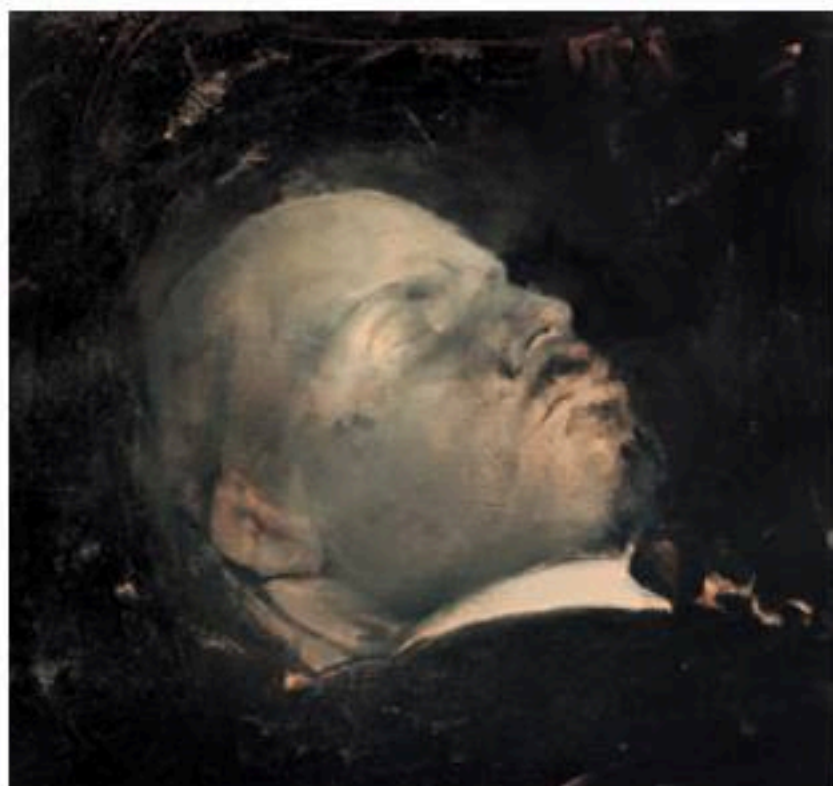


ADRIAN GHENIE

ADRIAN GHENIE, *DUCHAMP'S FUNERAL II*, 2003, oil and acrylic on canvas, 78 1/4 x 118 1/2" /
DUCHAMP'S BEGRÄBNIS II, Öl und Acryl auf Leinwand, 200 x 300 cm. (ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF
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Rememberment of Things Past



MIHNEA MIRCAN

ADRIAN GHENIE, *TURNING BLUE*, 2008, oil and acrylic on canvas, 12 1/2" x 12 1/2" / *BLAUVERFÄRBUNG*, Öl und Acryl auf Leinwand, 31 x 31 cm.

One is an assembly of prosthetic viscera and transplanted veins, grafted together to construct an infinite body. The other is a golem of plastic and toxic light, peering unblinkingly into a scene of ravage. Two figures borrowed from the bestiaries of the twentieth century will guide this exploration of Adrian Ghenie's portraiture, an endeavor whose realism does not seek to picture life but instead to capture time—the stretched time of putrefaction, lifeless endurance, and contagion that his models inhabit as they continue to discharge contaminates into the present.

The first of these deathless corpses belongs to Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, caught in sickening close-up

