

EXHIBITION REVIEW:

**Geta Brătescu, Mircea Cantor, Alexandra Croitoru,
Ion Grigorescu, Cristi Pogăcean, and Arnulf Rainer:
In Their Own Image, PLASTIC, Cluj-Napoca,
19.09–10.11.2024**



Are you or are you not part of a specific circle? This is the first question the show poses when you enter the space, and your eyes fall on Mircea Cantor's 2006 photograph of a pile of white porcelain urinals heaped against an ordinary, industrial-looking fence. Do you get the reference? When it comes to contemporary art, *ceci n'est pas seulement un*

urinoir. Seemingly discarded, they mirror the fate of Duchamp's original submission of the *Fountain* (1917), which was treated as a crude joke and unceremoniously thrown out. At the same time, PLASTIC addresses a circle within a circle—if you are familiar with the history of contemporary art in Cluj, then you'll register the gallery's location on Einstein Street as a return of the slightly older kids on the old block, and *In Their Own Image*, in particular, feels like a door left open, through which you can overhear a long-standing conversation between palls. The works belong to the Mircea Pinte collection (an outstandingly rare treat); they were chosen by Norbert Costin (this might explain the predilection for photography) and Ciprian Mureșan (whose most recent curatorial project involved showcasing Șerban Savu's works at the Venice Biennale); the accompanying gallery text is shaped like a dialogue between the two. It all reads very *IYKYK* (in social media



speak), as it all ties back to Cluj's claim to international art scene fame—the Plan B Generation / the School of Cluj, both shifting and currently imperfect labels, but still holders of meaning. I am biased and thus unsure of how snobbish and hermetic this looks to a complete outsider, but the text itself is at least moderately accessible.

On the ground floor of a new building, the space is a respectable white cube, its crisp, uncluttered elegance suits the works well, and their display is clearly thought out. The reciprocal hanging of Ion Grigorescu's *The Neck: Self Portrait with Tutankhamun* (1975) and Arnulf Rainer's work stands out as particularly soothing. Both can be classified as interventions on photography – in Grigorescu's case, it falls within his expressionist exploration of his own body, narcissistic and self-mythologizing – here his throat is exposed and superimposed with the famous princely image of King Tut's gold and lapis lazuli mask. In the work titled *Charles Augustin Saint-Beuve* (1978), Rainer's ink gestures overwrite the French critic's portrait as an organic network. Essentially, we have two death masks facing each other in two mystical interpretations: the throat chakra is associated with self-expression, while the creative intrusion of an apparent doodle brings a further macabre quality to the disembodied head. In the first work, the dead, the historical is placed on top of the living, imbuing it with legitimacy, while in the second, the dead, the old is overcome by the new, by the lively, flowy lines. Thus, in the various tones of grey of the two pictures, there lies a whole narrative of acknowledging mortality and fighting it through art.

Also dealing with the idea of legacy, but this time in a decidedly political key, is another Romanian post-modern photography classic: Alexandra Croitoru's *Untitled (Prime Minister)* (2004). The ventriloquist-puppet interpretation of the power dynamics in the picture, as suggested by Norbert Costin, hits home and is still poignant 20 years later, especially since, as the show is on display, the Romanian electoral climate is terribly fraught. Except now, the handler behind the politician is a different kind of artist—a social media artisan, a PR guru, a wizard of the algorithm who wins votes for the mouthpiece candidate.

There are several themes connecting the works in the show, and they revolve around (self)portraiture and roles, around art about art and art about systems, as well as the negotiation of personal mythologies. In the case of Cristi Pogăcean's *2544* (2006), all of the above are contained. The different hats often worn by contemporary artists feature in this deadpan video showcasing the power dynamics of contractual obligations, fame, and mythmaking. The works that fit in least within the aforementioned themes are, however, Geta Brătescu's *Magnets* (1974–5). Conceptual proposals for monumental public pieces meant to disturb the urban fabric by drawing metals towards them, the pretense that the works in the show “can be considered self-portraits due to the magnetic

field produced by the artist's personality" is, at best flimsy, and corny at worst. This is not to detract from their intrinsic quality, but let's just say they are too abstract in an otherwise quite cynical show.

Ultimately, for a small show, of around ten or so works, *In Their Own Image* packs a ponderous punch. Maybe this is more strongly felt by those a little 'in the know', but I would say it makes for a great foray into Romanian contemporary art and its collectionism for any of those who appreciate the archaeology involved in uncovering layers of meaning and intention.

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