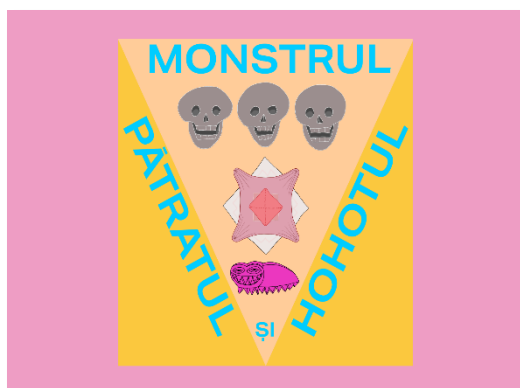


EXHIBITION REVIEW:

***Monstrul, pătratul și hohotul*, Museum of Recent Art, Bucharest, 07.06.2024–31.01.2025, Curator Dan Popescu**



The exhibition *The Monster, the Square and the Laughter* is, in the words of its curator Dan Popescu, a temporary reconfiguration of the Museum of Recent Art collection of Romanian contemporary art—lasting from 06.2024 to 01.2025—but also a curatorial essay on its own. The theme is a strong one, laying the groundwork for a contemplative journey throughout the psyche

and thought process of contemporary Romania. Physically, each level of the building itself corresponds to a certain type of mood constructed entirely out of the artworks, their interaction with one another and their positioning in space. There are the “Black Cubes”, intermediary rooms situated between each level and painted entirely black, meant to convey a feeling of claustrophobia but also interconnectedness. Even though the levels themselves don’t have a strict theme, at times both humorous and solemn pieces hanging from the same wall, the atmosphere is intricately constructed to either pull you towards the dignified or towards the absurd. There are paintings, sculptures of all kinds, installations, readymades and video art.

As the title suggests, there are two major approaches to contemporary art in Romania: one is the humorous path, which is rooted in the interwar period, and the other is the sacred one, displaying Romanians’ complex relationship with

God and faith. The divine, here, can only be approached through the monster or the square (sacred geometry)—two sides of the same coin actually, as represented on the first level of the building. One of the highlights for me was certainly Marian Zidaru's (b. 1956) *Saint George*, which abruptly catches your attention as soon as you finish ascending the stairs thanks to its central placement and towering figure. This wooden sculpture, surrounded by paintings of the same nature, demands your full awareness and concentration. It's a swift motion, but frozen in time and space. Saint George, represented as the weapon and held up by light itself, is merely seconds away from slaying the dragon.

In the same room, once you look away from Saint George and turn around, you notice behind you a piece made from resin, EPS foam and cement. Carved into these solid and harsh materials are monstrous faces, or rather, as the title suggests, Masks which have no person behind to bear them. Expressionless figures are staring at you through cut-out eyes and, at times, mouths. Vlad Olariu (b. 1983), the artist, added very little color, and instead allowed the inorganic material to speak out through itself. There is sorrow depicted, amusement, suspicion, surprise, and even bewilderment, yet all these mean nothing but illusions of emotion.

Works such as *Judas' Dream* by Neculai Păduraru (b. 1946) and *Black Pieta* by Titi Ceară (b. 1957), both located in the same area, offer a moment of religious contemplation infused with a feeling of heaviness and solemnity. The first piece showcases a bound humanoid creature gazing into an extended body of itself, while the latter represents a mother's agony holding the lifeless body of her son through minimalist, androgynous and expressionless figures stuck in unnatural and tense positions. *Judas' Dream*, for me especially, felt absurd and on the brink of hilarity, yet as soon as I turned away from it, I felt a strange sorrow and guilt, emotions that accompanied me beyond the museum walls. It definitely left an impression.

There is also softness, pink bodies which seem to melt into one another and into the strident landscape behind them. Suzana Dan's (b. 1976) *L'amour c'est le cul* and *Sadness Is Looking at Me* offer us a reality outside of our grasp. The colors are saturated, and yet they remain gentle. This is a world far from natural, dream-like and irrational, but still desirable to most of us. The body itself becomes the main focus of these paintings with its pink skin and cotton candy-like texture, while the face is either turned away from us or completely missing from the composition.

For Romanians, life is a dark comedy, a view reflected across all forms of media: from literature, art and cinematography to reality TV shows, news and even politics. It's a coping mechanism developed to face the absurd reality we live in, and help us take ourselves a little less seriously at times. From a cardboard

Ceaușescu through various sexual organs to the sword of Stephen the Great made entirely out of Turkish delight, we see life as less intimidating and more indefinite.

This juxtaposition of humor and holiness can sometimes come off as overbearing, especially in parts where the transition is too harsh and unexpected. But perhaps that's the point of the entire exhibition: the constant switch between comedic relaxation and sacred tension, an illustration of the absurdity of Romanian society and, last but not least, the attempt at keeping you out of your comfort zone for as long as possible.

Rose-Marie RUNCEANU

Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

E-mail: runceanuroze9@gmail.com