...might be good

Eastern European Painting Now
Lora Reynolds Gallery
On view through May 5

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Let's start with a speculative color theory. It's a safe bet that prior to the collapse of the Soviet Block, the color most Americans associated with Eastern Europe was red. Since that time, throughout the nineties and up to today, I'd wager that the color of Eastern Europe has been gray. A Romanian folk dance might be motley, but Eastern Europe, as a concept, is ashen colored. Haven't you ever seen a "failed utopia"? (Curse that term.) They're dusty, decrepit and have bland concrete high-rises. The sun never shines through the cloud cover.

Slawomir Elsner's paintings have a lot of gray in them. His three works in Eastern European Painting Now, all made in 2006, picture thirty year-old covers of Panorama, a Polish periodical, in a palette of black and white and gray. Panorama 90 (Lenin Anniversary) has a beautiful thinly-painted uneven-gray sky that bears the texture of the brush that applied it. This sky occupies about three-quarters of the 20-x-24 inch canvas. The non-sky parts of the painting show a prototypical statue of Lenin in profile to which virtually faceless Poles bring flowers. There is so much white in the painting that it appears to give off (and hold back) a great deal of light. This vague brightness contributes to the painting's sense of aimlessness and futility. It may seem odd that the longhaired male figure in the foreground, seemingly unenamored with the status quo, would repeat Lenin's form, but this suggests that the newest crop of Polish malcontents circa 1976 still found their origin in Father Lenin. Quoting this image in 2006, Elsner posits the rebel as an interchangeable figure who could make a difference, but might also effect little substantive change from one generation to the next.

Elsner's other canvas of this size, Panorama 93 (All Saints Day), has a much thicker impasto than its counterpart. In this work, as in Elsner's more thinly painted canvases, a viewer has the sense that the shift in mediums from a faded photograph to oil paint, combined with the increase in scale that accompanied this translation, has interfered with and dulled the image's clarity. Though the works are obviously derived from photographs, the painted images are hazy and partially unresolved, which leaves their source imagery beyond a viewer's grasp. Curator Jane Neal explains this quality as Elsner's method of representing scenes that have become memories. This may be part of it, but there is also the implication that one's experience of life at the time these photographs were published does not register with life today. Finally, in Panorama 91, Elsner's largest painting, we see the backs of a dozen students looking at a map. In this work in particular, one senses the ironic distance between the light of a "bright future" and the washed out tones of a fading exposure.

Serban Savu's works hang on the opposite side of the gallery from Elsner's. The Romanian artist's delicate paintings in oil on linen are quite something from a technical standpoint. His three untitled images from 2006 show workers unaware that they are being observed. Soft and subtle, these paintings, too, are rendered in tones of gray, though they also bear other hues. In one of the finest paintings in the exhibition, two male laborers peer outside from behind a propped-open window. The building they occupy is shown cropped on the 13-

x-19 ¾ inch painting and its facade appears like a detail from a neoplasticist picture. A related work shows a woman in a red work apron washing the windows of a large modern building. We only see one complete floor of this building, whose windows frame the working woman, divide the painting's surface and extend an overall flattening effect across the image. One suspects that the meaning of work has changed very little for these people from when they were Communists to now.

Paintings by Savu's countryman Adrian Ghenie impressed me less. They are, however, almost entirely gray. The works seemingly want to haunt, but they don't quite pull it off. The resulting effects vary—some, like The Ballroom (2006) strike a viewer as surreal with their odd juxtapositions of imagery, while others like If You Open It You Get Dirty (2006) read strictly in formal terms because their iconographic elements are too difficult to decipher.

Wojciech Zasasni, a Polish artist, is the odd man out in Eastern European Painting Now. First, Zasasni is the only artist who works in three-dimensions. He makes low-relief woodcarvings of covers of popular magazines and books, which he paints in vibrant colors of acrylic and enamel. Second, if the paintings we have considered up to this point could be described as subtle, contemplative and psychologically rich, Zasasni's work are loud and unabashedly the products of an unthinking consumer culture. Neal's catalogue essay argues that these reliefs ask us to imagine a world in which "everything designed to have a short shelf life remained with us." Let's not forget that Slawomir Elsner's Panorama series also preserves disposable material. Zasasni's ironic reliefs, however, seem to say that Eastern Europeans, now at home in the culture of western consumption, need to learn what to do with throw-away goods. These objects no longer represent scarce western commodities, but they may symbolize something Eastern Europe once showed little hope of achieving—a strong economy, built on discretionary spending and an inexplicable valuation of the new.

While it's a luxury to have a publication of the works in Eastern European Painting Now, Neal's catalogue essay keeps the artist too far at bay. In the seven-page essay that covers the work of four artists there is but one instance when an artist's voice comes through in the form of a quotation or as a reference to an artist's statement. Surely the language barrier is not so difficult to surmount. By not bringing the artists' voices into the essay, their culture remains unnecessarily disjointed from ours. Neal provides a very readable interpretation of these artists' works, but it lacks historical context and its approach is insufficiently critical. Bringing such interesting, well-made paintings from Poland and Romania to Austin marks an important step. But writing founded merely upon one interpreter's perspective makes these multi-toned gray paintings unnecessarily monochromatic.

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