

TRANSFIXED BY TRANSYLVANIA

1989. Friends gathered in San Francisco for a Christmas dinner. A toast is given, "Peace on earth, good will toward men". The day is filled with happiness as children run among the colorful gift wrappings that lay scattered on the floor and play with their new toys.

On the other side of the world, Christmas Day is shattered into a thousand fragments as shots break the silence of years of oppression. Romania's dictator Ceausescu and his wife lie in a pool of blood. Long suppressed ideas and hopes emerge as students from the Academia de Arte Vizuale in Cluj, Romania begin to take over the school and oust instructors who supported the dictator.

1998. I was invited to join two other artists, Carrie Galbraith and Bogdan Achimescu, to teach a Bookarts Workshop at the Academia de Arte Vizuale. I've been involved in the making of artist books for many years and have a printmaking background, teaching at various schools and workshops. This would be my first teaching experience in a country I knew nothing about.

We arrived in Cluj, located 90 miles into Transylvania late in the evening after a long drive from Budapest. We would share a small room at the school with bunk beds, a sink, and a shower down the hall. The school was across the street from a small park in front of a 14th century Roman Catholic Cathedral. A large equestrian statue of a Hungarian king shared the park with a curiously deep hole where men could be seen from the classroom window digging during the week. We were told that this was a political absurdity brought about by the mayor of the city who wanted to prove to the Hungarians that digging anywhere in Cluj, traces of Roman history could be found, thus proving that Romanians were descendents of Rome and they were there first. On my excursions throughout the city I began to notice there had been holes dug in front of many Hungarian statues.

The classroom with its very high ceilings, large ceramic heater, a view of the park and tables for working, soon became alive with students, faculty and guests who were curious about us and the making of artist books. Bogdan was translator and each time I said something he would go on at much greater length than I had, adding humor, suggesting once I was with the CIA. The students were all very talented with years of drawing skills and knowledge of contemporary artists and ideas. We began the morning classes, which would run for nine days, showing slides of artists' books. Our first introductory project was an Exquisite Corpse accordion book with each student drawing whatever they wanted on a single sheet of heavy stock paper. The idea of the Exquisite Corpse is to have the drawings join each other

in one long sequence. The students approached it with enthusiasm and scurried about getting their art supplies. I was curious to see if any hint of past events would show up in the art. There didn't seem to be any.

One of the more challenging projects was to sew sections together for a book. This could have been achieved by not using a frame, but for some unknown reason I kept thinking I needed a frame with ribbons attached. I looked about the room and realized the chairs could be used. Chairs were placed on the tables, ribbons attach, and the seats used for the sections. Surprisingly it worked very well. Each student finished a blank book that they were to turn in at the end of the workshop with content. Art materials were not in great supply, nor was good printmaking paper. One student began to make his own paper and started his own business. He became the second papermaker in all of Romania. Christian Opris, a graduate student in printmaking, made all his own tools for etching. He worked primarily in mezzotint on thin iron plates using the tiny grooved metal wheel from the cigarette lighter that sparks the flint. Mezzotint requires the artist to create a surface cover on a plate made up of thousands of burrs with the grooved metal wheel until, when printed, it is a solid color. This requires many hours of preparation. A scraper and burnisher are then used to remove the burr and create an image. The plate is inked and printed on an etching press.

Cristian Opris's prints and artist books left a profound impression on me, reflecting the feelings I had while visiting Romania, a place where hardships were apparent in the landscape and peoples' faces. The drawn mezzotint images of portraits, clothing, stamps, letters, and beautifully written script were combined to reveal an awareness and understanding of the time, place, and history he lives in.

Cluj had only two art galleries, a student gallery and a photographers' gallery. Very few people can afford to buy art and there are very few outsiders visiting the country, making it almost impossible for artists to make a living unless they teach at the art school. Many of the students entered foreign competitions and applied for grants or scholarships which would give them the opportunity to study abroad or have an exhibition.

