck a pose for the picture in order to silently communicate something about their situation. Without knowing anything further about the subjects represented, their fundamental themes are clear. These are portrayals of power structures and dominant gestures, which communicate through the way they are arranged spatially as well as through the way the bodies relate to one another. Even *World Falling Apart* (2007; ill. p. 39) and *Dutch Interior,* works depicting couples performing sexual acts, are obviously about dominant behavior and role-playing. Ghenie has mastered these themes in both large and small formats, and the sizes of his paintings vary greatly—*Nickelodeon* (ill. pp. 93–94), for instance, measures 2.3 by 4.2 meters, while *The Collector (Study)* (ill. p. 67) is only 30 by 29 centimeters.

Each scene seems to be trapped underneath the mantle of a history that has been a traumatic collective experience. Indeed, Ghenie is interested in the reception of historical facts, the history of exploitation, repression, and violence: Germany's National Socialism, for instance, is present in many of his works, sometimes explicitly, at other times implicitly. *Berghof* (ill. p. 69) refers to Adolf Hitler's domicile on the Obersalzberg; *The Collector I* portrays Hermann Göring, as he looks in Ghenie's source material—photographs of the Nuremberg Trials—but in a room full of panel paintings, as part of a black and red arrangement of layered, oily, fluid colors.

Ghenie created *Dada is Dead* (2009; ill. p. 111) by taking the perspective shown in the famous photograph of the main room at the *First International Dada Fair,* held in Berlin in 1920. The room, which was lively and full of people at the time, has become a forgotten, gloomy spot, while the works are mere shadows of themselves. A wolf stands with its back to the viewer, although its head is turned in the opposite direction. Here Ghenie recalls Hitler's East Prussian (now Poland) headquarters known as the *Wolfsschanze,* or Wolf's Liar, and thus the fate of countless artists, including those in the Dada movement such as George Grosz, whom the National Socialists defamed by declaring them "degenerate."

In *That Moment* Ghenie works with, among other things, a photograph showing Hitler in front of a Roman copy of the ancient *Discus Thrower* by Myron as well as the famous collage *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?* by English artist Richard Hamilton—one of the key works of the British Pop Art movement.[3] *Found* (2007; ill. p. 51) recalls the pictures of the sacred-looking, mummified corpse of Lenin, and in his Flight into Egypt series (ills. pp. 45–46, 49) Ghenie explores the Biblical theme of the flight of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph into Egypt and, consequently, the notion of real and imaginary exile. At the same time, in his treatment of this religious motif he refers to the role that the Flight into Egypt theme had played for artists

Exhibition view of the *Erste Internationale Dada-Messe (First International Dada Fair),* Berlin, 1920. From left to right: Raoul Hausmann, Hannah Höch (sitting), Otto Burchard, Johannes Baader, Wieland Herzfelde, Margarete Herzfelde, Dr. Oz (Otto Schmalhausen [sitting]), George Grosz, and John Heartfield. The *Preussischer Erzengel (Prussian Archangel)* hanging from the ceiling was a sculpture by John Heartfield and Rudolf Schlichter.

Adolf Hitler next to a Roman copy of the *Diskobolos (Discus Thrower)* by Myron, after the original bronze of c. 450 BCE, Glyptothek Munich, 1938. Marble, height 1.54 m, Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome

since the Renaissance: the subject matter allowed painters to concentrate entirely on landscape painting without disappointing a patron from the clergy.[4] By indirectly quoting this process, Ghenie himself questions the legitimacy of landscape painting and provides an almost ironic answer—since his *Flight into Egypt* only distantly recalls a landscape.