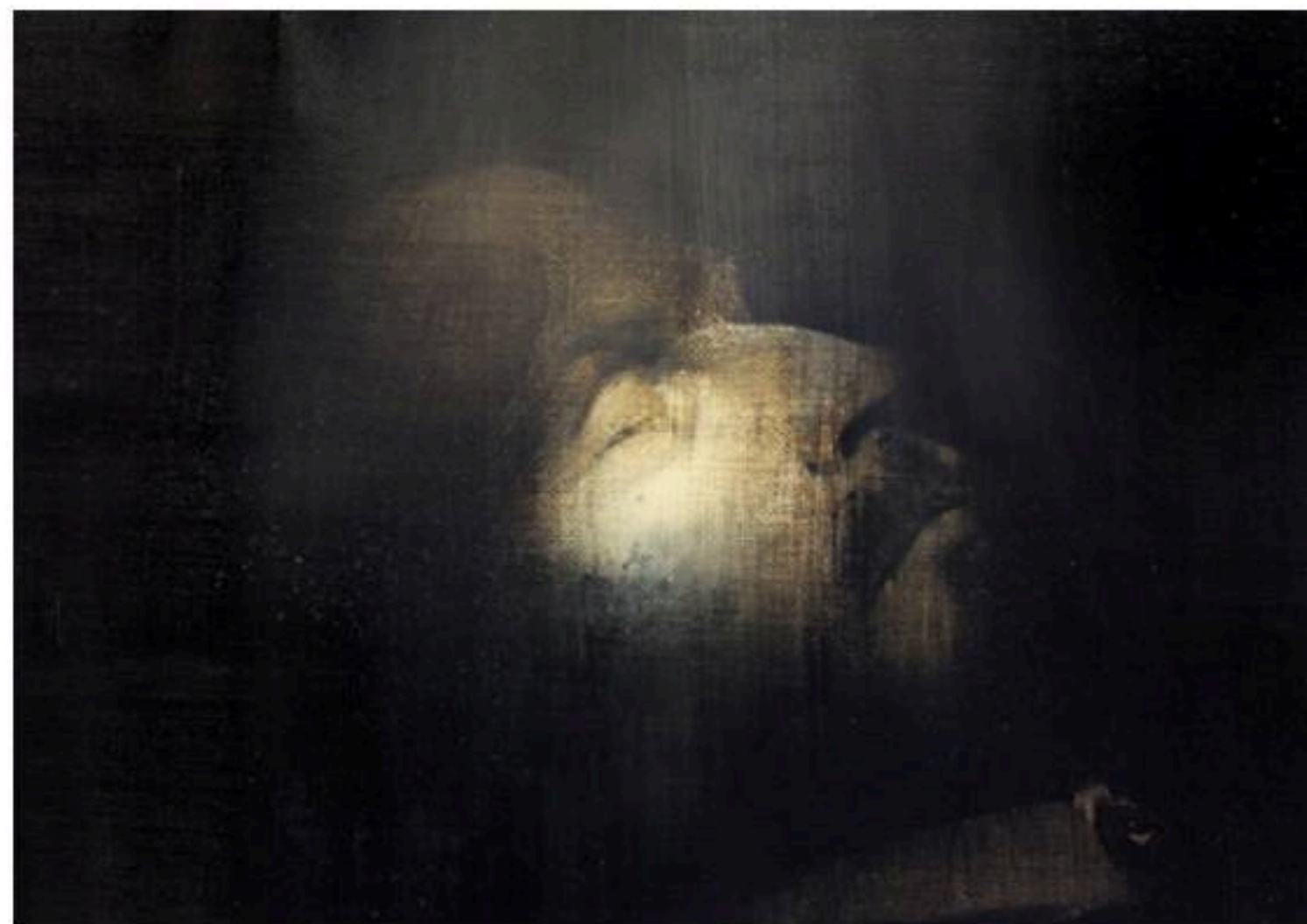
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in *TURNING BLUE* (2008), then nearer still in *THE LEADER* (2008). The clinical nature of the first canvas, a montage of bruises and ruptures that does not disguise its origin in a photograph, shifts to theatrical in the latter, as otherworldly light illuminates the cheekbone and closed eye of the revolutionary. Ghenie's double take reflects on the dual roles of this anatomy, and the odd hagiography uniting them. In his essay "Bodies of Lenin: The Hidden Science of Communist Sovereignty," anthropologist Alexei Yurchak describes the ontological ambiguity of the exhibit preserved in the mausoleum on Moscow's Red Square for the last nine decades, recounting the incredible resources and ingenuity marshalled to prevent this physically and symbolically elastic body from ever hardening into a relic. Yurchak writes that,

remarkably, "Scientists have maintained not only the features of Lenin's face but also the shape of his heels, the pigmentation around his armpits, the strength of hair attachment on his chest, and the flexibility of his knee joints"—every part, whether or not it is visible to the flocks of tourists and pilgrims who visit the display. Lenin is conserved as a "dynamic form": "work on the body can never cease; the body cannot be allowed simply to lie there in an embalmed state. It must be continuously examined, fixed, resculpted and reemalmed."¹⁾

