

EXHIBITION REVIEW:

Șerban Savu: *What Work Is?*, Romanian Pavilion – La Biennale di Venezia, 20.04–24.11.2024, Curator Ciprian Mureșan



In 2024 our country's pavilion was represented at the Venice Biennale through the exhibition *What work is?*, where visitors could enjoy the mastery of the internationally renowned Romanian artist Șerban Savu. The Venice Biennale is one of the most beautiful celebrations of contemporary art. Through this event, the artworld gains consensus because once every two years artists from different corners of the world have the opportunity to exhibit their works in the most important global festival. Therefore, both the exchange of ideas and the connection to new innovations are favored.

Venice in general is a place blessed with a variety of beauties that belong both to the uniqueness of its anthropic geographical features, given its picturesque canals, and the urban landscape

that is made up of pretentious architectural monuments, but during the Biennale, when the galleries welcome you at every corner, the city becomes a true hedonistic sanctuary. In addition to the exhibitions that can be found in the most spontaneous places of the city, two geographically peripheral areas are dedicated to the Biennale and thus become culturally-central, namely *Giardini*

and *Arsenale*. *Giardini* means garden, as the name suggests in Italian, but it is more of a park dedicated to the arts where one can interact with the national pavilions and exhibitions of different countries.

Șerban Savu, born in 1978, is one of the best-known contemporary Romanian artists active on the foreign art scene, able to convey particularities of the post-communist Romanian landscape with the help of old masters' techniques. The artist works primarily with painting and mosaic, favoring a classical, figurative approach to the autochthonous themes he explores. He also belongs to the famous group of artists, catalyzed around the gallerist Mihai Pop, referred to in historiography as the "Cluj School" or the "Cluj Phenomenon". The group includes other world-class artists such as Adrian Ghenie (who also represented Romania at the Venice Biennale in 2015), Victor Man or Mircea Cantor. Curator Ciprian Mureșan (b. 1977) is another significant member of the group, to whom we owe the core idea behind the exhibition. He is an artist recognized both in Romania and abroad for his neo-conceptual vision through which he perceives social vulnerabilities and criticizes or ironizes them through various artistic means.¹

The artist's affinity for Venice did not begin with the current show. He completed his university studies with a master's degree in this city. Venice is known to have a well-established tradition in visual arts since the time Titian inspired the whole of Italy with the skill of combining his lively hues, being a faultless colorist. Arriving here, Savu was seduced by the classical techniques of the Renaissance period, which he first contemplated at the Gallerie dell'Accademia, and then began to assimilate.² He could only choose the thematic orientation when he returned to Romania, realizing that in his native land every blade of grass inspires him,³ as he said in an interview. Thus, the real resources he uses to create have always remained at home, but it took several formative journeys to see his path clearly. At the moment, we are talking about a mature and very committed artist, who surprises us both with his elaborate methods, as well as with the power behind the chosen concepts.

The exhibition dedicated to Romania was impressive in 2024. The pavilion combines two exhibition styles that synchronize with the current period. First, we turn our attention to the overall atmosphere which is really inspired by the principle of the 'white cube', a manner of exposition typical of the modern period, but very successful today. Neutralizing the space's personality with

¹ Erwin Kessler, *X: 20. O radiografie a artei românești după 1989* (Editura Vellant, 2013).

² David Cohen, "Communism never happened: Șerban Savu and the Cluj connection," *Artcritical. The online Magazine of Art and Ideas*, October 13, 2011, <https://dawidradziszewski.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/communism-never-happened-serban-savu-and-the-cluj-connection-artcritical-artcritical.pdf>.

³ Adina Zorzini, *Cincisprezece conversații cu artiști contemporani* (Editura Trei, 2015), 284.

whitewashed walls suggests a purification of the cultural environment, set in contrast to mundane reality. It is an environment created specifically to delineate the sacred space dedicated to art, meant to take one out of the profane state and devoid of visual or intellectual ecstasy. A second method of display is inspired precisely from the medieval period, when polyptychs were often used to decorate church altars. However, in this particular case, the presented polyptych, and at the same time the theatrical hit of the exhibition, takes the form of a large-scale art installation that brings together 45 paintings made by Șerban Savu. Moreover, this generous secular iconostasis is in dialogue with four other exhibits in the form of buildings that can be interpreted like models or sculptures, each containing a mosaic of social realist inspiration.

