



EUGEN RAPORTORU

17. March till 13. May 2023. Thru – Sa: 4pm till 7pm u.n.V.

Opening: Thursday, 16.March 2023, 7-9 pm

The exhibition organised by the Kai Dikhas Foundation at the Educational Forum against Antiziganism aims to shed light on the Roma experience, visually narrated through the eyes of a Romanian artist with a unique path: Eugen Raportoru.

Eugen Raportoru's path as an artist is significant in all its nuances, from meeting a great painter, a real mentor when Raportoru was still a teenager, to the late decision at the age of 45 to study painting at the University of Bucharest, Romania. Born in 1961, he is the youngest of eight children. Raportoru knew from an early age that he wanted to become an artist and tell stories about real events with a brush on canvas. His mother, a Romni who experienced the horrors of deportation as a child, was his lighthouse at sea as he navigated the unjust social waters of the Eastern European bloc under communism in the 1960s.

He worked independently, was self-taught, and when he was 45 and still not recognised by the local artistic community, he went to college to graduate at 50. The flow of information that came his way as he learned the mechanics of the art world and broadened his views determined a series of decisions in his artistic production. Today, Raportoru is pushing the boundaries further and further. In a sense, he is still in the process of distillation, having experimented with Kiefer's monumental paintings dealing with the trauma of the pogroms of Jewish communities during the Second World War, or Baselitz's impetuous treatment of large canvases, or Kapoor's monumental biomorphic plaster sculptures. He was an avid lover of the old aesthetic beauty as taught to him by his older (now deceased) masters: Flower pots and romantic landscapes. But his real universe was one of hard struggle, and that is why his landscapes are grey and the flowers hide a certain sadness within them. When he visited the Venice Biennale for the first time in the 2000s, he was enchanted, and he still paints such pictures today. But every now and then he shows the mahala (neighbourhood) where his soul finds peace, the multi-ethnic social fabric where neighbours live next to each other like in one big family and share almost everything as a group: Space, memories and often food. This is solid ground.

Back to the present: in 2022, on his return after the opening of the Roma Collateral Exhibition in Venice, organised by ERIAC (European



Roma Institute for Arts and Culture in Berlin), Raportoru goes into hiding and works intensively on Gelem, Gelem, a project that had already been planned in the back of his mind for two years. This year marks the 78th anniversary of the horrific events of 2 August 1944, when some 4,300 Sinti and Roma were murdered in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and extermination camp. In two months, Raportoru hangs 12 canvases on the high walls of the Tancred Bănățeanu Hall in the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, painted in mourning black, on which he tells the truth of the 12 apostolic crosses in a symbolic Orthodox Christian key: the truth about the Holocaust against Sinti and Roma. About a taboo, something we don't talk about. Just as we don't talk about the 500 years of slavery of the Roma. The 12 canvases treated with layers of brown oil are witnesses to historical abuses with strong traumatic reverberations for the Roma ethnic group - a cruel reality that is not openly discussed in his home country, neither on an institutional nor on a state level. Red and brown are chromatic instances of blood and earth, which are fully reflected in the artist's diagrams.

A large wooden crossbeam and carriage wheels are interlocked in the shape of a crucifix and form the centrepiece of the exhibition installation - it functions as a reference to the mass deportation decided by dictator Antonescu in 1942, which led 25,000 deportees from all over Romania to the arid plains of Transnistria. 25,000, only half of whom survived the cold and hunger as they set out on this long journey, without any possessions or security except hope. Hope for a better life in a foreign land, because the officials had told them again and again: you don't need anything, you will be fed and given shelter. They were promised decency. But they found only scorching heat and freezing cold and were forced to do hard physical labour when food was scarce. Soon Transnistria began to become a mass grave for the entire population. The stories of the survivors from this period are difficult to tell. The grave site bears witness to the sacrifice of mothers and families for their youngest, and it contains candles and Christian icons as a re-enactment of a funeral service they did not have.

The deportation in the 1940s remains a sad historical moment, textually represented in the 1968 novel "Şatra" by Romanian writer Zaharia Stancu. In it, the turmoil of the young and old Roma and their traumatic path to death are described. The number of victims of the genocide perpetrated by the Nazis against the Roma and Sinti runs into hundreds of thousands, an estimated half a million souls, in addition to the six million Jews.

A disturbing tone hovers over the entire exhibition, a mournful song of disbelief: from the confusion felt by Roma souls of all ages as they



boarded the trains and carriages, to the heights shrouded in deep despair. The exhibition is a cumulative installation and, according to the author, an act of remembrance for the artist's mother, who was among the thousands of children deported to Transnistria.

The first part of the exhibition at the Educational Forum against Antiziganism bears witness to the deportation commemorations, while the second part at the Dikhas Dur art space speaks of an ideal environment similar to the interior of Eugene's childhood home: It is part of the installation "The Abduction from the Seraglio", shown at the Venice Biennale and commissioned by ERIAC for the 2022 edition, which will take place at the Instituto Veneto from 23 April to 27 November. The main work of the exhibition was acquired by the Kai Dikhas Foundation and will remain in Berlin. The Abduction from the Seraglio is a multi-layered and kaleidoscopic time capsule. It traces the history of the increasing presence of oriental carpets in post-Soviet households from the 1960s and 1970s onwards, leaving them forgotten after the fall of the communist regime. As a window into another world, the carpet functioned as an ephemeral carrier of meaning and possibility; on a deeper level, it represents a long tradition of using oriental motifs as vehicles for fantastic escapism. The installation thus displays carpets that represent Orientalised narratives of the Other while literally embedded in the picturesque iconography of Western painting traditions of landscape, still life or religion, perhaps as a reference to a dreamy romanticism that involuntarily serves subjugation in the name of enlightenment. The installation thus makes tangible the visual vocabulary of an entire generation by bringing together these contrasting images that stand for the general psyche under communism.

Ilina Schileru

The exhibition is curated by Ilina Schileru.