Yurchak compares the creation of Leninism, to the treatment of his biological remains, turning this

assemblage of joints and limbs into a visual equivalent for a polity. Decades of replacing dead tissue have altered the body's original composition to the extent that it now inhabits a spectral terrain between carion and representation, a cyborg-icon whose heart and brain are extended through political and medical protocols. A member of the preservation team employs the phrase "living sculpture" to convey this paradox, "as if to say *this is a sculpture of the body that is constructed of the body itself.*"²⁾ For his body to appear unaffected by the passage of time, it must constantly change. Evidencing a different paradigm from Ernst Kantorowicz's classic distinction between, and blur-



ADRIAN GHENIE, *THE LEADER*, 2008, oil and acrylic on canvas, 8 1/2" x 12" / *DER FÜHRER*, Öl und Acryl auf Leinwand, 22 x 30,5 cm.

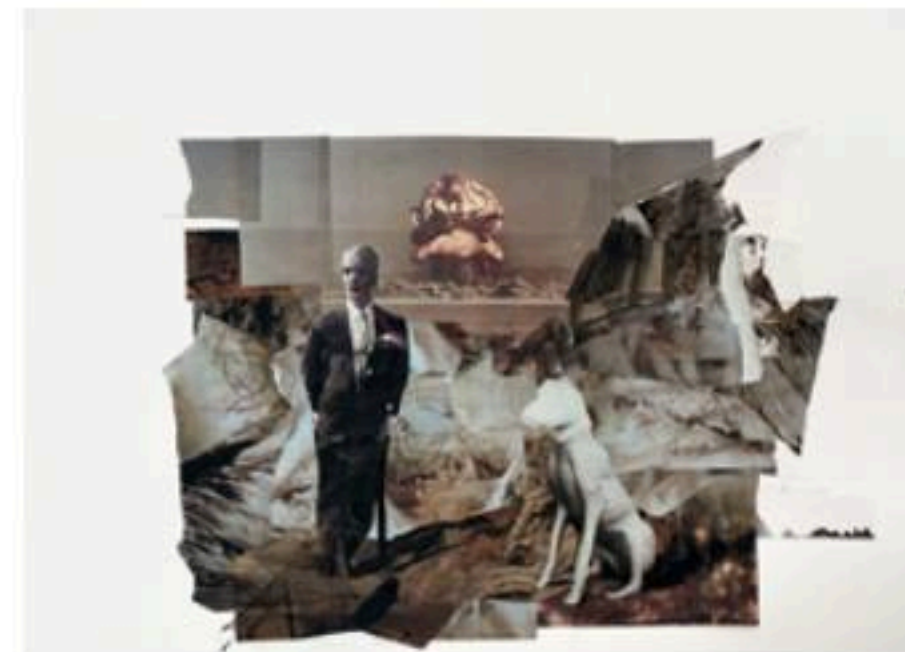


ADRIAN GHENIE, *THE DEVIL 1*, 2010, oil on canvas, 80 1/2 x 90 1/2" / *DER TEUFEL 1*, Öl auf Leinwand, 205 x 230 cm.

ring of, the king's "body of nature" and his "body of grace," Lenin is ec-static: rescued by medicine from the stasis of demise, maintained by a secular theology in a condition of stilled agility.

Throughout the communist East, in Russia as much as in Ghenie's native Romania, the 1990s were a mix of abrupt political change and deep-seated inertia, of quickly toppled monuments and lingering societal reflexes. Lenin's legacy in Russia still remains in a state of suspension—and thus so does his body: "Attitudes are split between those who consider it a sacred symbol of the heroic revolutionary past, an evil emblem of a criminal regime, or a neutral monument of national history."⁵³ Ghenie's two paintings depict the intersection of something not quite ending and something not quite beginning: On canvas as in reality, Lenin is stranded between the various allegorical tools—and forms of political confabulation—that separate death from life, the metaphysical frameworks through which these exchanges between flesh and effigy can be given the appearance of sense, or a political instrumentality. Between the stale apathy of *TURNING BLUE* and the prefigured ascension in *THE LEADER*, the revenant—neither carcass nor apparition, propelled forward by its own simulacral élan of becoming-same—is an image in search of its signified, of context and consolation.

