

The stuff that stars are made of. Young Graduates from the School of Cluj

For the fourth time, Mie Lefever Gallery hosts a group show of graduates of the University of Art and Design in Cluj. This year's edition features three talented young female artists, brought together not just by belonging to a certain generation, but also, and more importantly, by the common points that can be detected in their artistic approaches of issues such as intimacy and public presence, feelings and clichés.

Thus, *The stuff that stars are made of. Young Graduates from the School of Cluj* is a decidedly feminine exhibition, by that meaning that all the works revolve more or less explicitly, more or less consciously around the encompassing topic of feminine identity and its social perception. However, there is nothing artificial in the artists' interest for such a topic. Their choices are not dictated by conceptual trends, but rather by quite personal artistic interests. Hardly feminist and never rhetorically strident, the works of Anca Badea, Alexandra Tatar and Anna Olenicenco are charmingly reflexive and gently seductive, although acid accents and slightly ironical innuendos can at times be guessed behind the smoothness that appears to dominate their images.

Anca Badea's paintings are intimate in a rather strange way and technically impressive without any unnecessary bravado. Her half – delicate, half – sophisticated handling of painterly matter is not what one would call arresting. But this doesn't make the paintings in any way dull; on the contrary, her works can be spectacular, but they are also rather demanding. Thus, her painting requires quite serious attention from the viewer in order to be fully enjoyed. Still, although they do not aggressively catch the eye, but rather seduce it, her works possess the subtle power to make the spectator turn to gaze at them again, after passing them maybe to hastily, as the sheer refinement of her depictions of pretty domestic, banal scenes lingers at the back of one's mind.

Badea's works in the show at Mie Lefever Gallery are intriguingly elusive, from more than one perspective. The images themselves seemingly take the viewers into the very intimacy of the depicted characters, as most of them are sleeping, carefree and defenceless. In a way, the Cluj based painter acts like a caring voyeur, one that is sincerely fond of the people into whose intimacy is prying. However, the prying eye of the artist also acts protectively. The true intimacy of the characters in the paintings is actually out of our reach, precisely because they are sleeping; their inner reality, literally their dreams are in fact shielded by their closed eyes and by their very oblivion regarding the surrounding world. They are thus vulnerable, yet safe, exposed, yet continuously protected by the act itself of being represented in the enclosed, frozen painted image.

Moreover, a story can be presumed behind the skin of the image, yet the precise narrative trajectory that had unfolded before the suspended moment in time captured by the painting is impossible to actually track. The episodes leading to the serene scenes in the works can be as various as a night of heavy drinking or a nervously exhausting lovers' quarrel, an overnight stay in a stranger's house or a Sunday morning home arrival after a long journey.

Technically solid perhaps in a more emphatic manner, **Alexandra Tatar's** paintings stem from the author's triple fascination with painting, cinema and fashion. Poignantly melting the references to such high specificity media together into something coherent is definitely not easy. How to make a relevant painting about the communicational codes of fashion and cinema that would "speak" about the contemporary circumstances under which we construct our imaginary and eventually our identity? How to meaningfully point at the artificiality of codes and still affectionately depict iconic epitomes of feminine identity?

These interrogations represent the crux of her endeavour. And, as if these questions wouldn't be complicated enough to painterly try to answer them, the young artist gets another medium involved in the challenging riddle: photography, the long time sparring partner of painting. More seasoned and savvy artists would perhaps hesitate or even refrain from tackling such a daring puzzle, leaving maybe its solving to philosophers. But the young painter approaches it with a juvenile courage that is to be admired, even if one might suspect that it borders conceptual recklessness, as it is a convincing proof that we are presented with an artist for which art can't be reduced to petty commentary. She deploys painting to approach the overlapping realms of imagery as if her medium of choice would be, for her, both the dear friend with which to casually chat about life on a couch and the only philosophy that can make sense of an environment in which artificiality had long become intricately present at the core of the civilization.

Alexandra Tatar's works take as concrete starting point photos of female celebrities, such as Marilyn Monroe, Suzy Parker or Carmen dell'Orefice. One can detect in the painted images an almost teenage – like admiration for the heroines of the silver screen and / or the catwalk. However, the paintings avoid becoming photorealistic, thus reminding that the evocative power of painting might just lay in the very fact that it is, in many respects, more remote to its object than other, more imperative media.

Anna Olenicenco is also attracted to identity issues, but, in her case, these are introduced via the universe of childhood (or rather puberty) memories. The expressive forcefulness of her displayed series of drawings, as well as of the small paintings featured in the exhibition, relies upon remarkable draftsmanship as well as on her amusedly affectionate, gently captivating approach to the realm of memory.

She recurrently depicts strongly evocative female characters in small scale, somewhat intimate works. Sometimes the figures allude, as in the paintings, to distant and spectacular childhood heroes or role models. Other times they are delicately recalling the seriousness invested by a young, curious, lively girl in some activities that seem so movingly unimportant when looked at after some years, with the scrutinizing and frustratingly lucid eyes of the mature person that the little girl had turned into.

The works possess an arresting tactile quality, as, in the case of the pencil drawings, for example, the surface of the wood on which the characters are depicted is evocatively used by the young artist, alluding to the imprecise charm of old family photos. Some areas of the drawings intentionally lack mimetic details, which makes them unavoidably refer to the fuzzy way we remember quite long gone actions. Olenicenco uses the interplay of textures in a refined way, fascinating the viewer's gaze with what appear as half – controlled accidents of the surfaces. The photographic image is, for her, crucial for the way we live our memories, yet the immediacy and the somewhat inherent anonymity of the photography seems to be considered by the artist to render the medium too "cold" to adequately circumscribe the affective charge implied in the act of remembering. And this is where the pigments intervene: the fine lines and patches left by the pencil or the painterly matter used in a deceptively naïve manner allow Anna Olenicenco to produce (autobiographical?) works that effectively and quite directly address one's most unsophisticated feelings and most common reveries

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November 2011

(text for the exhibition ' The stuff that stars are made of. Young Graduates from the School of Cluj ' – edition IV, 2011)

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