

## WAVE A LITTLE LIGHT

### **Iulian Bisericaru, Sebastian Hosu, Dragos Badita, Antony Valerian - the latest generation of European painters**

*by Alessandra Redaelli*

Today the most fiery debate on contemporary art focuses on the theme of painting. A flawed reading of reality could make one think that the art market at the beginning of this millennium could only proliferate around the most glittering manifestations of kitsch (\$58 million for Jeff Koons' *Balloon dog orange*) and that the patrons of the third millennium put their trust only in colossal marketing operations (Damien Hirst's hypertrophy exhibition *Treasures from the wreck of the Unbelievable* commissioned by François Pinault in Venice in 2017 during the Biennale) or in hyperintellectual niche art (radical chic exhibitions at Prada Foundation of Milan). Forgetting perhaps that painting still makes - and always will - the big numbers at auction. The reason is simple: from a communication viewpoint an auction sale of \$17 million for a puppet that represents a little kneeling Hitler is much more appetising (*Him*, Maurizio Cattelan), rather than \$157 million for a reclining nude by Modigliani or \$115 for a Picasso. This because these last two sales (that - coincidentally - belong to the top ten most expensive works sold in 2018, together with seven other paintings) are less than the auction records of the two artists in question. The news reaches the experts, while in others - in the public - the idea continues to take root that those who do not trap hundreds of thousands of flies in resin or do not enclose dead sharks in transparent showcases full of formaldehyde are both reactionaries and passatists. And maybe the news hasn't even reached this audience that after five years on the podium, *Balloon dog orange* has finally lost the record of the world's highest paid artwork by a living artist, outclassed by a pictorial work - a painting of extraordinary beauty - by David Hockney (\$ 90.3 million in November 2018 for *Portrait of an artist, pool with two figures*).

However, the latest generation of international artists knows well how powerful painting is, how its language - the net of the auction records only interests us here as data - is incomparable in its capacity to enter the viewer and to speak to their soul. And therefore amongst the artists of this latest generation there are truly excellent painters.

To paint today means making an immense tradition one's own, especially for those born and raised in Europe. The artists from the Cluj School - in Romania - and Anthony Valerian, the youngest painter exhibiting today (born in Hamburg just twenty six years ago), do exactly this: they paint the contemporary mood with a disarming sincerity and an astounding immediacy, but they do so keeping their roots firmly planted in the great history of art. That which they have in common, however, beyond the touch of ingenuity and uniqueness, is the pure and simple fact that when we find ourselves in front of their paintings we remain hooked. Leaving aside what we do or don't know of their history, leaving aside the motivations also which have led them to that specific work at which we are observing, we remain enchanted by the potency of the colour, of the strength of gesture, from that "recognition" that is triggered when an artist touches our heartstrings.

Let's take Iulian Bisericar. The first thing about his work that hits us is the colour. We have it inside, that colour: it speaks to us of Matisse and Van Gogh. We breathed it there. But when we go a few metres closer and take in the details of the leaves - the nature that proliferates the foreground - the echoes that resound in our heads are those of Rousseau the Customs officer, with his luxuriant and sensual vegetation. At this point we have no escape: we are inside the painting; inside that rhythm that resonates from one detail to another of this surreal construction substantiated by trees and architecture, and again a roof, a bush, a glimpse of wall, and leaves, flowers, in a game of precipitous perspectives that invite us to enter. But we are unsure, we have a little fear. Because on the side, unexpected, a patch of colour opens up, that has no relation with reality, an abstract area that hits us full in the face and bounces us towards another corner of the painting, and then yet another, until the horizon strewn with hills sloping down in perspective under a sky that is a single piece of turquoise, a whole piece, hard as stone. Those of Iulian Bisericar are iconographic collages, false collages, created by breaking the images and breaking the images and mending them according to a personal, sometimes inscrutable, logic. They resemble the spatial inlays of which David Hockney's (him again) paintings were made some decades ago, but here the sense is not that of a pre-established fixity, but rather that of a disintegration of form that brings him back a little to Cubism and a bit to the mysterious overlapping narratives of Neo Rauch. Fascinated by the way in which we desperately seek to make city and nature live together, Bisericar dedicated his thesis at the University of Cluj to the fusion of architecture in the landscape and then continued with a search that from the simple re-proposal of urban landscapes continued to a real hybridization between urban view and nature. The dream cultivated by Frank Lloyd Wright in order to arrive at a masterpiece like *Fallingwater*, a dream that is renewed today in buildings like our *Vertical Forest* or

