

Serban Savu

Daily Practice for the End of the World

Opening: Friday, April 27, 17 - 22 h

Special opening times during Gallery Weekend Berlin:
Saturday, April 28 11 - 19 h and Sunday, April 29 11 - 18 h

April 27 - June 16, 2012
Tuesday - Saturday, 12 - 18 h
Potsdamer Strasse 77 - 87, 10785 Berlin

Galeria Plan B is happy to announce the personal exhibition of Romanian artist Serban Savu and the inauguration of the gallery's new space in Berlin. We are delighted to invite you to join us for the opening on coming Friday, April 27 during the Gallery Weekend Berlin.

Interview realized by Mihai Pop with Serban Savu, to accompany this exhibition:

Cluj, April 10, 2012

Mihai Pop: In the last two years you have focused on large compositions depicting several situations; each of these scenes could be in itself one of your past paintings. I think this is how you have clarified your position. You look at reality with great clarity, as from a high vantage point, this is more obvious than ever.

Serban Savu: And you know why? It is because I can see more, both the characters and their surroundings, which is very important to me. The surrounding space defines the character very well. Hence the inclination for the overall look, for capturing more, for understanding more and more. It's like in literature. One starts writing a scene by first describing the landscape, the atmosphere, the smells. Then, turning to the characters, one describes the clothes and then their personality. This is how I see things now and that is why I adopt the aforementioned standpoint.

M.P.: In order to describe...

S.S.: Yes, because what I have just described refers to an action, but also to its context. This is very important: it happens here in the East, in Romania, around me. It's a reality that I understand; I understand every leaf of grass, every tree, if I see a man on the street, I kind of know "who he is". If I go somewhere else, I'm not that sure.

M.P.: You don't know the codes there.

S.S.: There are codes that take longer to understand. I know them here, that's why I'm interested in these things, but I need the wider context, I have to see more.

M.P.: How did you arrive to the compositions with multiple topics? Your characters do not relate to each other, but compose a pictorial geometry, lacking metaphorical layers or symbolic forms.

S.S.: They function according to a logic of painting. By using collages, I obviously manipulate these characters at will. I often compared myself to a puppeteer that moves everything around until he finds the intimate geometry that makes the characters work together and in the context.

M.P.: But the feeling is still one of realism. The juxtapositions are not forced, perhaps, you actually account for the positions of your characters. What does this multiple topic add?

S.S.: First, it provides a broader picture. There are characters who do not related to each other, as you said, but they make up a larger landscape. The more the scenes, the better they define reality. I paste and

assemble these scenes in an organic way or I try to pursue the same scene for several days in a row. During a week, different things happen in the same place. Then I assemble everything and I obtain the full landscape of activities, of reality, of the life in a certain area. Through it, one can read the whole, wider reality. I've always wanted to make that perfect painting and not ever have to paint again.

M.P.: A painting to include them all?

S.S.: Oh well, that is impossible, but that's my goal. That is why I try to condense the scenes. This agglutination should not be forced either. I imagine possible and real things. I assemble realities, put them together so as to understand them better.

M.P.: People painted by you are bound to a context, which you see clearly and it's there for all. However, they seem isolated in that context. There are different stories assembled. This is society in a nutshell. Basically, have you got closer to what is your work, your world?

S.S.: It is an attempt to attain a complete painting. Going back to literature, it is like collecting some stories into a novel. The story captures something simple, but the novel coagulates the stories into something more complex, that's my feeling and that's what I want. To coagulate certain realities. Sure, this collage is also a creative process, trying to find the perfect fusion between things. And that's exciting.

M.P.: I can read these large compositions more easily than the isolated scenes, the landscape itself becomes a character and so does the architecture, the whole context is so important that I find in these works you are closer to the powerful images of the old painting tradition.

S.S.: I don't know if they relate to the painting tradition that was not at stake. You were right when you said that, in fact, I do not paint landscapes. The landscape is there because it has something to say, it is a character nevertheless and maybe you're right: if you look through the history of art, there are indeed these major compositions in which the landscape says something, the sky is cloudy for a reason.

M.P.: It participates in some way.

S.S.: I recall a little Brueghel painting. It snows, it is a village scene. And in one corner there's baby Jesus, the whole biblical nativity scene. The landscape is placed there so naturally that it seems as though nativity happened in the winter, in a village in Flanders. It makes you believe it so strongly...

M.P.: Does painting have the power to convince?

S.S.: It convinces whomever wants to be convinced. It's like faith. If you believe, you follow the path of faith. It is the same with painting, if you like it, it can convince you. It's a matter of practice. One must practice, one must be a viewer. If a painting convinces me, as a viewer, I will enter that world. This is the charm of the game, it's a cultural intellectual challenge. I'll participate, if I like it and if it convinces me.

M.P.: Why did you choose the exhibition title, *Daily Practice for the End of the World*?

