

# JUERG JUDIN

## EAST BY SOUTHEAST

In October 2006 I travelled to Cluj in Romania to attend the opening of the first one-man show of a young artist whom, until then, I had not yet met in person—Adrian Ghenie. I was preparing a group exhibition in the Zurich gallery of Haunch of Venison that aimed at introducing Ghenie and six other young Romanians to a Western European audience. This project had been suggested to me by British curator Jane Neal, whose pitch (“Seven young artists from a small industrial town in Transylvania, friends since they marched together as ten-year old Ceaușescu Pioneers”) did not exactly knock me off my feet to begin with. It sounded to me like the proverbial “four-hour documentary about striking Polish miners shot in black and white with a hand-held camera,” that famous fictitious movie Hollywood producers like to cite in order to express their revulsion of projects that ignore the desires of mainstream audiences. I knew little more about young Romanian art than most movie producers know about class struggle in Poland, and did not feel compelled to remedy this lack. Luckily, though, Jane persevered and continued to ply me with new images. I thus discovered that among those Magnificent Seven were Mircea Cantor and Victor Man, two artists who had already achieved major success in the international art world—the others, Ciprian Mureșan, Cristi Pogăcean, Serban Savu, and Gabriela Vanga, would soon follow in their footsteps. And it dawned on me that Cluj, rather than being the end of the world, was in fact a hotbed of creativity.

My first visit to Cluj began in CinemaScope. The airline that would take me “across the forests” (the literal translation of Transylvania), to safely drop me off in Cluj, was called Carpat Air. An indulgence, I thought, for all those who only know this part of the world from Roman Polanski’s famous *The Fearless Vampire Killers*. The tiny terminal was bustling with life and laughter as my fellow passengers were greeted by their friends and families. I was to be picked up by Adrian Ghenie, without even knowing what he looked like. I was indeed on something of a blind date—and at first nothing at all seemed to happen. All the travelers were gone, and the terminal descended into a ghostly silence. I had no way to contact Adrian and did not even know which hotel I had been booked into. I started to feel like Claudia Cardinale in that great opening scene to Sergio Leone’s *Once Upon a Time in the West*. After what appeared to be an eternity, a rickety car appeared, driven by Serban Savu, from which an apologetic Adrian Ghenie emerged—a striking-looking thirty-year old with a slightly mocking but friendly smile.

We drove directly to Plan B, the gallery led by the charismatic Mihai Pop, where Adrian’s exhibition was just being hung. Also an artist, Mihai has placed himself at the service of his friends and runs Plan B as the group’s own gallery—with by now significant international success. Four of Ghenie’s then only seven paintings were done in a somewhat indefinable monochromatic color and seemed to depict a mysterious burial site, probably from the early middle ages, which in turn appeared buried beneath a thick layer of ash. They radiated a refined sense of history—and suggested that one should in fact know whose grave this was. But although one of the paintings was titled *Stalin’s Tomb*, the first impression had been entirely misleading: in the gallery’s exhibition room there stood, ugly and in everyone’s way, a large, green-tiled stove. For