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Portraits of Hubris: Painting Despots in the Contemporary Era

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Abstract

From ancient times political leaders have risen to immense power then suffered dramatic falls. This was no different in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, with the end of various dictatorial regimes across the world. For the current artist, living in Romania before, during and after the eastern European communist period, the experience and memories of watching these falls was made particularly vivid through digital and live televised broadcast. How does one represent this recent history through contemporary painting? How, why and should one depict the duality of political hubris?

From 2010 to 2012 the author painted a series of paintings of dictators, all of them depicted at their deaths. Beginning with a group of black and white oil-based portraits of eastern European leaders, moving on to bright streaks of colour and portraits of notorious fallen world despots, the author addresses various questions around the emotional responses triggered by this specific genre of political portraiture. Taking photographic records as an initial source, the author examines different techniques of representing 'the unrepresentable' through painting. Contrasting responses of absence and alienation, coupled with emotional affinity and identification are explored, in the context of historical events and regimes that were without doubt horrific.

The work of selected contemporary artists, including Gerhard Richter, Luc Tuymans, Marlene Dumas and Wilhelm Sasnal, who have dealt with a similar problematic are set against a detailed exegesis of the author's own approach and techniques. The place and relevance of painting in the contemporary era of digitised and live imagery is affirmed.