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Serban Savu 'The Edge of the Empire'

by Holland Cotter

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The Edge of the Empire, 2008, oil on canvas, 126 x 190 cm.

The Romanian artist Serban Savu, who was born in 1978 and lives in Cluj in Transylvania, made his New York debut with a single small, gray, silent-feeling painting of huddled figures at the Armory Show in 2007. That same year he stood out in a group show of young Romanian artists at David Nolan Gallery, then in SoHo, and now Nolan is giving him a solo show of 14 paintings in which the sense of overcast soundlessness persists.

When Mr. Savu was a child, Romania was still under the Communist dictatorship of Nicolae Ceausescu. And although Ceausescu was deposed and killed in 1989, the technological impoverishment and isolationism of his quarter-century rule continues to mark the country, as Mr. Savu's pictures suggest in his slightly dazed and fogged-in version of the Social Realism that was once considered a utopian aesthetic.

In his paintings, most set in semirural landscapes with evidence of towns or cities not far off, everyday life goes on as if indifferent to politics. Commuters wait for a bus; workmen make concrete; a couple lie together on the grass. But beyond the couple looms a hulking building, a factory or an electric plant, apparently deserted. The workmen stand in a hangarlike interior, empty and overgrown with weeds. Only one painting depicts a world filled with material things, and these are wrecked cars and discarded furniture piled up in a trash heap, through which men sift and dig.

There is nothing radical about Mr. Savu's art. It is the opposite of cutting edge, which seems to be its point. Emblems of past promises for a utopian future and scenes of a present still poisoned by those promises exist on a continuum in these wry but unlaughing, beautifully painted pictures

They could be taken as stagnant idylls for a new Depression, except that an old one hasn't ended. (A painting by Mr. Savu is also in the booth occupied by Plan B gallery, based in Cluj and Berlin, in this year's Armory Show, which is reviewed on Page 23.)