

## ARTICLES

## REVIEW

## 'Historical Relayerings'

**A fascination with personal and collective history is explored in Referencing History, a group show at Green Art Gallery exhibiting works by Eastern European artists with three renowned Middle Eastern names.**

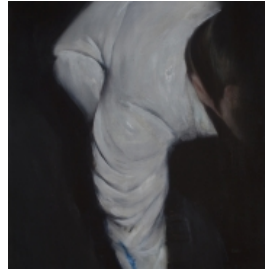
Three swimmers seemingly prepare to dive into a vast sea. They are suspended in air in the midst of what appears to be an old disintegrating warehouse. One overhead window provides the only passageway for light to enter into the bleakness of the surrounding space. These swimmers are physically trapped within the sad reality of the encompassing walls, and yet despite their current state of limbo, rays of sunshine find their way in as though symbolic of hope and of a way out.

The scene is from *Educatio*, an acrylic and oil on canvas work by Romanian artist Zsolt Bodoni. The depiction is the artist's way of relating to the past and its inextricable influence on the present showcased through an exhibition which reflects a common interest in history. On display is the work of Kamrooz Aram, Hale Tenger and Ali Banisadr alongside a selection of Eastern European Contemporary artists including Alexander Tinei, Daniel Pitin, Marius Bercea, Zsolt Bodoni, Ivan Grubanov, Ciprian Mureasan, Mircea Suciuc and Serban Savu.

Within each artist's *oeuvre* is a fascination with the systematic interpretations of historical events. "Art can transport us back in time in a way that people can't," says curator Jane Neal. "Like an archaeologist, an artist can't escape the constant layering of influences which affect his/her *oeuvre*." Many of the displayed works by Eastern European artists - all of whom experienced the collapse of Communist rule - depict the bleakness reality of growing up under a repressive regime and witnessing its disintegration. Through largely haunting and intense representations, these artists retrace their own personal and collective history through their own present visual language.

In *Shirt* by Alexander Tinei, one is provided with a glimpse of a man's head and shirt sleeve as he bends downward. The visceral depiction of movement is seen as his dark torso twists and is portrayed with gestural brushstrokes akin to Francis Bacon's physical and rhythmic canvases. On the back wall is another work by Bodoni entitled *In Bloom*, capturing several young girls in uniform dress juxtaposed with grazing horses in an outdoor field. The colours are dark with hints of warm tones of brown and red accentuated by the appearance of a hot air balloon in the background. "Here there is something much closer to what I call 'reality'," says the artist. "The figurative is always difficult to balance; it leads one to base the work off reality when it can go much deeper - into something more subjective." Also on view is Serban Savu's *Procession II*, a small oil on canvas work, portraying a snow-filled field with a group of people huddled together in a collective moment of faith. The crowd draws together amidst the surrounding countryside as if retreating to nature to escape the outside world.

Tucked away on the right hand wall are works by Iranian New York-based artists Ali Banisadr and Kamrooz Aram. Banisadr's vibrant and busy canvases full of bustling colours and movement re-appropriate the techniques of Northern European Renaissance masters in a visual *tour de force* that references the past while also providing edgy commentary on the dark side of modernity. Aram's more simplistic paper collages from his series *7000 years of history*, address Iranian nostalgia and the magnificence of Persian heritage through book clippings of Qajar dynasty paintings and monumental ancient sculptures. He incorporates such representations from his homeland's history within his own contemporary visual language in order to engage a dialogue with Western art's perpetual relationship with what has become known as the exoticism of the East. However, despite these more lively visual renderings of an interaction with the past, works by Aram and Banisadr seem almost overshadowed and out of place amidst the more eerie and dark canvases of their Eastern European counterparts. The only other work by a Middle Eastern artist exhibited is Turkish artist Hale Tenger's *Give me back my innocence*, a crystal slipper designed in 17th-century style, and placed on a periwinkle-coloured cushion within a glass bell jar. Displayed in the centre of the gallery, the work takes centre stage amidst the surrounding sombre canvases and relays a visual pun to the story of Cinderella - that fairytales exist in all societies regardless of their historical consequences. The title of the piece is taken from Laurie Anderson's song, *The Day of the Devil*. And like the song itself, the work also examines issues of consumer society:



Alexander Tinei. *Shirt*. 2012. Oil on canvas. 60 x 50 cm.



Serban Savu. *Procession II*. 2012. Oil on canvas. 30 x 40 cm.

what is light and pretty can also have a dark edge.

Yet regardless of the seemingly unbalanced presence of Middle Eastern artists, one can't deny the impact of presenting such a strong group of works by artists from the former Soviet bloc. "I hope that the show opens up the possibility for dialogue and for change," says Neal. "There are numerous shared commonalities between these Eastern European artists and their Middle Eastern counterparts - the strongest parallel being the Soviet Union's collapse in 1989 and what is happening now within the Middle East. You need to understand the past to go forward." The artists in *Referencing History* re-interpret the past to their own accord and choose what they want to portray from previous times. "You don't have to reinvent new things in your work; you just have to think about what has been done over, and over again," says Bodoni.

And while these common links can certainly be drawn between Eastern European nations and the Arab world, they can likewise be made with any other society which has undergone moments of cultural upheaval. It is by drawing such visual parallels that importance is placed on the common threads which bind human beings together - even during moments of darkness.

By Rebecca Anne Proctor

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