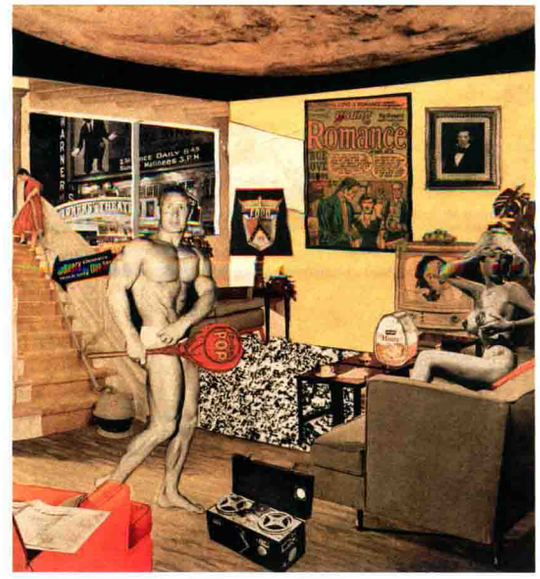
Even without the viewer knowing the precise themes and reference materials, the darkness of the scenery and the arrangement of the bodies in *New God's Funeral* or *Silent Crowd* (both 2007) move him or her to think of persecution, suffering, and hopelessness. The empty section of a room in *Memories* (2007; ill. p. 41), where we see only a pile of film canisters on top of a chest of drawers, similarly reminds us of a disquieting secret that might possibly be revealed if the reels in the canisters were viewed. This first thought is also confirmed when we learn what the source material is: a photograph of a film archive in Dresden that was destroyed during the Second World War. The image brings to mind the visual and especially the filmic propaganda machine of the National Socialists.

But the mantle of history also surrounds the painter himself, who grew up during a period of great changes. Adrian Ghenie is a surprisingly young artist, born in 1977 in Baia Mare, Romania. Surprisingly young, because the themes he chooses and the atmosphere of his pictures cannot be described as "young," "fresh," or "new." Almost involuntarily, we are compelled to ask: Where does this pathos come from? Why would an artist of Ghenie's generation choose these themes and forms of representation?

Ghenie vividly describes how he grew up in Nicolae Ceauşescu's communist Romania, in a family with an older brother. He himself arrived much later, when his parents were older and themselves had aged parents—so old, that his grandfather had been born in the nineteenth century. His father told many stories about the "Golden Age" of the sixties, Ghenie recalls, when the poor economy was not as glaringly obvious as it became in the seventies. He was influenced by these familial relations and his father's oral histories, which is probably why, he explains, he is able to sense the current aspect of historical events in the more remote past.

Ghenie began his studies just after the fall of the Ceauşescu regime. He studied at the art academy in Cluj, Romania's third-largest city. He learned his craft well, but had barely any exposure to twentieth-century art or the great names of Western art history, since books in general—let alone books with color plates—were hard to obtain, and the Internet was not widely available at the time. His experiences with the great museums of Western Europe and with the region itself, which he made during a two-year stay in Vienna, must have therefore had an enormous impact on him. After living through a dictatorship and an inefficient administration—even during the process of democratization—he was bombarded with new visual realms of high and popular culture. From the delicately executed oil painting to the thumbnail photograph on the Internet, he encountered a veritable flood of potential sources of inspiration.

Ghenie still works to this day before this backdrop of experiences, collecting widely varied source materials, combining photographs and film stills, and building three-dimensional models. Often, he does not transfer his ideas to canvas until this preparatory phase is complete. In occasionally audacious ways, the artist creates relationships among the source materials taken from different, unrelated contexts, signifying light entertainment and collective trauma. *Nickelodeon,* a work whose title refers to vaudeville, film, and a children's television channel, is an exemplary result of this kind of combination. To create the large painting, Ghenie combined sources that include a photograph of a group of people in the Warsaw Ghetto and countless comedic scenes from the *Three Stooges* in which cream pies are flying everywhere.[5] The silent group of people emanates a sense of desperate powerlessness, precisely because Ghenie obviously stigmatized some of the pie-smeared figures as victims of a violent assault. The comedic scene that has become a disdainful cliché of a gag is here



Richard Hamilton, *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?,* 1956, collage, 26 x 24.8 cm, Kunsthalle Tübingen

Adrian Ghenie, model

Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, May 1943, scene on Nowolipie Street depicting the Polish Jews struggling with the Nazis; photo from the Jürgen Stroop Report to Heinrich Himmler from May 1943. The original German caption reads: "Forcibly pulled out of dug-outs."