The relationship between inanimate and living forms takes a different trajectory in *THE DEVIL* (2008). Ghenie borrows his lopsided protagonist from a black-and-white image by *Life* magazine photographer Loomis Dean, one of numerous American photojournalists invited to document the aftermath of nuclear experiments at the Nevada Test Site. An entire town was built at Yucca Flat and peopled with hundreds of store mannequins to study the effects of a blast on everything from houses to clothes to canned food. The News Nob, a strategic spot positioned seven miles from the test site itself, was established in 1952 as a designated area for journalists to witness the detonations. In tandem with aerial photography of craterous depressions or clouds dissolving into their own brightness, photojournalistic routine at the News Nob established an iconography of sorts: the categories into which an indirect gaze onto the blast would fall, the postures and positions, protocols, instruments, and crepuscular photogenics by which an event whose intensity defies capabilities of technical registration and mortally threatens the naked eye could be obliquely apprehended, segmented into points of view, and seemingly domesticated. Dean's own experience leads to an insistent focus on portraiture, on the make-believe of familial and domestic devastation played out by the mannequins. Take the



ADRIAN GHENIE, study for *THE DEVIL 3*, 2010, collage and acrylic on paper, 12 1/2 x 18 1/2" / Studie für *DER TEUFEL 3*, Collage und Acryl auf Papier, 32,7 x 48 cm.

title of the particular photograph that serves as Ghenie's source: SCORCHED MALE MANNEQUIN CLAD IN DARK BUSINESS SUIT STANDING IN DESERT 7,000 FT. FROM THE 44TH NUCLEAR TEST EXPLOSION, A DAY AFTER THE BLAST, INDICATING THAT HUMANS COULD BE BURNT BUT STILL ALIVE, YUCCA FLAT, NEVADA, 1955. The dummy's serviceable smile is still legible under different degrees of burn, its retinas seared by winds emanating from the blast.

The collective image-rapture induced by the lethal combustion of atomic energy that held the gaze of journalists and brought thousands of atomic tourists to Las Vegas, the unleashing of a crazed, noxious excess of photo-sensitivity in which these documentarians and witnesses operate, are captured, shaped, and measured in the plastic flesh of the dummy, made to see something we cannot. A cog in an abstract ma-



ADRIAN GHENIE, study for *THE STIGMATA*, 2010, collage and acrylic on paper, 27 1/2 x 20 1/2" / Studie für *DIE STIGMATA*, Collage und Acryl auf Papier, 70 x 52,7 cm.

ADRIAN GHENIE, *NOUGAT 2*, 2010,
oil on canvas, 86 1/2 x 78 1/2" /
NOUGAT 2, Öl auf Leinwand, 220 x 200 cm.

chine that bestows life and quantifies death, askew, mute, and lethal, the mannequin conduces the dark glow of avisuality, that anxious relation structuring the atomic unconscious discussed by film theorist Akira Mizuta Lippit. Drawing on early film and post-Hiroshima Japanese cinema, Lippit analyzes avisuality as an abyssal unseeing that shoots through modernity's epiphanies, a substance that corrodes the thresholds of the visible world, complicating or twisting their geometry by a new optics of causes and effects, by a pulsating synthesis of glare and blackness. A repertoire of surrogate images and ersatz glimpses, of which Dean's super- and subhuman dummy is one, surrounds and spectrally grounds the efflorescence, beyond sight and history, of the atomic bomb: Like allegories (in Paul de Man's proposition), they persist in visualizing what they have already demonstrated they cannot show.

In *THE DEVIL*, the dummy survivor, thrust into the present by the malignant energy with which it is perpetually infested, encounters a man on an armchair. Possibly a self-portrait, the figure leans forward to retch up an impressionist pink splatter. Their meeting occurs in a space that could be a studio or a gallery, as amorphous traces and penumbræ are organized into something like a grid of picture display. This is a recurrent trope in Ghenie's work, which often places perpetrators and victims in milieus of artistic production or presentation, shaded with a sense of provisionality or inadequacy. As a receptacle for such apparitions, the environment of the studio connotes artificiality and constructedness rather than historiographic decorum.

