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Tintoretto
*San Marco salva un saraceno
durante un naufragio*
[Saint Mark Saving a Saracen
from Shipwreck], 1562–66
Oil on canvas / Olio su tela
398 × 337 cm
156 ¼ × 132 ⅝ in
Gallerie dell'Accademia,
Venice / Venezia

ADRIAN GHENIE THE BATTLE BETWEEN CARNIVAL AND FEAST

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*Everything is in constant flux on this earth.
Nothing keeps the same unchanging shape,
and our affections, being attached to things outside us,
necessarily change and pass away as they do.
Always out ahead of us or lagging behind,
they recall a past which is gone
or anticipate a future which may never come into being;
there is nothing solid there for the heart to attach itself to.*

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, 1778

The paintings of Adrian Ghenie break into the arena of contemporary art as an unexpected, unstoppable, polymorphous presence. From the very beginning, they stem from roots both new and profound. Adrian Ghenie brings to the fore, a painting and a way of approaching painting, which opens up infinite possibilities of interpreting the world. Like a *Solitary Walker*, the artist builds and paints a constant, uninterrupted flow of images through an artistic practice that is both ancient and freshly provocative. Everything stands 'before' him, 'behind' him, and everything 'precedes' him, similar to the incessant rhythm by which we are flooded in the contemporary world, with ephemeral and impactful stories, with profound or irreverent events, dramas and puns, poured out onto screens, the printed media and the fluid and fierce immediacy of the internet. Each image encloses another.

Venetian and Berlin Chronicles

Venice. Exterior. Daytime: a terrace on the Grand Canal, on an extraordinarily sunny day. Reflections, palaces, the great baroque church.

The artist, with implacable calm, focuses on a conversation about painting that has spontaneously arisen between the two of us. Tiepolo's name reoccurs, and then, suddenly, the deep timbre of Tintoretto breaks through. The act of painting, that moment in which a subject is made explicit onto the canvas, a fragment of time, a fruitful gesture. Nevertheless, painting travels through time, and this is clearly expressed in his words – the words of an artist – and in his works. But as Ghenie emphasises, he's not a 'monolithic intellectual', an artist possessed with unbreakable certainty. 'I would get terribly bored if I were to discuss nothing but painting', he says.¹ The constant motion of his thinking reverberates somehow in his artistic universe – his painting captures his radical way of thinking (he is not a monothematic intellectual). In his conversations, Ghenie speaks of how the Enlightenment rejected the irrational spirit and of the extraordinary Darwinian lesson explored in depth during his artistic career. In the soaring of his thought and analysis, his painting becomes a lucid and perpetually shifting 'battleground', sensitive to the gestures that reveal, build and jolt the images. Painting becomes a telluric field, as unstable as it is wonderful. In Ghenie's imagery there is never a stentorian final statement, everything is always in motion. On the canvas the gesture remains almost a sign of the transience of the 'whole', of the world. This temporality, subtly traceable and created by its maker, seems to constitute a warning against contemporary 'uniformity', against the loss of what he himself calls the 'magical dimension' of ancient images. He speaks of works that, even today, testify (beyond the pictorial medium and the era) to the durability and deep fixity of signs perpetuated by time. When discussing these works, questions continually arise about the multiple reading of themes, subjects, and the hypertextual instability of images in an extraordinarily interconnected world, as Ghenie also stresses:

1. 'Adrian Ghenie in Conversation with Mihai Pop', in Mihai Pop (ed.), *Adrian Ghenie: Darwin's Room*, exh. cat., Venice Biennale (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2015), p. 81.

The internet is undeniably a source of my practice. But that was only natural. I don't think we'll get the best of it, no matter how hard we might try. [...] To a certain extent, any critical discussion is almost meaningless. The Internet is here to stay; it has changed the world more profoundly than many other things.²

The artist moves in this contrasting consciousness amid the ineluctability of the flow and impact of 'the society of images', which has come to define contemporaneity. The theory of the horizontality of information in the internet age, as it is made available to everyone today, is now ordinary. The subtle and sometimes useless hypertrophy of notions, indications, suggestions, fake sentimentalism, declarations and political claims are reachable, usable, accessible at every second. As a painter and a creator of worlds that confront themselves with this unstoppable topicality, he opposes the contemporary indistinctness to a lush and strong world immortalised by an obstinate paradox. In speaking of Tiepolo, or in imagining the works preserved one step away from this Venetian terrace, our conversation leads to the art of painting as a possible 'arena'. From the Tintorettoesque gesture that tricks the eye to the adamantine sound of Renaissance painting, his pictorial practice is experienced as a traditional and evolutionary possibility that exceeds and almost overcomes every possible 'genre'. A practice that can be linked to the 'velocity' of late baroque painting, or to the experiments preserved just a few 'laps' away from the place of our meeting, which indelibly link Max Ernst to Jackson Pollock under Peggy Guggenheim's roof. Venice is a time trap, its amphibious flow is founded on the clash between water and stones. In the collective imagination, the city of Venice is associated to the Venetian school of painting and to the workshops of thalassic painting. And also to the ghost of itself, as it has been represented and photographed, consumed through incessant reproduction, from landscape painting to postcards.

Berlin. Exterior. Daytime: Heidestraße. Northern light; a grand building without a precise epoch.

The studio is immersed in what is for the Mediterranean eye an indefinite light. The depth is neither given by the structures, nor the accumulation of materials, or the signs of the inexorable passing of time. The light is provided

2. *Ibid.*, p. 29.