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Art Matters | A Medieval Romanian City With Major Art Talent
by Zeke Turner



Frank Herfort Cluj's most well-known gallery, Plan B, is overseen by the curator Mihai Pop (in coat), pictured with the artists Ciprian Muresan, Cristian Rusu and Savu.

Lacking a famous art school, government support or even a location most people can point to on a map, the small medieval city of Cluj, Romania, has become an unlikely breeding ground for the next generation of art stars.

Two years ago, the painter Adrian Ghenie was in his friend's studio, having a coffee with some former classmates — all Romanian artists and gallerists in their mid-to-late 30s — when it sunk in: they had made it.

“I realized that Mircea was having a show in Salzburg, and Cipri, right next to him, was going to show at Tate,” Ghenie recalls of his friends Mircea Cantor and Ciprian Muresan. “We’re having shows at MOMA San Francisco. And Plan B” — the gallery Ghenie started with the artist-turned-dealer Mihai Pop in Cluj in 2005 — “was going to Basel. I realized I don’t have to go out to Paris or London to find out what’s going on in art, because we are it right now. And we were still in Cluj having coffee like normal people!”

In the last decade, Cluj-Napoca, better known as Cluj, an Eastern European university town of about 325,000 permanent residents, has become an unexpected art world hothouse, its homegrown talent pool earning rapturous praise on the international stage. Ghenie is represented in New York by the powerful Pace gallery, and his work has caught the eye of major collectors, including the Christie’s owner François Pinault. At two separate Sotheby’s auctions in the last year, his sales tripled and then doubled their respective estimates.

While Ghenie and Victor Man are the best known of the group, success has come to each in his own right, as if lightning struck multiple limbs of the same tree. It was the Italian critic and Flash Art founder Giancarlo Politi who in 2007 first called them the Cluj School, in the manner of Dresden and Leipzig. Already known abroad for his 2005 video “Deeparture,” depicting a wolf and a deer left alone in a Parisian white-cube gallery, Cantor won the Marcel Duchamp Prize in 2011, which came with a solo exhibition at the Centre Pompidou last fall. Muresan, too, first gained wide notice for a video: “Choose,” showing his young son mixing Coca-Cola and Pepsi in the same glass. The work landed him a place in the 2009 New Museum show “The Generational: Younger Than Jesus,” as one of the world’s 50 top artists under 33. Last year, he had a show with the Polish artist Anna Molska at the Tate Modern in London.

“I found it somehow miraculous,” Ghenie, 36, adds of the group’s success, coming from a state with paltry, temperamental support for the arts and a university with no reputation abroad. “This thing happened in such a short time from that place, which had little tradition. There was a month when if you opened Artforum, every three pages was an ad with a Romanian — and from really big places like MOMA or Tate to smaller, private galleries.”

“Nobody bet on such a successful artist from this small scene — maybe one, but not five,” Muresan, 36, agrees. “This is weird.”

Why this flowering? Well, the best explanation is the artists’ work and, perhaps, their work ethic, a trait they often attribute to cultural cross-pollination from the Germans and Hungarians who settled in the area years ago. Romania is still recovering from decades of isolationist and brutal rule under Nicolae Ceausescu, and this fall the country’s justice system began the first trial in decades of one of its own for abuses during the Communist era.

Twenty five years after Ceausescu’s lightning-quick trial and execution on Christmas Day, when most of the artists were in grade school, they retain a special brand of pragmatism, cynicism and dark wit. Their output — somber, intellectual, haunted by history and laced with gallows humor — reveals the psyche of a country sentenced to grapple with its past for decades to come. Ghenie’s thickly worked canvases depicting what look like melting faces have drawn comparisons to the work of Francis Bacon, but his titles making reference to pie fights lend the works a layer of slapstick. Muresan’s video of dog puppets evokes the human potential for brutality. The Romanian critic and curator Mihnea Mircan, 37, summed up their generation as “allergic to utopia.”

In this spirit, they navigate success in a post-Communist environment, where for decades most any achievement required working with the regime. “I trust myself better than I trust others,” Serban Savu, 35, says, explaining the self-reliance he and his colleagues have developed. “Nobody helped us to construct the art scene.”