as the Parisian eco-district of Clichy-Batignolle (which Bisericaru studied closely), is questioned by the artist, who wonders if a fusion is really possible or if it is just an illusion, because this nature, so caged, is no longer nature, but an unnatural combination of spontaneity and control, once again trapped by the needs of man. Possible answers to this question arise from his incredible, crumbling, broken, labyrinthine landscapes, built on surreal perspectives, invaded by a vivid and teeming nature, daughter of a spontaneous and uncontrollable germination, an uncontrolled power that from the point of view of reading seems to be pushing the subject towards a fatally abstract outcome, from the point of view of content, seems to suggest - or hope - that in the end nature is the winner of this battle, a wild nature, ready to gobble up everything, thus cleaning the world from the original sin of our pride.

Born in 1988, and therefore a year younger than his study colleague (they attended the art school in Cluj together), Sebastian Hosu also strikes us first of all with his use of colour.

But even more than the colour, it is the manner in which it is spread on the canvas which captures our attention. If this free gesture is certainly due to action painting as taught by Jackson Pollock (throwing the canvas to the ground and letting the colour take possession of it), the sign we find here is not that of pouring, where it is gravity not randomness that determines the direction, but rather that of a fingernail, a scratch. Of a lash of matter. Powerful like the black marks that wounded the canvases of Franz Kline. Or, better still, anarchism like that of Willem de Kooning (who, born in Rotterdam, is not by chance European rather than American); artist with whom Hosu has in common not only assertive gestures and chromatic dynamism, but also - unique among the exponents of abstract expressionism - the option of keeping a figurative memory alive on their canvases. But Sebastian Hosu is a child of his times and therefore his poetics go a step further. If the mission of abstract expressionism was to destroy iconic painting with a deflagration that overturned the old certainties, Hosu develops in a world that has overturned old certainties for some time and is already rebuilding new ones. Nature reconsidered into strips of dense matter, along which the traces of the brush bristles are distinguished, therefore no longer appears as a lump of clotted rage, but rather brings to mind a sort of ecstasy of form that has left behind any complex with respect to tradition and is therefore free to rediscover the wild joy of painting. A visual ecstasy in which the figure is distinguished only by virtue of its morphological characteristics - a raised leg, an outstretched arm, the profile of the head - but denounces its own substantiation of the exact same material as the landscape. Just like Iulian Bisericaru, then, Sebastian Hosu also pays attention to nature, to its role in our lives as inhabitants of the Third Millennium and to our role in its survival

(and consequently ours). And with his painting drenched in a kind of pantheism, where the sea, the sky, the grass, the mountains and humanity are participles of the same divine material, an urgent and absolute question is put before us, asking us if there still exists a nature to which we as human beings belong or in fact of that authentic nature there is nothing left but a faded, rough memory, dirtied by the hand of man and perhaps by now irrecoverable.

