

A woman in a bright yellow dress and red shoes is walking on a stone path in a garden. The garden features large, sculptural topiary trees and a pond with lily pads and flowers. The scene is set against a clear blue sky.

# THE CLUJ COLLECTIVE

CO-CURATED BY CATALIN NECULA

10 - 27 APRIL 2024



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Marcel Rusu  
Oana Fărcaș  
Dragoș Bădiță  
Dan Măciucă  
Cătălin Tăvală  
Cristian Lapusan  
Botond Gagy

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GROUP SHOW

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It has been eighteen years since the esteemed curator and art historian Jane Neal curated *Cluj Connection*, an exhibition credited for identifying Cluj as a bonafide art movement characterised by serious work ethic, a dark sombre visual language and dry humour. Shortly after, the art world anointed a cohort of Romanian artists, such as the now familiar names Victor Man and Adrian Ghenie, who have been praised for their prodigious take on haunting and historical subjects. One of the most exciting enigmas of recent years is how and why their art grandiosely took the art market, and a group of leading curators and collectors by storm? Growing up in the aftermath of the Romanian Revolution in 1989 and characterised by life in Post-Communist Romania, these artists – also referred to as the Cluj School – were celebrated for their evolving styles which resonated on an international scale without renouncing their own regional contexts. The artists presented in JD Malat Gallery's latest group exhibition are similarly bound by the historical context of their generation. Aptly titled *The Cluj Collective*, this group of seven artists are indeed a collective born out of the historical Transylvanian capital of North-Western Romania, whose diverse painterly styles demonstrate the evolving thread of figurative painting inspired by the distinct culture of Cluj, and it's beautiful to witness.

United by their educational background, artists Dragoş Bădiţă (b.1987), Oana Fărcaş (b.1981), Botond Gagyí (b.1992), Cristian Lapusan (b.1976), Dan Maciuca (b.1979), Marcel Rusu (b. 1989) and Cătălin Tăvală (b. 1996) all graduated from the esteemed University of Arts and Design Cluj-Napoca, with an intense and critical focus on narrative and figurative painting. The paintings in this exhibition are about story telling. Like an Aesop Fable they are fictitious, useful to life and true to nature.

Each painting has a calm yet incredibly tense space where many ontological questions can be asked. Cătălin Tăvală's *AEROB VS ANAREOB* (2023) shows a naturalistic portrayal of a small bird swiftly swooping from left to right above a sturdy and weighty bull facing the opposite direction. The swift mobility and lightness of this little bird mocks the heavy bull and its stagnancy, or could this be an allegory of the safety of stability, that slow and steady wins the race? Does it stand for social disparity, and inherent challenges of the contemporary world? Or perhaps it is reflective of the imposing presence of history even amidst swift changes of social tumult. In the same vein as an Aesop Fable, Tăvală allows viewers to revel in beauty or discomfort of opposing states of being that transcend the post-communist life of Romania into our shared collective consciousness.

This interplay of contrived dream-like visions with a realist approach and ironic, humorous titles has a hard-hitting effect; it presents an intermingling of varying artistic concerns wavering between the solemn and the jocular at the very heart of the historical background of Cluj itself. Up until Romania's break from the dictatorial rule of Nicolae Ceausescu in 1989, the art of the period had been categorised by two camps; neo-socialist realist works and more emancipatory subjects resembling Western Modernism. The years which ensued were marked by a series of changes, from strong nationalist leadership to Romania's join with the European Union in 2007, as well as a renewed interest in figurative painting following the influx of new mass media, mobilisation, and freer movement of Romanian citizens.

Several of the artists in this exhibition reconfigure their personal memories of post-communist Romania through their subversions of art historical narratives, and references to film stills and mass media imagery. The sombre and dark compositions in Botond Gagyí's work resemble the beauty of film noir, where dark silhouetted figures lurk in states of apparition, making us consider the duality of the divine and foreboding dimensions of our contemporary life. Dan Maciuca presents the convergence of well-known religious stories and art historical themes such as *The Annunciation, after Fra Angelico* (2022). Maciuca's virtuosic brushwork and impastoed canvases seek to obscure and challenge traditional readings of symbolism and history painting in a contemporary context. Dragoş Bădiţă similarly surveys and subverts historical narratives and tropes of biblical art in his paintings *Mountain of Tears* (2024) and *Tending to Plants* (2024), unearthing feelings of vulnerability, fragility, and the sublimity of nature.