S.S.: I think that everyday life here is as interesting as life in New York or Berlin. But why doesn't the story from here work elsewhere? Eastern artists have always related to the West, while Western artists have not appertained to the East. So it is the case with us – I relate to Western art. But on the other hand I wonder why the reality here could not be equally valid and powerful there?

M.P.: In what sense?

S.S.: Equally interesting, human and worth being retold.

M.P.: Are we, the people in the Eastern, in some sort of daily survival practice?

S.S.: There are things that have been perpetuated over the years. The whole tradition of cultivating your land

in all types of environment, for example...

M.P.: Such as the garden behind the apartment building.

S.S.: If you had moved from the countryside to the city, you would have been stuck with this habit. If the system collapses, which societies will survive? Certainly not the big cities, they will fall first. If you leave a big city without water for 24 hours, anarchy will ensue. I am equally interested in the methods of survival in an urban environment or in a less developed society. I am interested in the reasons why people go to the forest and cut wood. Certainly, it is against social laws, but on the other hand, those people heat their homes with wood, as our ancestors had always done, it is something human, a natural way to survive. All these actions are in fact ways to survive in any conditions, including in the Western culture, which provides increasingly more questionable products. For me, it is a struggle to find proper food.

M.P.: It's great that you said that! This struggle for survival in an advanced society that actually provides for everything is paradoxical.

Returning to painting, at some point, your works had a single theme. It reminded many of us of socialist realism, some say your painting is socialist realism without the propaganda. I think there is less investment with heroic attributes in your painting. These things have melted into something else, others have appeared in your paintings. More people.

S.S.: Actually, let's say, it was the ordinary people of Romania that appeared.

M.P.: We are not dealing anymore with the former hero of a dead society.

S.S.: These are people who work daily, who simply live their lives. I am interested in people who do not have some special social status, who may not have a very urban lifestyle. I am not interested in fashionable life, in city life, I am not necessarily interested in students, in youth. No. I am interested in people working every day, who are worn out, tired, bored. Or who enjoy life, do gardening. It is those anonymous people who make up a society. It's actually my idea about how society works, with each little bee carrying its pollen.

M.P.: Without favoring one.

S.S.: Without categories. On the other hand, I reach them through other connections, for example, the landscape often influences my choices. When I see a landscape that has something interesting to say, that is not a cliché that has its absurd side and its history, its complexity, this often produces a click, acting as a catalyst. Then I keep my eyes on it. If I find something interesting in the city or outside it, I return there and watch what happens. After a time I go back and populate the landscape with things and people seen along the way.

M.P.: Basically your works are also born from a kind of accumulation, you see something today or the next day, and then you recreate the things experienced at some point, the things that are very offering to you.

S.S.: I pursue the large compositions for a long time, I gather information, images, scenes that repeat themselves, and then I agglutinate them all. I watch a place and what happens in it. Often the space itself has a certain energy accounted for by the way in which the landscape itself is built. Not a flat landscape, but with a certain vertical dimension of historical layers. It is a space that offers something, not just like a theater stage.

M.P.: We once joked that your works could be used as evidence for the police. I feel that they document very well, not necessarily with the accuracy of a photograph, but recomposing something we all see around us and recognize. Your painting may be an undeniable proof that something happened although in fact we have no idea whether it happened or not. How diverse is what you see out the window? How relevant is it?

S.S.: I dig trenches, I can see what happens from many angles. As I always carry my camera with me in order to quickly capture an interesting scene, I am just like gone fishing or like a worker digging the same hole deeper, deeper and deeper, until he hits stone and then carries on digging. I have probably created a

routine of looking at what surrounds me. And especially since I know what to look at, it's easy for me to swim in the waters that I have unearthed. But these things only happen gradually. Now I'm working on this painting with multiple scenes, I do not know what the next step will be. I only know that it will come, I cannot slacken; I get bored with a formula that I have created myself. Things flow naturally, like the experience of watching when at some point one wants to investigate something else. But, on the other hand, I cannot refrain from consuming a space, I watch it until I understand it.

M.P.: From my point of view, you are one of the consistent artists, you change organically, you evolve; the occurrence of multiple topics is an essential step, well established. It did not occur overnight. You come very close to the truth, paradoxically, through the collage of situations. Your previous works had something akin to propaganda, these have something more akin to life and what we see around.

S.S.: I am interested in reality. Real life gives me energy and motivates me. For me art is not a self-referential intellectual game. It is a different intellectual game, connected directly to reality, to immediate life.

Serban Savu (born 1978) lives and works in Cluj. His recent solo exhibitions include: Under the Radar, Pitzhanger Manor, PM Gallery & House, London and David Nolan Gallery, New York. Group exhibitions participations include Art From Cluj Today, Kunsthalle Mucsarnok, Budapest; Romanian Cultural Resolution, Spinnerei, Leipzig and Expanded Painting 3, Prague Biennial 4, Prague. His work is featured in Vitamin P2: New Perspectives in Painting, published by Phaidon Press in 2011.

For more information, please contact the gallery at contact@plan-b.ro and +49.1723210711.