

ARTFORUM

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Mona Vatamanu and Florin Tudor

LOMBARD-FREID PROJECTS

It appeared when one entered Mona Vatamanu and Florin Tudor's exhibition (the Romanian artists' first in the United States) at Lombard-Freid that a lecture had just taken place or would take place very soon. Rows of folding wooden chairs were arranged in neat diagonal rows in front of a stark wooden lectern with a microphone. Yet, though nobody was situated at the podium—and the day I visited I was the only person in the space—a single voice, enunciating crisply with moderated pitch, rang through the room. *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels's influential 1848 screed, was being read in German, but not "live": This was a prefab version (in fact the store-bought "book on tape" one gets to listen while on the go) of the foundational text, presented with a kind of dull urgency by a well-trained, anonymous orator, who gave his rendition the emphatic variations expected in the telling of a good story.

On the walls hung fourteen small canvases, most of which depict another scene that, at a glance, register as "political" in nature due to the main representational features: red flags, crowds of people, military tanks, banners. The actual content of each piece is hard to discern, since the compositions aren't striving for specificity but instead



View of "Mona Vatamanu and Florin Tudor," 2008.

seem to present the general contours of historical events—linking together otherwise disparate occasions, creating a kind of contingency between them, at least formally. Indeed, the muddy, moody palette of the works endows each scene with a kind of overdetermined heaviness, as though the skies are quite literally pressing down. But the titles of these works show that they refer to distinct historical moments, most devoted to demonstrations from around the world in the last twenty years or so (Berlin in 1989, Genoa in 2001, Basel in 2007, and so on).

A few of the paintings are more ambiguous (a man, seen from behind, peering out a window onto a stark cityscape), even romantic (the composition is titled *The Impossible Love*). If in some ways obvious—we are clearly encouraged to think of the alienated individual—the images operated here as punctuation, reminding viewers that if Vatamanu and Tudor's installation relied heavily on clichés, so too does every retelling of history.

Indeed, in the artists' film *The Trial*, 2005, also included in this show, the very question of how to process histories—especially very recent, traumatic histories—is taken up overtly. Filmed in Bucharest, the piece seems straightforward enough, giving viewers stretched, panoramic, perpetually in-motion views of communist block housing, which appears unchanged despite the tumultuous events of the last two decades in that and other Central and Eastern European cities. A male voice reads aloud the transcript of the trial of Nicolae Ceaușescu (Communist dictator of Romania between 1965 and 1989) and his wife. No people are visible in the video, but *presences* are implied by the myriad curtained windows; this forensic treatment renders the invisible inhabitants abstract yet strangely palpable. One has the feeling they could be either hiding or lurking within.

As I left the gallery, the lectern and seats remained unoccupied. The premise of Vatamanu and Tudor's "Appointment with History" was, as the press release puts it, to "bring . . . history into the present tense, whether in the form of performative reenactment or symbolic recuperation." Audience members were encouraged to ascend the platform and speak simultaneously with (or over, depending on how you see it) the reading of words written by Marx and Engels more than 150 years ago. But the work, it seemed to me, was perhaps most potent when impotent, when awkwardly allowing a kind of disconnect.

—Johanna Burton