Having produced paintings between the years of 2018 and 2024, the artists also offer a contemporary lens to consider human life beyond the complex historical context of Cluj. The corporeal reality of the figures in Cristian Lapusan's dark, urban settings symbolise vulnerable contemplations of the past and unexplored aspirations for the future. The materialistic and mass media cultures of urban life are explored in Oana Fărcaş' paintings, depicting well-dressed figures staged within dreamlike surroundings to address the many facets of female identity and femininity. Marcel Rusu's work depicts scenes ranging from personal mundane moments to collective memories like the emergence of the consumer society in the late 1990s following drastic political shifts, as well as recent events such as the war in Ukraine. Whilst a bold reckoning with the transformative events of history, Rusu's work also harnesses hopeful notions of a utopian future, as reflected in his vibrant hyperreal painting *The Fountain of Youth* (2024), glowing with the new hybrid reality that is at the centre of Eastern European contemporary culture.

All seven artists in this exhibition have a deep intellectual approach to their subjects and themes. Their serious work ethic and dedication to their academic studies during their time at the University of Arts and Design Cluj-Napoca, not only results in technically brilliant paintings, but also images that resonate with different levels of presentation, engaging with cinematic styles and the dreamlike, surreal tendencies of the subconscious mind. Whilst many of the painters in this exhibition employ a realistic portrayal of their subjects, they seem to imbue their work with a

feeling and ambience without explicitly telling you what that is. This exhibition is packed with double-entendres that revel in their ambiguity, casting viewers in the role of not just an onlooker, but an active participant in the unfolding of the histories and contemporary narratives at play in these paintings born out of Cluj.

Whether or not the artists in this exhibition are quick in their commercial ascent like their earlier contemporaries, it is completely clear that this collective of painters is a symbolic reminder that Cluj is a revelatory bedrock for new artistic talent which speaks to the collective imagination on an international scale. The whimsical and emancipatory artworks in this exhibition probe the depths of our conscious and subconscious minds, prompting viewers to contemplate much wider historical and political shifts that expand beyond Romania, underlining precisely why and how the Cluj School continues to fascinate global audiences today.

**Words by Annie Pereira, 2024.**



*"Cluj, nestled in the Northwest of Romania, has long been a focal point in the art world, boasting luminaries such as Adrian Ghenie, Victor Man, Ciprian Muresan, Serban Savu, and Marius Bercea. As both an Art Collector and Curator, delving into Cluj's artistic tapestry has been a continuous pursuit for me. Embarking on the art journey years ago, I find myself now curating a captivating group show at the esteemed JD Malat Gallery in London Mayfair, featuring seven exceptional artists from Cluj. As a proud Romanian, realizing this dream is an incredible honour, and I am grateful to be a part of this exhibition, thanks to the outstanding team at JD Malat Gallery."*