As the title indicates, the exhibition aims to answer the question of what work is, visually defining this activity from several points of view, of course, through the typical filter of the Eastern European context. In addition to the actual work, the artist also considers the indispensable breaks from it, naming the polyptych as work but also leisure, alternating lucrative state with idleness.

To get into the content of this exhibition, it is essential to learn some of the particularities of the artist Șerban Savu. First of all, he lived his childhood in the shadow of the Romanian communist regime, witnessing the breakthrough marked by the 1989 Revolution from which the new liberal period was born. In his work he captures the chaotic transition from totalitarianism to a democratic world, paying attention to the social process. He is an observant artist who takes scenes from Romanian reality and transposes them into a painting or mosaic. His main environment of inspiration is on the outskirts of cities, on the border between urban and rural areas, places where the reminiscences of the Communist period are still very visible. He does not aim to criticize the country's shortcomings or fall into false nationalism, but rather remains objective, a mere witness to the scenes he depicts.⁴

His work can also be interpreted as anthropological study, because he is interested in understanding the current state of that new man, who, with the help of propaganda resources, was developed in the Communist laboratories. Currently, the social category in which communism invested so much has become a failure, also illustrating the failure of the Western regime. He investigates the present state of workers and farmers who have fallen exponentially in the social hierarchy and became marginalized in the urban suburbs.⁵ A feature present in Șerban Savu, which is clearly observable in this exhibition, is the pervasive passivity shared by his characters, captured in the most concrete way possible. It is a feeling that can indeed be observed among people who belong to the middle and lower classes in Romania, resembling a latent melancholy.

⁴ Ioana Chira, "Privirea lui Șerban Savu," *Bazar* 44, no. 6 (2015).

⁵ Șerban Savu, *Paintings 2005-2010* (Hatje Cantz, 2011).

The works selected for the polyptych depict individuals at work or ordinary people who are in a state of relaxation, spending the free time they have in various ways. In the first category, we can distinguish restorers, archaeologists, but also garbage collectors or plumbers, referring directly to occupations that require physical effort. For the second category, familiar leisure spaces and at the same time typical Romanian pastimes were chosen. Here we see people fishing, biking, or lounging and sunbathing by the lakeside.

The four models that complete the exhibition in a three-dimensional way embody typical buildings found in Romanian settings. The first represents the communist block of flats in the Mănăstur neighborhood of Cluj-Napoca, where the artist spent a significant part of his childhood. On top of this layout, there is a mosaic depicting the May 1st celebration on one side of the block's façade. The second model imitates the shapes of the former paintbrush factory that was converted into a cultural space, becoming an emblem of contemporary artistic movements in Cluj, even meanwhile it stopped functioning. The accompanying mosaic depicts a meal break. The third model, in the shape of an archaeological site, contains a detail from a Social Realist mosaic in Arad, from the wagon factory. In the last model, a church in ruins is represented, in the apse of which there is a mosaic with a sleeping worker.⁶

From my point of view, through this exhibition Șerban Savu demonstrated that painting has its well-defined place in the heterogeneous world of contemporary art. Our pavilion, made in the most classical manner, undoubtedly managed to shine, even when competing with contemporary artworks featuring audio, video or light art installations, so very modern innovations designed to catch one's eye. The visitors paid a lot of attention to our exhibition, meticulously analyzing the action involved in each work, an attitude that once again proves that Șerban Savu helps us see in an aesthetic light the images that evoke a dusty and monotonous past in the Romanian collective mindset.

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⁶ Daria Ghiu, "Arte frumoase. 23 martie 2024. Cu artiștii Șerban Savu și Ciprian Mureșan despre Ce este munca," *M-xcloud*, March 23, 2024, https://www.mixcloud.com/daria-ghiu/arte-frumoase-23-martie-2024-cu-arti%C8%99tii-%C8%99erban-savu-%C8%99i-ciprian-mure%C8%99an-despre-ce-este-munca/?fbclid=IwAR0B2o6hIqASVDSqxM0BAbOtRwFBper84CbpVJVVoGAlfDoOyO9GY0LjyKr4_aem_ASLLarr5pSj9oyY1UMfMm3PAIRTBjL_1HeZMgTmiWwi69RBX9zMl_JUmIbHcRK_4-SHQXHbjygAjogh3y1YS0Ug9z.

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