Contemporary of Biserițaru, Dragos Badita is perhaps the most tied to a traditional language of the three Cluj School artists shown here. It is not for nothing that one of his favourite subjects is the portrait, genre of painting excellence that however the artist expresses in a most personal manner. For example portraying many of his subjects either with eyes closed or with a covered face that prevents us from meeting their gaze. In traditional iconography closed eyes represent death, and only with symbolism does portraiture begin to count them as a sign of a spiritual transformation. Drenched in spirituality then are works such as *Alex*, elegant revisiting of the most classic portrait iconography (framed in space, the window open in the background) where however the hidden gaze and the pose of the hands suggest an exquisitely contemporary asceticism like that of meditation. While the choice of ultramarine blue for the t-shirt, the only vibrant note in the symphony of browns and whites, goes beyond the aesthetic need for tonal balance and weight to a further symbolic exploration, taking on the colour that from the thirteenth century onwards is without fail associated with the Virgin's mantle. When however the portrait wants to bring us back to the here and now Badita gives his subject open eyes and prefers exquisitely photographic edges perhaps leaving half of the space empty and concentrating the weight of the figure in the other half. While, getting closer to the viewpoint, the brushstroke dissolves into vibrations of post-impressionist flavour. The same vibrant brushstroke that the artist chooses for his landscapes, where the spell of nature is always disturbed by an event of destruction that reveals - even here - its intrinsic fragility. A fragility that the artist loves to tell also through suggestions in works such as *White*, the cleanest of still lifes with an almost Japanese flavour, played out on the contrast between the burnt hues of dried flowers and the whiteness of snow, or *Ruin*, where the tragic event - in this case a fire - has already happened and what remains is a castle of ruins, an unsafe crossing of charred woods immersed in a dense, milky fog, on which stands a mysterious figure, daughter of the great romantic tradition of artists like Arnold Böcklin and Caspar David Friedrich.

Anthony Valerian is the youngest of the group. He was born in 1992 in Hamburg and studied at the Vienna Fine Arts Academy, so doesn't belong to the Cluj School, but his affinity with the other three artists in the exhibition have, if possible, even more profound roots, that are embedded in the

mood of the generation to which all four belong to, that of the future. This is a generation which on one hand is paying for the uncertainties that have been left to it - worldwide economic crises, a planet which is struggling with intensive exploitation - and on the other is regaining an unexpected strength imbued with optimism. Just think of Greta Thunberg's sweet protest to wake up the world in the face of the ecological emergency. The artists of this generation are made of the same stuff, powerful and resilient. And the expression of their power is colour. For Anthony Valerian colour is not a fact but an emotion. That time after time he makes the sky become orange, milk white or red like blood.

“Because it is not important what I paint on the canvas, but the feeling that flows from this canvas and that spills directly into the heart of the beholder.” His figures are the characters of a story to which we do not know the plot, but that enchain us to their mysterious narrative from the moment in which we recognise them as protagonists. The man who directs a disenchanted look at us, the boy abandoned in a position of tired surrender, the three figures that stand next to each other in the night, without speaking, but of which we perceive the secret speeches. His is mature painting without uncertainties, substantiated above all by instinct, that one senses in the decisive and immediate brushstroke and that tells of himself, when he explains that sometimes he begins to paint like this, without a project, impelled by the urgency of gesture and the need to converse with the canvas. Instinct functions in this way, and it is not by chance if the immediacy of the gesture at times brings to mind Basquiat's scratchy painting, or if certain glimpses of landscape - those inhabited by a single tree thrown into the sky like a brush in a tub of colour - make us think of the worlds of Mario Schifano. That of Antony Valerian, however, is a tamed instinct, because he, although extremely young, already possesses the necessary knowhow. From here comes the feeling of completeness that one feels before his work, the awareness that the landscape, the characteristics of which we barely manage to distinguish between, however vague it is, is perfectly solid, able to contain us and make us live, just like the few brush strokes that sculpt the man's dress in the foreground, summarise it, define the whole, up to the seam and the fold of the sleeve. There is the substance from which, then, emotion flows in waves, transparencies, poetic moments in which certain details of the figure begin to disappear, as if it were dispersing in space. This painting lives, at times set in three dimensional space, solidified in simplified perspectives like those drawn by a child, and at times melts into almost abstract suggestions, finding the most mobile and elusive point in the subject's face. Constructed in few fast brushstrokes, so as to make reading the features uncertain, Valerian's faces are capable of communicating a yearning melancholy. The verve of

youth, strong but sometimes desperately lonely, is gathered within, in the sign of the brush that from time to time makes a sneer or scar. Perhaps a hidden scar, a wound to the soul that we can only see for a moment, in the instant in which we draw on the truth.