

COSMIC GREEN SOLITUDE

—Radu Băieș, Mircea But—

It might have seemed that Mircea But, who finished his studies at the University of Art and Design Cluj-Napoca in 2015, rebelled against the painterly realism that had made the previous generation famous, because he filled the canvas of his abstract paintings with striped patterns, polygonal network of lines and industrial surfaces. However, it was not the Frank Stella-like non-referring formalism that he was interested in, but rather the classical questions of painting. He completed his studies with a monumental abstract landscape series dedicated to Monet (*Claude Monet Street*, 2015), since he was interested in the path towards abstraction. "It was Monet who took the first step towards it with his large-scale *Water Lilies*" – he says. Another exemplar of his is the "painter of painters", Diego Velázquez, whom he admires for his professional know-how and delicate brushstrokes. The starting point for Mircea But is not only the natural and urban landscape, but the sight filtered through the visual system, the painter's eye. Being the resident artist of Galeria Plan B in Berlin, he took photos of the fragments of the urban environment in the German capital that served as a base for his nonfigurative series in which he searched for the formal balance of layered structures that defined the first two-three years of his path. The precisely structured framework is realized in a spatial material with sensitively formed painterly tools: he put plaster on the canvas in a way it is applied to walls and he carved

vacillating lines into the monochrome painting with the handle of the brush. The surface preserving the fresh gestures is treated with acryl or at times with industrial spray paint.

He worked with sensitive scales of greys, lilacs and greens, letting the artificially created quiet melancholy prevail. The abstraction put together from differently coloured and textured fields is evoking the aesthetics of old industrial iron doors with rippled paint (vide the milieu of the late Brush Factory in Cluj – where But had his first studio). In his latest *Cemetery Landscape* series – from the second part of 2017 – he returned to the tradition of depicting reality, within that to the picturesqueness of the impressionists, while he is unfolding the real origin of his green scale – from the woods blunted with mist to the mossy undergrowth. In his latest pieces he is painting the rural cemeteries around Baia Mare with gloomy autumn trees, crosses, wooden headstones, grassy graves and the inevitable artificial flowers. But isn't painting morbid cemetery vistas, but is looking for the pulsing, discrete and almost invisible signs of life – from feasting worms to the blooming plant life. "Only the artificial flowers are really dead – he says, – even though they seem alive, they are ridiculous products, the last desperate gestures of immortality." Beyond the branches of the trees the sky opens hopefully. "Death is natural, there is nothing dark in it" – he adds.

—Gábor Rieder

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Radu Băieş didn't just attend the Art and Design University of Cluj-Napoca, that produced school founding artists who reached the international art world's elite scene - such as Adrian Ghenie or Victor Man. He was also born there - in this historic Transylvanian city proud for its gothic church and sumptuous old town. For a visitor coming from far away Cluj rather seems like a sleepy town telling old tales, meanwhile the modernization of the 20th century created a milieu for young Radu Băieş in which he faced the conflicts between civilization and nature leading back to romanticism. It takes about half an hour to get from the teeming contemporary centres constructed from art factories to the high summit of Carpathian Mountains, where shepherds heard their flocks in white whiffs of cloud. In Cluj nature - with some exaggeration - is unspoiled and at arms length. This night landscape showered in deep greens and blues, which suggests the sublime and is irradiated by moonlight appears on most of Radu Băieş' paintings. For example as lonely tree giants with huge canopies that evoke the anthropomorphic magic trees of fantasy woods. Băieş painted these trees as a mythical pivot, - a Transylvanian axis mundi, connecting the underworld and the sky. Their dark leafage is graphic and fragmented, stimulating the viewer to - as Leonardo or the Gestalt psychology taught - imagine forms, figures, ghosts and Arcimboldo faces in the crowd of plastically modelled leaves.

The different versions of these dignified trees show a figure lying under them, the grandfather who was relocated in the city but is always returns to his well-known trees to rest under the leaf. There is a big dose of vulnerability in this Rousseauian innocence: Băieş' landscapes are not bucolic pastures mostly filled with lambs, but mysterious highlands soaked in the nocturnal moonlight. In his previous paintings they didn't appear on their own, but projected on the wall above a worn-out couch. The slandered sofa that lost its form and was found at the university is his first leitmotiv. The gently caressing and wispily painted couches are stroked by the warm light, while the space widens and the background that appeared like wall is opening to an imaginary romantic scenery mounting the inner and outer world. The version named *The Empty Throne* shows a blazing red blanket covering the empty couch before a background that melted into an abstract blast. Evoking the absence of classic art - precisely the virtuoso crimson velvet in the Portrait of Pope Paul III by Titian. Băieş - as a young representative of Cluj School - is nursing a heart-felt and personal relationship with the big masters of European tradition. It isn't just Titian's spirit he is evoking, he is also painting late-renaissance figures, on palm-sized and self-made wooden boards. In his latest pieces he is completing the bucolic painting visions with celestial lights.

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