It’s mid-August, and Savu is piloting his black Volvo sedan through

Manastur, the area where he grew up. Originally intended as a Le Corbusier-inspired modernist project, the green space between the blocks was filled in with additional units as Ceausescu shunted Romania onto an industrialist track and crowded peasants into towns and cities. Savu's social realist-style paintings, which have drawn comparisons to Jean-François Millet, Edward Hopper and Pieter Bruegel, offer gentle, complex depictions of Romanians generations on — agrarian families uncoupled from their homes and still uncomfortable with the transition decades later.

“It's our generation's task to start building,” says Mara Ratiu, 35, a senior lecturer and vice rector at the University of Art and Design of Cluj-Napoca, where many of the Cluj set studied. “I'm doing this at my university with my colleagues. Mihai is doing that in his gallery program.” She's just returned from the Venice Biennale and is sitting in Cluj's Museum Square, a cobblestone plaza in the old city.

“I hate sometimes living in Romania,” she admits. “It's crazy to live here because you have to deal with so many difficult things. On the other hand, what's very fascinating is this pioneering work, the idea of building something.” With its centuries of history and culture, Cluj is fertile ground.

But in 2005, when Ghenie and Pop decided to start Plan B, Romania's second largest city seemed more like a place they couldn't escape. Ghenie had just returned penniless from living in Vienna and Catania, Sicily, where he had begun doubting his ambition to be an artist. Ghenie's brother introduced him to a friend, a stockbroker who had recently purchased a big house in Cluj with empty walls and offered him a tidy sum to help start an art collection.

Meanwhile Pop, who was running an exhibition space at the university as a graduate student, was frustrated with interference from the administration. The two found a space in the city center with damaged parquet floors and called it Plan B. Then they used the money to mount a Victor Man show.

It may have started as a fallback plan, but Plan B quickly became the

catalyst for a new scene. Juerg Judin from the gallery Haunch of Venison in Zürich flew in to see Ghenie's first solo show on the advice of the British curator Jane Neal. When Judin arrived at the airport in Cluj, Savu and Ghenie showed up late to pick him up in a red Soviet-made 1982 Lada. The work, however, impressed him, and on returning to Zürich, he mounted a show in 2006 called "Cluj Connection," curated by Neal, presenting works by Cantor, Ghenie, Man, Muresan and Savu, among others, as a group for the first time. Ghenie's paintings sold out, and Judin added him to the gallery's roster.

In 2007, Plan B was the only Eastern European gallery with a booth at the Armory Show in New York, and Pop took the reins of Romania's national pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Plan B opened a second exhibition space in Berlin shortly thereafter.

After it lost the white-cube space in Cluj, Plan B joined with the nonprofit gallery Sabot in 2009 to renovate an old paintbrush factory in the light industrial district close to the city's center. They envisioned a complex of performance spaces and studios. "It's a factory, and I really feel that I am coming here as a worker," says Daria Dumitrescu, 36, the gallerist running Sabot. When the Paintbrush Factory opened in October 2009, more than 1,000 locals from Cluj turned out to see what the artists and gallerists there were up to.

Cluj's artists tend to share a pessimistic streak, and as a result, they seem primed for their moment in the spotlight to elapse, but seven years after the original Cluj coming-out in Zürich, the city continues to draw interest. At the end of 2012, Cluj was included in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art show "Six Lines of Flight: Shifting Geographies in Contemporary Art." Until January, Espace Culturel Louis Vuitton in Paris is showing artists from Cluj as part of the show "Romanian Scenes," and the Arken Museum of Modern Art outside Copenhagen just concluded a show called "Hotspot Cluj — New Romanian Art." Phaidon included Cluj in a new book published in September, "Art Cities of the Future," alongside the likes of São Paulo and Istanbul, metropolises 30 and 40 times its size.

It's a frantic pace, and the gallerist Pop, 39, can't help wondering how

long Cluj will hold onto its stars. Cantor has long worked out of Paris, for instance, and Ghenie is spending more time at his studio in Berlin. Pop is also preparing for the moment when the art world's eyes shift to the next big thing. "The shows about Cluj, I find them O.K., but I know quite soon they will be gone," he says, sitting on a bench at the botanical garden on one of the hills overlooking the city. "The people who are organizing these shows, they like to map territories," he adds. "And when they already know who's good, who's not, they go further to map another territory and another territory."

"In our case in the East, it's important to constitute something," Pop continues. "From the very beginning the idea was that if we open Plan B, it will be a long-term project. In the West, everyone is always asking you 'What's your next project? And what comes next? Next, next!' There's no next. Next is to sustain yesterday's project."