**- Catalin Necula, 2024.**



**Oana Fărcaș**

*Echoes from Paradise/Ecouri din Paradis, 2024*

Oil on canvas

63 x 59 in

160 x 150 cm



**Oana Fărcaș**  
*Eternity/Eternitate*, 2024  
Oil on canvas

63 x 63 in  
160 x 160 cm



**Dragoș Bădiță**  
*Tending to plants, 2024*  
Oil on canvas

35 3/8 x 35 3/8 in  
90 x 90 cm



**Dragoș Bădiță**  
*Mountain of Tears, 2024*  
Oil on canvas

55 1/8 x 35 3/8 in  
140 x 90 cm



**Marcel Rusu**  
*The Curtain*, 2018  
Oil on wood

9 7/8 x 7 1/2 in  
25 x 19 cm



**Marcel Rusu**  
*Hanging Gardens of The Citadel, 2024*  
Oil and acrylic on linen

19 3/4 x 16 1/2 in  
50 x 42 cm



**Marcel Rusu**  
*The Fountain of Youth, 2024*  
Acrylic and oil on linen

57 1/8 x 65 in  
145 x 165 cm



**Botond Gagui**

*Torch Recourse, 2024*

Oil on linen

47 1/4 x 39 3/8 in

120 x 100 cm



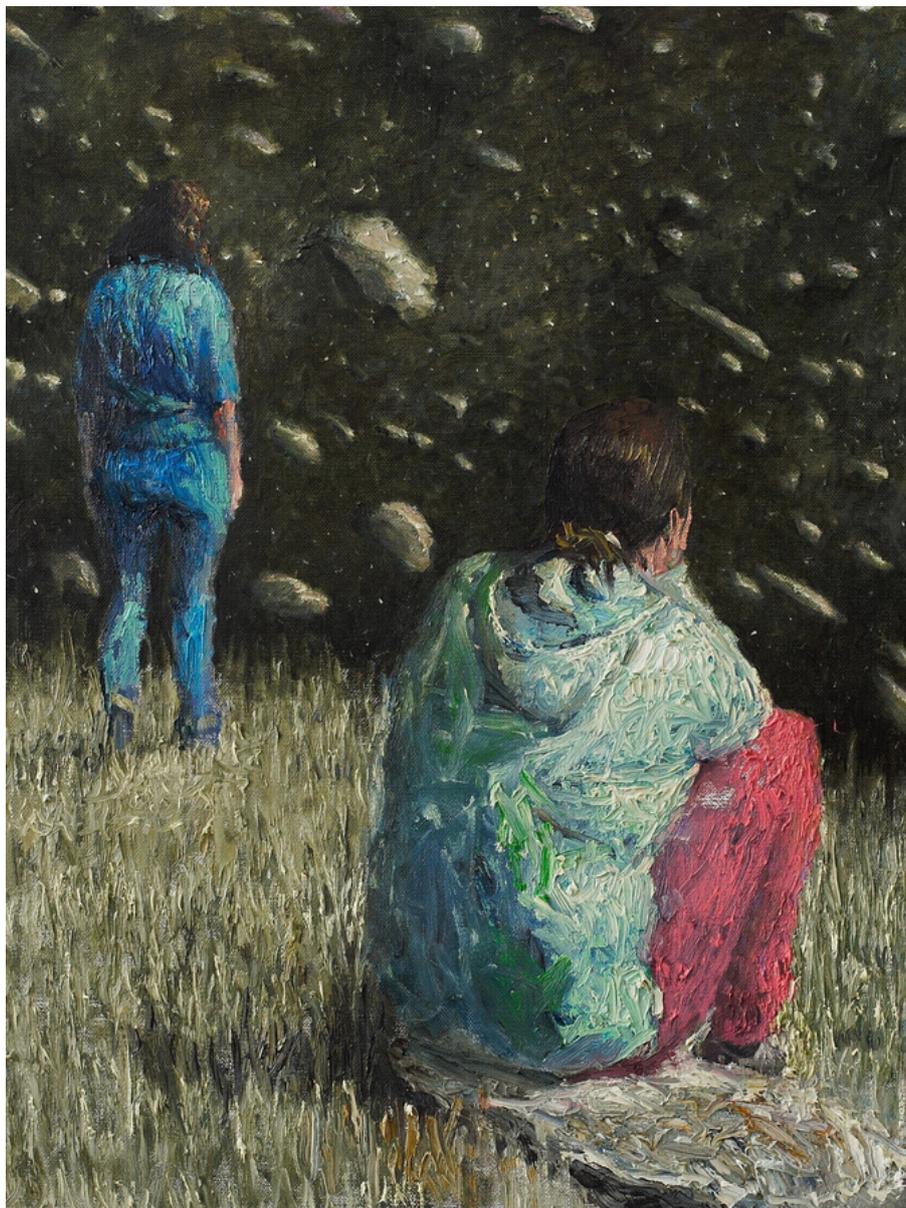
**Dan Maciuca**

*The Annunciation, after Fra Angelico, 2022*

Oil on canvas

63 x 47 1/4 in

160 x 120 cm



**Dan Maciuca**

*I'll meet you in a dream, 2023*

