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Dumitru Gorzo *In the Corner of My Eye*

By Valery Oisteanu

SLAG Gallery, June 12 – July 19, 2008

Live flowers decorate the ceiling and floors of this new gallery, just as they would at a real Romanian wedding—but the party guests are on the walls: the subjects of the provocative portraits of the Romanian painter known as Gorzo. Who? He is a talented young man in his thirties, enmeshed in controversy in Europe and, now, the United States, wherever politics, sex and aesthetics meet.

His work combines the freshness and sentimental naiveté of folkloric bas-relief with an overlay of Photorealist portraiture. He has exhibited these quasi-pornographic sculpture/paintings for more than 10 years in Romania, Germany, France and Luxembourg. He has lectured about pornography in art at forums such as the Erotic Café in Bucharest.

Gorzo has divulged that he sometimes works from snapshots he takes of peasants at marketplaces, some of them habitually drunk on poisonous wood alcohol, their skin flushed red, their gaze boring into the viewer, their babushkas redolent of a distant past. Most works, however, are done from memory and reveal the artist's deep connection to his ancestral roots. A village historian (he plans to paint all 1,000 inhabitants of Ieud, Maramures, in Romania), a field anthropologist and a sexual prankster, Gorzo augments his neo-bestiary with quasi-religious figures—Adam and Eve back to back, Eve and the snake—and phallic/pubic elements



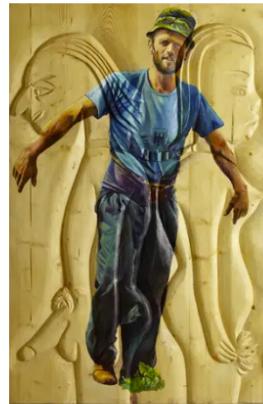
Dumitru Gorzo, "Baba Sfacoale," (2008). 35" x 27 1/4" x 3 1/4", oil on carved fir. Courtesy of SLAG Gallery.

His creative process starts with his notebook, where he draws his figurative and sometimes erotic elements until he finds the right image and perfects it. He then uses the drawing for his carvings on pine panels, which are glued together and backed by several supporting two-by-fours, just like window shutters for countryside abodes. The third step is to paint a completely different and stronger image on top of the carving—a portrait of a peasant or group of peasants, or decorative patterns from ancient Romanian embroidered textiles.

This is not the first time I have seen Gorzo's Transylvanian peasants; they have appeared in public places, painted on metal, on the streets of Bucharest, in Sibiu (Transylvania), and in Regensburg (Germany), unprotected from "interventions" from nature (rain, snow) and people. Most were eventually embellished with graffiti from passersby; only a few were completely covered over. But in Germany, the works were left alone, without a scratch of defacement. In one of the snapshots Gorzo showed me from Regensburg, young picnickers sit on the grass right next to his artworks, oblivious to them.

This time Gorzo has brought his work to a brand new Chelsea gallery called slag, an inaugural exhibition titled: *In the Corner of My Eye*, a phrase that evokes the images created by the mind in the periphery of the visual field—the same phantomlike images that appear in the brain in a state of inebriation: alcoholic, sexual, ecstatic or all three.

The first room offers two-dozen carvings/paintings, where the viewer has to look closely to notice that under a flowery motif there is a woman face sucking on a penis and wearing a necklace of penis charms. The gallery's second room has a wall bedecked with Gorzo's drawings—airbrushed with psychedelic colors—one of them of a maiden (Eve) with a snake, and others of a new bestiary that has supplied some of the models for his carvings.



Dumitru Gorzo, "Cousin Tarzan," (2008). 78 1/4" x 50 3/4", oil on carved wood. Courtesy of SLAG Gallery.

Gorzo's teacher and mentor, the painter Florin Mitroi, gave him his house in Bucharest to use as a studio following the younger artist's graduation with an mfa from the Art Institute of Bucharest in 1999—a top privilege indeed. He often provokes the media, not as a Dadaist (an ethnic pride—and curse—still used by some critics to pigeonhole Romanian artists and poets, no matter what the nature of their art), but as a contemporary multi-media artist whose paintings reveal, on the contrary, some Surrealist affinities: animals bearing multiple breasts, multiple tongues and multiple penises.

Gorzo's art is unambiguously contemporary, humorous to a fault, politically provocative and, as considered by some, dangerous. He is an original, balancing outsider technique with high conceptual art and urban folk-artist know-how. He has blanketed Bucharest with stenciled graffiti of the executed tyrant Ceau, sescu depicted as an angel and accompanied by the words "Back in 5 Minutes!", and with pink plaster babies that some suspected to be part of a strange religious cult. His art is feared to such a degree that the artist has been the victim of physical assaults, including an occasion in which his leg was broken, courtesy of some unofficial secret-service goons, following the raucous opening of a show called *Mister President is a Sexual Object* at Bucharest's ht0003 gallery. It depicted the faces of all of the Romanian presidents silk-screened on pillows and impaled on a tree with wooden penises for branches.

Some can label Gorzo's art post-surrealist, shamanistic psychedelic, or neo-expressionist, but it is, simply put, fresh and original. "Painting, I think, will unfortunately never die," says the artist, "and this will keep some people from speaking well about it. I am not post-feminist, but rather post-illuminist, and I like intellectuals—I apologize for that. Painting came into my life in the most quiet way, so quiet that it became for me home, grandma-replacer, Maramures (county in Romania), dance, pain, almost religion without even noticing. It became a path, a path that I don't know where it takes, a necessity; I can only feel the direction, sometimes it's like when you're trying to find a footpath in the forest, by night, using your foot only."

He continues: “I believe in the existence of a Romanian source that can give things universal value. I like and find amazing the way light touches earth here, I like working with different materials, each one seeking a shape, an expression and a theme of its own. Without drawing a bottom line, my work synthesizes the observations I have made throughout my path in painting. They are meant for a large exhibition, something between a book with distinct pages, rhythm, tension, composition and tram number eight, which, I know, is never like other trams” (from an artist’s statement for a 2006 exhibition catalogue published by the National Museum of Contemporary Art [mnac] in Bucharest, Romania).

Gorzo creates new work every day, on the train to and from Bushwick, his new home, where he is finding his way into the artistic landscape of America.

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