

# ROUTINE OF THE REAL

DIETER ROELSTRAETE ON THE ART OF EDI HILA

**VISITORS TO DOCUMENTA 14** in Athens and Kassel might have been forgiven for scratching their heads in bemusement at the sight of so much Albanian painting from the 1960s and '70s. Arben Basha, Llambi Blido, Pandi Mele, Hasan Nallbani, and Zef Shoshi: These were artists of zero renown outside of the secretive Balkan republic.

Reviewing the exhibition, which I co-organized as one of six core curators, for the *New York Times*, Jason Farago wrote that “for every familiar name” in the 2017 edition of the quinquennial, “there are ten you’ve never heard of, often for good reason,” adding parenthetically that “Albanian socialist realism, weirdly, gets a major day in the sun.”

Another critic (Dean Kissick, in *Spike*) stated that “the spirit of Documenta 14 personified” was “a little-known avant-garde painter working on a turkey farm under duress in 1970s socialist Albania.”

Hila, who was born in Shkodër in 1944 and trained in the socialist-realist idiom in Tirana, did spend his formative years working as a menial laborer at a poultry-processing plant in the Albanian countryside. He had been banished for reeducation purposes after unveiling his 1972 canvas *Planting of Trees*. A joyous, colorful pastoral fantasy, tentatively Surrealist in tone, it was deemed too fanciful and lacking in properly class-conscious heroism by the dour arbiters of official taste in Albania under the regime of dictator Enver Hoxha. This important painting shows a collectivist, arcadian idyll infused with the unassuming eros of true communion, free of the heavy-handed figural engineering of orthodox socialist realism. A miserable attempt at propaganda, we may find in retrospect—but all the more successful a work of art because of it.

In Warsaw, *Planting of Trees* was shown alongside dozens of drawings Hila made in exile among his fellow feather-plucking peasants. Rendered in a loose, diaristic hand, they reveal Hila’s understated classicist sympathies: shades of Daumier, echoes of Masson. He in fact never stopped making art, but was prohibited from exhibiting until the '90s. As Albania traumatically transitioned from a sclerotic centrally planned

economy to casino capitalism, Hila, too, entered a new phase, capturing the broad sweep of this upheaval in paintings at once beautiful and glum.

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Hila works in series, with something of the detached observer’s penchant for methodical reporting, in an arresting, muddy, quasi-realist style and mutable palette. Morose browns convey the drudgery of everyday, hand-to-mouth existence in the series “Paradox,” 2002–2005; “Roadside Objects,” 2007–10; and “Threat,” 2003–2009. “Penthouses,” 2013, is characterized by the acerbic pastels of the monochrome planes atop which Hila depicts the homes of Albania’s nouveaux riches. “Martyrs of the Nation Boulevard,” 2015, features oppressive, sullen grays befitting the fascist architectural remnants of the Italian wartime occupation. Occasional splashes and washes of acidic hues appear in the handful of Hila’s paintings that have people at their center, yet one particularly gripping work, *Mother*, 2000, is as somber as the famed Whistler composition to which it appears to allude. In it, Hila shows his ailing parent in a dowdy flowered dress. Stubbornly aiming her remote control at an unseen television, *hors-champ*, to the viewer’s left, she’s flipping channels, or maybe trying to rewind more than just a TV show. All around her is a darkness that seems the very essence of foreboding—a darkness that perhaps only the tried and tested tools of the true painter’s trade are capable of capturing.

There is more than a passing parallel to be found here with the life and work of Andrzej Wróblewski, the realist Polish painter brought to international attention in 2015 in another exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. Wróblewski also found reality too riddled with ambiguities to create easily decipherable propaganda, and ran afoul of the authorities as a result. But while Wróblewski, one feels, could not have been didactic if he’d tried, Hila refuses even to try. The power of Hila’s work derives from a commitment to capital-*R* Realism that did not falter even after the ignominy of failing to practice it in a properly “socialist” manner. He has defiantly stuck to his faith in painting’s status as the “most appropriate way of describing the world,” as Éric de Chassey put it in the catalogue essay for the Warsaw exhibition. Like Luc Tuymans, de Chassey suggested, Hila is not necessarily interested in representing discrete facts and historical events, but instead seeks to capture the reality of moods and ever-complicating twists of fate, of feeling and foretelling. His “Open Museum” series, 2017, takes armoires as its subject: One resembles an obsolete mainframe; another is full of automatic rifles. History seems to be allegorized in these cabinets of dire curiosity—but

which history, or whose, is nowhere made explicit.

Yet this quixotic focus on the ineffable does not mean that the work is less political than the heroic socialist figuration he was supposed to produce. To the contrary, his art, in its own way, evinces the militancy of Courbet's realism. It is its regard for the so-called little people, voiceless and immiserated, finally, that lends Hila's work its subtly humanist charge. There's a definite emotional depth in these paintings that is knowingly lacking in much of the post-photographic painting that has come out of Eastern Europe since the '90s (e.g., that of Sławomir Elsner, Adrian Ghenie, Victor Man, Wilhelm Sasnal). Works like *Penthouse 7*, 2013, with its architectural evocation of '80s neoclassicist kitsch, or *Under the Hot Sun*, 2005, with its rusted-out tanker run aground on a beach full of sunbathers' umbrellas, may have an ironic edge, but they also convey a sense of melancholy and, remarkably, a pathos without melodrama.

A larger irony is in play here, too. After all, the rampant, unregulated capitalism that the institutions of global finance were so happy to unleash on post-Communist countries has come home to roost with a vengeance. Unbridled self-dealing, *kompromat*, bribery, and kleptocratic ostentation on the one hand, deepening poverty on the other, and an ever more thorough imbrication of the legitimate and illegitimate economies: These are some of the characteristics that earned the post-Soviet world the sobriquet "Wild East." Regardless of whether it really is the case that the American president is Putin's "asset," the United States of 2019 looks increasingly like a province of the Russian Federation, belatedly catching up to developments already well under way in the metropole. Hila's work in recent decades is a panoramic vision of the exteriors and affects of a nation undergoing a kind of hyperbolic commodification, a society both exhausted and agitated, unable to process what is happening to it because these things are happening too fast. The stillness of Hila's paintings is the deceptive quiescence that can overcome perception when events are moving at a frantic, incomprehensible speed. His 1997 triptych *People of the Future*, which shows a kind of massive ghost ship that seems to be bearing down on the viewer, is one of his most moving works and, from the perspective of the present, one of his most chillingly prophetic. Painted after eighty-seven Albanian migrants drowned trying to cross the Adriatic, it is a memorial to all those who have been displaced by events they could never have seen coming



Edi Hila, *Planting of Trees*, 1972, oil on canvas, 58 7/8 × 78 3/8".