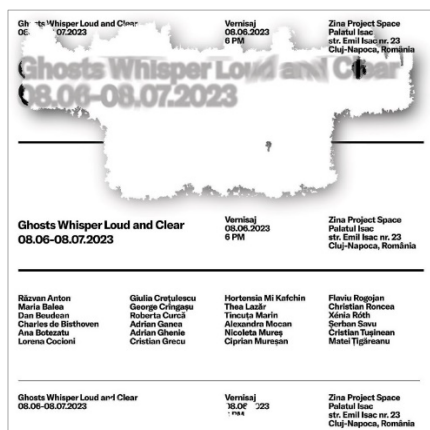


EXHIBITION REVIEW:

Ten Contemporary Art Exhibitions from Cluj-Napoca, 03–07.2023



Fabrica de Pensule was a welcome exercise for the artistic community in Cluj. An ambitious action modelled on the art hub in Leipzig but keeping in mind the proportions. Unsurprisingly, the exercise ended, as most such agglomerations do, after an average of 5 years. Hopes were rekindled when another artistic “hub” appeared shortly after the last studios in the “factory” disappeared. Centrul de Interes, however, destabilized itself in an even shorter time. Even though there is a certain constancy of artistic events in this space, it is no longer

what Fabrica de Pensule used to be and what we all hoped Centrul de Interes would revival. It no longer has a vibe, as Gen Z would say. Fabrica de Pensule and, initially, Centrul de Interes, were attractive not just because they were exhibition spaces, but because they emanated the effervescence of creative studios. Artists’ studios were the lifeblood of this ecosystem of contemporary art production and exhibition. In fact, those are the only things that artists essentially need: a place to create and a place to exhibit! Otherwise, other factors join the platform: gallerists and curators who push things further. Well, the two models of the artistic ecosystem in Cluj did not come out of the 5-year average statistics. However, the community of contemporary artists from Cluj did not evaporate with the dispersion of these two coagulation points. The year 2020 triggered a resettlement on the artistic map of Cluj, of creative studios and exhibition spaces.



At the moment we have art studios in the Unirea complex, a former industrial area which, in anticipation of real estate developers, hosts several studios of contemporary artists under 30 in one building. For several years ‘open studio’ events have been organized regularly here, and it is practically the only place where open studio visits are still organized. The place is not exactly friendly until you discover it, but those who have set up their studios there are very good artists: Oana Năstăsache, Camelia Filipov, Norbert Filep, Roxana Ajder or Leo Silaghi have opened their art studios to the public. The creative conditions in Unirea are not great, but we have already got used to the idea that the best works are not conditioned by facilities.

Although Cluj’s urban living is becoming increasingly inaccessible and expensive to independent artists, they have shown surprising resilience by continuing to produce art at a very good level!

Without any intention of synchronizing, on the same evening I visited the Unirea Open Studios, I also discovered a new space: the Altoi Studio, housed in a structure of the former Clujana factory that is now Mushuroi. Here, the painter Cantemir Hauși exhibited several large works in private. Nothing new so far, I was familiar with Cantemir’s pictorial options, the element of surprise was the folklore insertion through the voice of his sister Maria Cassandra Hauși who sang for us. 30 minutes... too little for the *connoisseurs*, too much for the impassive and pretty domineering in relation to the exhibited paintings. A lot can certainly further happen in 1 Mai Square for contemporary art, let’s be happy about it!

Also, as a centrifugal effect, I happily discovered the return to the stage of the Sabot Gallery with the funny-art-gimmicks artist from Cluj – Stefano Galigaro. For those who know how Stefano’s art should be consumed, it’s a pleasure to discover his computational language-based art. He identifies the patterns of pop culture we’re immersed in and cleverly manages to turn a pop cliché into a mental hook.

Another side-effect of the decentralization of the contemporary art “block” is the Camera Gallery. Irina Dumitrașcu, who supports the exhibition program both financially and conceptually, opened a suitable space on Einstein Street. A perfect gallery for contemporary photography. Its public inauguration coincided with a cyanotic photo installation on textile, which was mimetically inserted beyond the small, checkered window. Exhibitors: Allkimik Photographic Association under the title *Share, Tag or Dye*, which we did.

Quadro Gallery leaves behind the space we all liked on Samuil Micu Street and “rebrands” itself on Napoca Street with two sections: the classic one, already known, and the Aluvial space (white cube type) with a show signed by the sculptor (I dare to attribute an artistic identity for him) Ciprian Mureșan. The works fit well in the space, and the concept, neatly expressed, comes with a video and a twist:

the white torsos are actually *camerae obscurae*, pin-holes, and they photograph the visitors through this rudimentary method. Viewers watched and recorded on a photo film are sequentially exposed in the gallery. Obviously, it's good that one takes "the maiden voyage" alongside a big name because one wants to have a more consistent audience than at a post-war art auction. And they did.

