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Art in America

EXHIBITION REVIEWS, June/July '09



Serban Savu
The Guardian of the Valley
2008. oil on canvas
12 5/8 x 19 1/2 inches; at David Nolan

SERBAN SAVU DAVID NOLAN

Within Eastern Europe, Romania was one of the last Communist strongholds. On December 22, 1989, its dictatorial leader, Nicolae Ceausescu, fled protesting citizens at the Central Committee building by helicopter, only to be captured and executed alongside his wife three days later. Serban Savu, the young Romanian painter who had his first New York solo exhibition at David Nolan's Chelsea location, was 11 years old at the time, yet his paintings project a mature and quietly unnerving vision of Communism's vestigial influence on contemporary Romanians.

Savu populates many of the 14 oil-on-linen landscapes in the exhibition (all works 2008) with an analogous arrangement: swatches of verdant grass and trees interrupted by the serious and formidable cements fixtures of Communist-era architecture. Curtains of gray sky cool and darken the scenes. And often in the middle ground, figures seem hemmed in by their surroundings. In *The Edge of the Empire*, which shares its title with the exhibition, a group of men and women stand beside a road, their faces obscured by brushwork to suggest the anonymity of the ideal Communist citizen. However, their body language—hands in pockets, disengaged, forbearing—communicates their entrapment by the hulking gray buildings that haunt the background. The small size of the figures in relation to the canvas communicates their marginalization and impotence within the gears of a larger sociopolitical machine.

The paintings broadcast an allegiance to Social Realism; the influence of Ben Shahn, Raphael and Moses Soyer, and Edward Hopper is evident. (Hopper's talent with slanting light is particularly relevant.) Savu's subjects are the everymen and -women of Romania. Some of the men are at work, shirtless, mixing concrete or foraging through heaps of scrap metal. Some figures wait expectantly; for what, the viewer is not informed. Some are at leisure, and they are in the minority here as they bask under blue skies. But even the sunbathing subjects who occupy *In The Shadow of the Dam* are not free from a looming, pallid wall of concrete that casts a long, angular shadow.

Savu's strength is that he opens a window onto the lives of present-day Romanians, who remain oppressed by history's lingering narrative, if not by a Ceausescu-style tyrant. Their identities, Savu suggests, are rooted in a head-down, steadfast desire to survive, to make the best of an existence perpetually at the brink. - Nick Obourn