

Lyles & King

Marius Bercea

The Echo of a Breaking String

February 16 - March 16, 2024

Opening Reception: Friday, February 16, 6-8pm

We thought freedom was a very simple thing. A little time went by, and soon, we too bowed under its yoke. No one had taught us to be free.

Second-Hand Time (2013), Svetlana Alexievich (trans. Bela Shayevich)

The Romanian painter Marius Bercea has gained international plaudits for his fluent, ambitious oil paintings that anatomise modern life in California and explore the complex relationship, in the years since the Cold War, between Eastern Europe and the West. His new body of work, exhibited in *The Echo of a Breaking String* at Lyles & King, attends sympathetically to the lives of young Romanians born after the fall of the Iron Curtain – as Thomas Marks writes:

In the heart of Cluj-Napoca, Romania's picturesque second city, is a bar called Insomnia. There, most nights, amid the brightly coloured, slightly disheveled murals, you'll find clusters of the city's artists, many of them painters, and students from the University of Art and Design, whiling away the evening over glasses of Ursus beer or local wine. It's a convivial haunt, unquestionable – and yet, as its name insinuates, perhaps also a place that serves to assuage restlessness, even anxiety.

The painter Marius Bercea (b. 1979) is a familiar face at Insomnia. It's not just that he's a regular there, often dropping by after a day in the studio, but because many of the artists for whom the bar has become a public living room are his peers or former students. Bercea has taught painting at the University of Art and Design since 2006. But he is also among the leading figures of the 'Cluj School' of artists, a loose group of chiefly figurative painters – including Adrian Ghenie and Victor Man, both old friends of Bercea – who studied painting in the city in the 1990s and 2000s, and who over the past 15 years have achieved international prominence among institutions and art collectors.

For Bercea, the opportunity to exhibit outside Romania, not least from 2009 onwards in Los Angeles, coincided with a broadening of his artistic horizons. For a decade, the artist made annual extended visits to California, retracing the early migration there of Romanians, including some of his own ancestors, during the Gold Rush of the late 1840s, and drawn by the work of the Bay Area painters of the 1960s and of the modernist architects who emigrated from central Europe to the West Coast in the interwar years. Bercea immersed himself in the *chiaroscuro* of California, in its neon-flushed urban sprawl and the mysteries of its desert. He carried its lessons and sensations back to his studio in Cluj-Napoca, making paintings that, with their intense palette and taut shadows, imagined a heightened world elsewhere, almost fantastical but brimming with promise. 'I was in love with superficiality,' he says.

Then, in early 2020, came the Covid-19 pandemic and its imposition, so widely felt, of a scaled-down field of vision. At home in Cluj-Napoca, and with no prospect of traveling to California, Bercea found himself in an introspective mood in which he felt impelled, he says, 'to define myself as an artist – and also a citizen.' His thoughts increasingly turned to his position as a Romanian artist – not merely as a *de facto* cultural ambassador, that is, but as a painter engaged with lived experience in the recent past and present day of the country. The build-up to, and execution of, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 only accentuated the urgency he felt. 'It was as though I was open for surgery on my identity,' he says.

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Bercea's own childhood had unfurled during the grim final years of Nicolae Ceausescu's repressive Communist regime (1965–89) in Romania. It had been a closed world, marked by enforced austerity, including food rationing, and by the pervasive fear of surveillance by the Securitate (the secret police) and its vast network of informers. Then, with the fall of the Iron Curtain, came years of faltering hope, as Romania stumbled into capitalism. Bercea's abiding memories of the early 1990s are of an inundation of American pop culture and a glut of used clothes and second-hand electrical goods despatched from Western Europe. The Romania he knew as a teenager aspired to be a poster child of post-Cold War freedoms. But it was constituted as an afterimage of the West.