The new spaces in Cluj do not stop here. Zina G Gallery opened in May a micro-exhibition (*All Work and Time and Care*) in the "red house" on Brâncuși Street, only to then set up another one in a palace located in the heart of Cluj. On Emil Isac Street, Zina G hinted towards bringing up the long-awaited museum or permanent collection of contemporary art in Cluj. After the CCC froze in the project phase and while we are still pouring screed in the palace at the intersection of Avram Iancu and Republicii Streets, Zina G may offer Cluj what we have all been waiting for 15 years: a large space, dedicated to a collection of contemporary art. For now, the place was inaugurated with a condensed exhibition of older and newer acquisitions of the owner – *Ghosts Whisper Loud and Clear*. The space opened on the ground floor of the building, a historic residence of the Isac family, where old pieces of furniture, common to any home of the communist period, were converted into plinths or supports for the exhibited works: small sculptures created by Tincuța Marin and Lorena Cocioni, pseudo-archive of Ciprian Mureșan, a good drawing by Dan Beudean and one by Anton Răzvan, some illustrations by Charles de Bisthoven similar enough to those of Mi Kafchin, an unrecognizable work by Ghenie, a small painting by Matei Țigărean held briefly my attention. The opening was loud, long and well-maintained by the host. I will most certainly come again here!

Although it is not a new space, MATCA has brought a new exhibition through the works of Mihai Grecu, also a graduate of the University of Art and Design in Cluj-Napoca but perfected in digital art in France. Mihai exhibited here several video works and one in VR. *Saturnism*, from 2020 is an unsettling experience: one is transposed into Saturn's cave from Francisco Goya's painting. The viewer is somewhere behind the son-devouring god, including sound effects and all. One has a strange feeling of vertigo before being discovered by the monster and sharing the fate of his sons. 3 intense minutes in which Grecu manages to transpose the viewer elsewhere and keep him captive in VR for a while...

Precisely on the same day with the opening at MATCA, I discovered an exhibition signed by two young aspiring curators: Andreea Goța & Daria Corlațan under the title *You Will Die with an Undelivered Message and That's a Bummer*. This happened at the Casa Matei Gallery of UAD, a difficult space to curate, with many textures and diffused lights. Nevertheless, the Art History and Theory students surprisingly managed to find a red thread of the exhibition, to which contributed many participants, not homogeneous in terms of techniques and style. A good exhibition that surpasses by far the level of a student experiment.

Biju Gallery has a very clear profile: easel painting, figurative if possible. An elegant space, in a courtyard specific to old Cluj architecture. Two vaulted rooms and a warm light will certainly benefit the well-tuned chromatic painting. In June, the gallery proposed to the public an exhibition curated by Ada Muntean. Knowing the aesthetic directions of the curator, I assumed from the start that I would see something extra at Biju. And I did. A painting by Saha Bandi, yes you read that right: a painting. Then a small light box installation signed by Ada herself, correlated with a recognizable drawing in the artist's style. Finally, the exhibition was a breath of fresh air. It wasn't hard to feel that way after putting together younger artists with a personal, rigorous type of painting (for example Mathias Bar and Călin Dumitrașcu).

Finally, we must mention the new space on Iuliu Maniu Street, the Parter Gallery of the Union of Visual Artists Cluj-Bistrița branch. It is almost opposite the former UAP Cluj gallery, lost many years ago by the Cluj Union branch. Here, the members of this UAP branch managed to get a space, and not just any kind of space, but a central one, renovated to standards and with a generous inner courtyard. I hope it lasts!

The inaugural exhibition was a Brudașcu–Bertalan duo, both graduates of the Ion Andreescu Institute of Fine Arts in 1959. While Ștefan Bertalan is no longer among us, Corneliu Brudașcu, although in his 80s, still arouses interest even among the younger generations. This exhibition was cared for, cured, or curated by Mihai Pop because *a cura di* or *prendere cura* have a common path in a literary sense. A way to nurture the oblivion of the older generations in the face of the crushing steps of the very young ones. A praiseworthy and very trendy gesture not only here, but throughout all Eastern Europe. Always preoccupied with socialist progress, then civilizational recovery, and now technological synchronization, the generation that was still caught up in communism, then transition, and then in the liberating flight to the West, now feels the need to look back. In the footsteps of culture and arts. What was it, what's left? It is still impossible to know everything from a period of censorship and we don't know for sure what remained after gaining freedom, but for some time now, everyone has been taking care of the archive 'blooming' in their garden: in Bucharest Ion Grigorescu, Câlția, Geta Brătescu, Ioana Bătrânu, in Timișoara Flondor, Neagu, Bertalan, and in Cluj Albert Nagy, Moholy or Brudașcu and, more recently, Kancsura who had a retrospective at the Art Museum in July. Returning to the exhibition in Parter Gallery, it has a Mihai Pop brand curatorship: neat, good frames, and a dynamic line of sight between the walls and the podium. The works belong to private collections such as Plan B Foundation, Ștefan Gadola, Adrian Crivii, Dr. Sorin Costina, and Cornel Brudașcu. Maybe that's why some works are less flattering for the artists, but overall, one finds what one already knows: a

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cerebral drawing by Bertalan plus abstract compositional constructions, and on the other hand Brudașcu's intuitive, lyrical and apparently volumetric painting. His painting appeals to the young eye, eager for lessons in descriptive gesture, impasto and millimetric dynamics. The exhibition shows a dialogue between two schemes of work, one cerebral and the other emotional, between a look that seeks beyond and a look that frantically embraces the here and now.

Will follow!

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