

Serban Savu: The Edge of Empire at David Nolan Gallery  
by Greg Lindquist



Serban Savu *In the Shadow of the Dam*, 2008,  
oil on canvas, 57-1/2 x 48-1/2 inches.

\*Cover MARCH 2009 shows a detail

Serban Savu paints the Romanian landscape, a topography where man lounges in nature amid the remaining manifestations of the Communist era. In depicting what is stereotypically perceived in terms of a diametric relationship between man and nature, Savu's portrayal of these forces takes its cue from Romanticism. The distinctions are less clear: nature is not natural—flora, fauna, terrain—but rather evokes man's presence, in such forms as industrial structures, heaps of industrial materials and the visible atmospheric results of industrial processes. If Romanticism involves a psychological desire to escape from unpleasant realities, then Savu's 21st century rendition reinvestigates this concern, imbuing these vistas with a subtle and wry nostalgia for a more economically prosperous time when Communism brought more stable employment.

The painting *In the Shadow of the Dam* (all paintings 2008 and oil on canvas) is redolent of the bathers in paintings by Edouard Manet and Georges Seurat, which were made at a different moment in the industrial revolution's trajectory. In particular, Seurat's 1884 *Bathers at Asnières* comes to mind. The horizon line in this painting contains billowing factory smoke stacks and what appears to be a steam engine train crossing a trestle. In Savu's painting, the horizon is almost completely eclipsed, as the title implies, by the hulking concrete structure of a dam, assumedly made during the Communist era. Even more salient are the bathers in Savu's *They Cannot Hear Us*, two figures whose upper bodies emerge from and punctuate a river in a haze that extends towards distant factory smokestacks. These figures are all but takeoffs of Seurat's figures, murky cut-outs awash in what appears to be polluted environs.

Although the architecture's physical decay reflects its economic uselessness, such romantic titles as *The Guardian of the Valley* and *Mountain of Nostalgia* lend emotional value to these dour and severe scenes. These paintings speak to the failed utopian ideas in Communism. In *The*

Guardian of the Valley, a nondescript figure leans against the railing of what appears to be an elevated concrete structure with small sheds atop of it.

The figures in Savu's scenes are similarly painted in an anonymous fashion: In *The Edge of Empire*, facial features are suppressed, blurred in suggestion of an overcast recollection or impression. In several paintings, but most strikingly in *Peripheral View*, this hazily, blurred quality is reminiscent of Gerhard Richter's landscape series. The figure's isolation also recalls the young contemporary German painter Tim Eitel's lonely figures in empty spaces but also the romantic trope of the individual at the center of life and art, crafting an expression of unique feelings and particular circumstances.

Although this work appears to have a social realist ethos, Savu's paintings remind me of Italo Calvino's magical realism. In particular, the collection of short stories "Marcovaldo, or The Seasons in the City" comes to mind. In this cycle of stories the eponymous narrator, a romantic and a blue-collar worker, longs for nature in a northern Italian city in the 1960s during the illusions of an economic boom. In these stories, while what on the surface may appear conventionally realistic is in fact paranormal or preternatural. Nature overshadows urban life, rewarding Marcovaldo in surprising and unexpected acts of beauty. In Serban Savu's painting, I sense a similar longing for nature, a desire to escape from the unpleasant reality of the present through these wistful images of the architectural relics in the landscape of Romania's past.