Bercea came to realise that a younger generation of Romanians, born into this brave new world after 1989, had been cast adrift from the historical events that had convulsed the country only years before their birth. For many of his students – for those young painters who drifted into *Insomnia* every evening – the totalitarian regime and its aftermath were distant pressures, he felt, registered primarily through the conflicting attitudes of their parents and grandparents. Many of these young Romanians had been brought up by the older generation, their parents having moved to western Europe in search of employment; and their grandparents often nursed a nostalgia for the certainties of life under Communism, with its guaranteed jobs and housing. Reading *Second-Hand Time*, Svetlana Alexievich's oral history of the former USSR, Bercea realised that this rupture was general across the former Eastern Bloc. 'Those who were born in the USSR' Alexievich writes, 'and those born after its collapse do not share a common experience – it's like they're from different planets.'

Bercea turned his attention to portraiture. As models he had a ready supply of former students who had become his friends. But to work in this mode, for him, would also mean grappling with the tradition that had informed his artistic training under professors who had been schooled in it: the socialist realist imagery of Ceausescu's Romania, with its ubiquitous idealisations of the working man and woman. He set out to make representative, often large-scale, paintings that would depict a generation of Romanians – not as card-carrying heroes, like their forebears, but as delegates of contemporary ambivalence and doubt.

Take *Troubadours of an Uncertain Future*, the central painting in *The Echo of a Breaking String*. At first glance, its gathering of young men and women has something of the confidence of the figures in a group portrait of guildsmen by Rembrandt or Frans Hals. Look closer, however, and you notice that the figures are each lost in their own reverie, caught in a moment of ennui or otherwise striking their own self-absorbed pose. The depicted relationship between these people is provisional, even meaningless, an effect that the painter has amplified by stitching together disconnected photographic studies of models in determining the composition of the work. It is 'a group monologue,' Bercea says.

The figures in this painting are draped, quite literally, with symbols that gesture to the recent past. The animal- and flower-print fabrics they wear, some specially commissioned by Bercea, recall the pre-eminence of the fable as a literary genre in Communist Romania to convey cloaked criticism of the regime. The peacock-eye curtain, which might at any time be drawn across the ersatz stage, suggests the ever-watching eyes of the surveillance state. But does it divulge such a resonance to the people in the painting – or register with them as no more than pattern or decoration?

Melancholy infuses these paintings – a 'golden sadness', Bercea calls it, of a young generation stilled like flies in honey. It is there in the smaller portraits, such as *Untitled (Scorpion Belt)* or *Untitled (Vanessa)*, in the weary nonchalance of their subjects. And there, too, in *Girl at Mirror with Puzzled Thoughts*, in which the mirror reflects an unresolved image of the young woman – as though she is unable to reflect, or reflect on, herself.

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The most ambivalent of the works, perhaps, is *The Cherry Orchard*, a joint portrait posed on the type of bright, early summer afternoon that one wishes would last forever. The figures appear carefree, playful even: The man might be smiling, but his mouth is too much in shadow to be sure. But then we recall *The Cherry Orchard* of Chekhov, with the desultory bliss in ignorance of its anti-heroine, and the ‘sound of a breaking string’ that reverberates in the play as an irreversible snapping away from the past. A solitary flinch takes flight from the table in the painting. Will it fly far? Or simply flutter for an instant then alight?

Marius Bercea (b. 1979, Cluj-Napoca, Romania) holds a Master’s Degree from the University of Art and Design in Cluj. His work has been exhibited at Kunsthalle, Prague, CZ; Taubman Museum of Art, Roanoke, US; Cluj Museum of Art, Cluj, RO; WHAT MUSEUM, Tokyo, JP; Arken Museum of Modern Art, Ishøj, DK; Asia Art Center, Taipei, TW; François Ghebaly, Los Angeles, US; Blain|Southern, London, UK and Berlin, DE; La Kunsthalle Centre D’Art Contemporain Mulhouse, Mulhouse, FR; Musée de la chasse et de la nature, Paris, FR; and Elgiz Museum of Contemporary Art, Istanbul, TR; among many others. Bercea’s work is held in the collections of Taubman Museum of Art, Roanoke, US; ARKEN Museum of Modern Art, Ishøj, DK; Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art, Hudson, US; Kistefos-Museet, Jevnaker, NO; Zabłudowicz Collection, London, UK; Olbricht Collection, Berlin, DE; Space K Museum, Seoul, KR; and MAKI Collection, Tokyo, JP. Bercea lives and works in Cluj-Napoca, Romania.