The school provided us with a van and driver to tour the monasteries in northeaster Romania. On our way we passed many small villages where time seemed to have stopped centuries ago. The landscape was pristine with trees and wild flowers lining the roads. We passed a gypsy family in a horse drawn, colorfully painted, wood house trailer. Cows, horses, ducks, geese and chickens roamed about freely. There were no television antennas, road signs, or other signs that we are familiar with on the American landscape, only large colorful crosses with

religious images and delicate lace-like wood patterns of birds and angels. Farmers walked in the fields, digging up the earth with a wooden plow pulled by a horse as family members, young and old, hoed and raked the soil. The setting sun cast a golden glow on the carefully stacked rolls of drying hay. Occasionally a car would pass by. Horse-drawn wood carts on car tires loaded with hay or families and furniture slowing made their way from village to village.

The 16th century Christian Orthodox monasteries in Moldavia were architectural books, illustrated with remarkably preserved frescoes from floor to ceiling inside and outside. One could spend hours reading visions of hell, historical accounts of Stephen the Great, the Siege of Constantinople, Aristotle, Socrates, and Plato, or be horrified by the very descriptive images of tortured martyrs. Inside the images began to darken toward the vaulted ceiling, covered with centuries of smoke from candles. Here nobles worshiped inside while peasants sat on the outside being converted and warned of the horrors of going astray.

I saw my Romanian experience as a book in very much the same way the peasants saw the images on the monasteries; overlapping images and history with the imagined, feared and misunderstood. Each day there was a new page to absorb, observe and understand as reality or as a film, book, or tragic poem.

Much more could be written about this trip, for each day was an experience I will never forget; encounters with gypsies, the grave yards, the music, the food, the incredible artists I met, dinners with Romanian families, the delightful director of the school, Professor Ioachim Nica, and his home made wine, the beer gardens and my wonderful traveling companions who were responsible for my trip, Carrie Galbraith and Bogdan Achimescu.

—Howard Munson, Book Artist and
Instructor, SFCBA



SHOWS NOT TO MISS

Balthus at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice, Italy with more than 200 works borrowed from 90 museums and private collectors, including some paintings rarely displayed in public. www.palazzograssi.it

Alfred Jensen: Concordance at the Dia Center for the Arts, 548 W. 22nd St., Chelsea through 16 June.

Hirschfeld's Hollywood at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Beverly Hills, through 20 January 2002.

Vital Forms: American Art and Design in the Atomic Age, 1940-1960 at the Brooklyn Museum of Art through 6 January.

Jean Dubuffet at the Georges Pompidou Center in Paris through 31 December 2001.

Masterpieces and Master Collectors, Guggenheim Hermitage Museum, Las Vegas, through 7 April 2002.

The Art of the Motorcycle at Guggenheim Las Vegas, through June 2002.

The Short Century, an enormous show organized by Okwui Enwezor devoted to the independent and liberation movements in colonial and post-colonial Africa between 1945 and 1994 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago through 30 December and then traveling to P.S. 1 in Queens from 10 February - 5 May.

Hélio Oiticica: Quasi-Cinemas, conceptual Brazilian artist involved in sculpture, performance, film, sound installation and a personal charisma that lingers on, organized by Carlos Basualdo at the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH, through 30 December.

Objects for Use: Handmade by Design: 200 American Artists Create Stunning Works for Everyday Use at the American Craft Museum, New York City through 6 January.

Darger: The Henry Darger Collection at the American Folk Art Museum in New York City from 11 December- 30 May 2002. www.folkartmuseum.org

New Worlds: German and Austrian Art, 1890-1940 at the Neue Galerie New York, a museum for German and Austrian fine and decorative arts, at 1048 Fifth Avenue at 86th Street. Through 18 February.

Pop Culture! at the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, CA through 11 February with 47 paintings, sculptures and works on paper.

Giacometti at MOMA New York City through 8 January.