Linking the dummy's sickening charge with the stream of vomit or casting the mannequin as the titular demon are not interpretations the painting discourages, yet it forces the characters into the same space and ontological regime, compressing what might be an ampler stage and a more intricate causal





ADRIAN GHENIE, *THE DEVIL 2*, 2010, oil on canvas, 78 1/2 x 90 1/2" / *DER TEUFEL 2*, Öl auf Leinwand, 200 x 230 cm.

chain of pathogens, infection, and ejecta. In place of the semblance of an exchange, painter and model exist in separate domains within the painting's suggestion of three-dimensional collage. Ghenie has a keen interest in the scenographic dispositifs of religious art, in which context this image could have been an annunciation or a temptation. But these tropes are deployed here to opposite effect: Rather than delineate the crossing of borders between earthly and otherworldly realms, the scene is resolved as one of mutual obliviousness and severed contact. Revulsion reduces the self to nothing more than the skin that separates convulsed innards from inimical surroundings, an impoverished interiority that works as counterpart to the silent, battered guest, incapable of enunciating an identity. The demonic element indicated by the title might indeed be circling the eyeless, desensitized space between them: a negative sublime, an emptying-out and withdrawal of the self from the innumerable, immense, and ever grimmer statistics of modernity that it can no longer compute or bear.

Lenin the time traveler, with his baggage of implants and his political exoskeleton; and the mannequin, a drifter through ontologies and regimes of representation, playing both the role of a person and that of a technological apparatus that could wipe out all personhood: These are stand-ins for flesh, for life and death, degrading into radioactive or political half-lives. Ghenie explores a tortured mnemonics via a specific repertoire of characters: villains, both infamous and anonymous, from what the artist has called "a century of humiliation."⁴ Enveloped in folds of ambiguity, blemished by the grain of a vintage print, tumefied by deteriorated archival footage, evanescent in a flurry of pixels, his figures slip between categories of historiographic discourse with the same energy with which they are made and un-made by their pictorial environments, their features ricocheting between the canted, facing planes of impossible architectures, bifurcating into multiple, unsynthesizable vanishing points. For Ghenie, the visage is a locus of remembering, assembling distorted fragments and amputated likenesses to models real or imagined, drawn from history or nightmare: re-memberment rather than remembrance, elucidation, or a parti-

tioning of guilt and martyrdom. Cheeks, foreheads, and lips heave and ripple, bones protrude, stuporous grins freeze as iridescent smears, consumed by the effort to hold together against onslaughts of zombie chiaroscuro. The energy that makes these images cohere as paintings is equal to the stamina with which the faces resist being disassembled into force fields of abstraction.

In Ghenie's historical portraits, rooms contract or swell, their moribund and eternal inhabitants anamorphically knotted with perspective lines and architectural lineaments. Psychasthenic buffoons, they *become* space: As in Caillois's description, their proprioception is constructed from the other side of their senses.⁵ Emerging from blurs and exquisite smudges, as parleys between composition and decomposition, subjected to something of a painterly martyrdom, they appear as the different configurations of a malleable stuff that oozes somewhere between the skeleton and the mask. Ghenie's figures are sick with death and chronically dying, fermenting, obstinate and immovable; elsewhere antonyms of reason coagulate as political programs, bonfires are made of the values of the Enlightenment, negative social contracts are signed hastily on the brink of apocalypses, and sovereign beasts hunt in packs. Embalmed in paint to slow their decrepitude, marionetted by invisible pulleys of space and memory but never pushed beyond recognition, his ideologues, tyrants, and torturers persist, petrified and insulting, waiting in a dull netherworld. Like a sci-fi monster staring into the camera in the final scene to guarantee a sequel, they hold the potentiality to return as malevolent speech, as headlines, hats, or badges. Ghenie might be saying that nothing is ever really lost, and that ends and beginnings, "inaugurations" and "epochal shifts," repurpose the same scabrous, oily fragments.

1) Alexei Yurchak, "Bodies of Lenin: The Hidden Science of Communist Sovereignty," *Representations* 129 (Winter 2015), 117–18.

2) *Ibid.*, 128.

3) *Ibid.*, 145.

4) Adrian Ghenie, quoted in Jane Neal, "Adrian Ghenie," *Art Review* 46 (December 2010), 70.

5) Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia" (1935), trans. John Shepley, *October* 31 (Winter 1984), 30.