Oil on canvas

28 x 21 in

71 x 53.5 cm



**Dan Maciuca**

*Leaving the City, 2023*

Oil on canvas

78 3/4 x 59 in

200 x 150 cm



**Cristian Lapusan**

*6:35 AM, 2023*

Oil on canvas

59 x 59 in

150 x 150 cm



**Cristian Lapusan**  
*Walking in my shoes, 2023*  
Oil on canvas

59 x 59 in  
150 x 150 cm



**Cristian Lapusan**  
*Arizona Dream*, 2023  
Oil on canvas

59 x 59 in  
150 x 150 cm



**Cătălin Tăvală**  
*AEROB VS ANAREOB*, 2023  
Oil on canvas

31 1/2 x 31 1/2 in  
80 x 80 cm



**Cătălin Tăvală**  
*ANGRY BIRDS*, 2021  
Oil on linoleum

19 3/4 x 11 3/4 in  
50 x 30 cm



**Cătălin Tăvală**

*ROOM*, 2021

Oil on linoleum

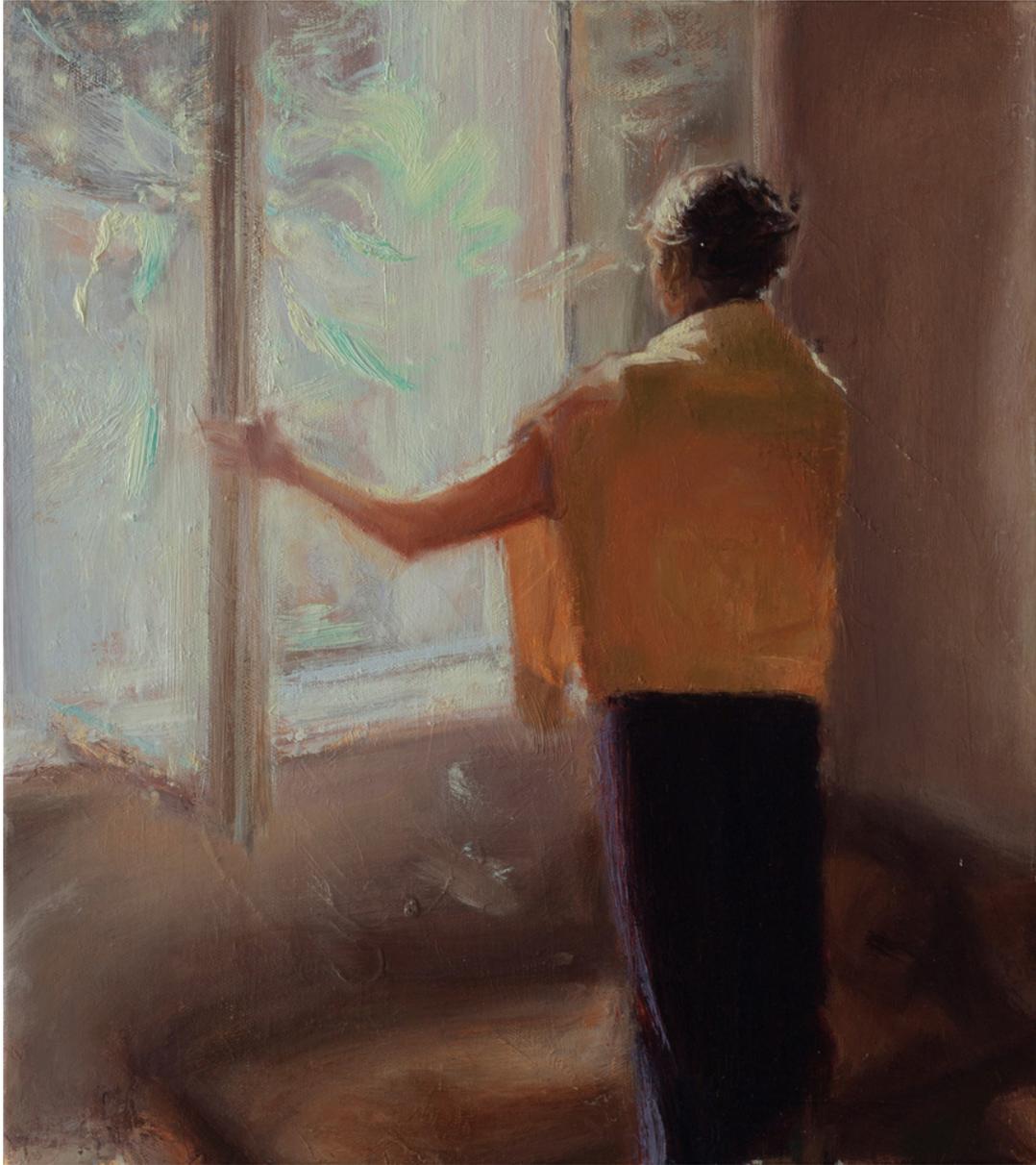
15 3/4 x 11 3/4 in

40 x 30 cm



**Cătălin Tăvală**  
*SUBWAY ANGELS*, 2022  
Oil on panel

15 3/4 x 15 3/4 in  
40 x 40 cm



**Botond Gagyí**

*Gleaming Shadows, 2024*

Oil on canvas

16 7/8 x 15 in

43 x 38 cm



**Botond Gagyí**  
*Inner Shades, 2024*  
Oil on canvas

78 3/4 x 63 in  
200 x 160 cm



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