

"Marius Bercea: François Ghebaly Gallery"

Jean Black, Ezrha

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*A Tree, A Concrete, A Cloud, 2012, Photo: Robert Wedemeyer. Courtesy of the Artist and François Ghebaly Gallery.*

IT WAS INEVITABLE THAT, FROM THE TIME PHOTOGRAPHY BECAME a tool of representational art, its inherent mimetic properties would become one of its subjects. Corollary to that, its capacities for taxonomy, verification, and reconstruction, quickly seized upon by everything from forensic sciences to entertainment media—in short, the photograph's utility as aide-mémoire, as *souvenir*—would themselves become subject to narrative manipulations.

Although Marius Bercea's work occupies a distinctly post-narrative domain, the 'corrected,' 'interrupted,' or otherwise manipulated 'souvenir' is critical to the direction he pushes what might otherwise be a very conventional mode of contemporary representational painting.

Nothing like a failed former totalitarian, or capital-rehabbed East European state to prompt a second look at the slick instruments of its propaganda or publicity. The show's evocative title, "Concrete Gardens," makes reference to the blocky, but frequently striking, post-Corbusier modernist buildings and grandiose civic spaces of Bercea's native Romania, among other Balkan and eastern bloc states; but it's not as if botanical life disappeared, nor the life of the imagination.

Bercea's paintings (all works in oil on canvas, all 2012) are an allusive and tactile performance on such souvenirs-elongated moments wherein the historical and the fantastical, rapture and alienation, the actuality revised by memory or dream, all converge and coexist.

*Landscape of Ignorance* presents one such moment—an uninhibited juxtaposition of scales: a figure which may be human or, more probably a sculpture, standing on a plinth, looming higher than a light standard; a platformed, multi-storey housing block, terraced with rectilinear balconies in pale sandstone-yellow; and in an ambiguous distance, a colonnade that flanks a stepped amphitheatre in the upper-right quadrant flecked with passages of red and mauve—all under a heavy purple sky. *Dusty Fairytale* might be another view of the same building, with a suggestion of neon and similarly toxic preoccupations.

The "cloud" of *A Tree, a Concrete, a Cloud*, a scumble of pale yellow and putty-beige, might stand in for human activity, suppressed or etherized in memory. An explosive purple-and-brown spatter of a poplar stands between foreground and background, further mediated by a shimmer of gray-and-bright-green eddying pools. In the middle ground behind the "poplar," a flat, gray rectilinear structure, pierced by lancets, the "concrete," backs into a flat, barely-there gray, flanked by a pink mass itself washed over with teal green, gray, pale yellow. The other paintings here share a similar quality of disturbed quietude.

*Imperfect Pearls Shimmer at Dusk*, by far the largest painting on view here, is a catalog of Bercea's subject and style, as exuberantly painterly as anything in the show, with a similar dream-logic relativity of scale, color and subject elements. You could almost lose sight of the Soviet modernist pyramid at the painting's center in the play of incongruities fore and aft: the socialist sculptural ode to politically correct physical pleasures—a deer grazing (or rutting) off to one side, an off-scale pavilion on the other—and so Bercea's improbable pearls string us toward a troubled twilight.

- Ezrha Jean Black