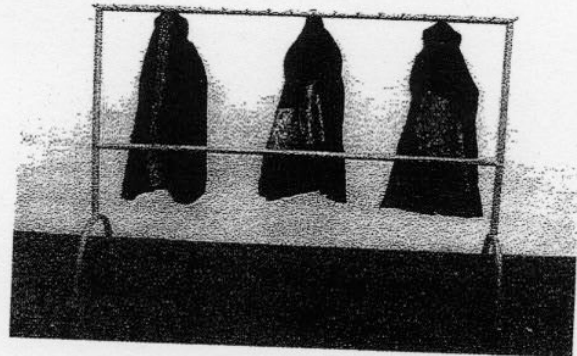


## GLADSTONE GALLERY

Van den Boogerd, Dominic, "Out of the Cold: On Victor Man's Work of Restraint", Art Papers, January/February 2008, pg. 22 – 25.

# OUT OF THE COLD: ON VICTOR MAN'S WORK OF RESTRAINT

TEXT / DOMINIC VAN DEN BOOGERD



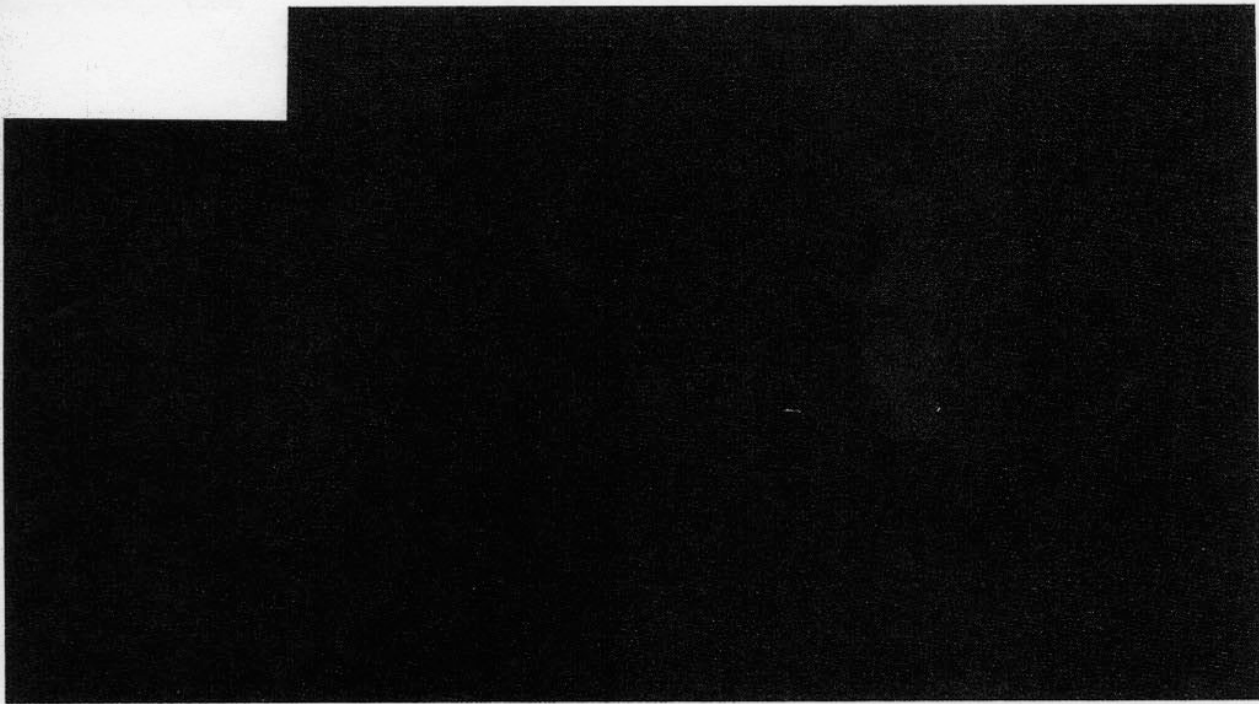
The Romanian artist Victor Man titled one of his recent exhibitions *The Place I'm Coming From*.<sup>1</sup> This place of origin is Cluj, a town in Transylvania—the region famed for its brutal ruler Vlad the Impaler (1431–1476), who inspired Bram Stoker's fictional Dracula. After studying art in Jerusalem, Man returned to his hometown and set up a studio in the house where he grew up. Much of his work springs from a mixture of childhood memories and references to the cultural myths and traditions of his homeland. His paintings and sculptures reflect both local folklore and the lingering traces of the communist Romania of his younger years—a society marked by shortages, decay, and isolation. "I'm coming out of the cold," says Man.<sup>2</sup> And so, the discrepancies between eastern and western European cultural self-image is a subject that crops up in his work time and again.

If the many years of dictatorship greatly limited Romanians' knowledge of the rest of Europe, they also skewed the people's sense of their own history. Man alludes to this in the comic strip *Mihai Viteazu*, 2006, drawn by the artist as a ten-year-old boy, and blown up to cover an entire wall. The ink—a little blurred—and the white paper—now yellowing—bear some of the traces

of the ravages of time. Under Ceaușescu, graphic novels, such as the French comic book *Piff*, were difficult to get hold of. Given this shortage, Victor Man decided to draw his own comic strips featuring Mihai Viteazul (1558–1601), known in English as Michael the Brave. Mihai Viteazul was the first ruler to unite the provinces of Wallachia, Transylvania, and Moldavia—now modern-day Romania. In the 1980s, stories about this national hero and his struggle against the Turks and the Hungarians were frequently repeated on national television, which was on air for only two hours a day. These programs, however, omitted the fact that this national hero was assassinated by his own comrades in arms when he threatened to become a little too powerful. Man's installation is both a melancholy tribute to the imagination of the child and a reflection on the precarious construction of national identity in times when information is scarce and media manipulation widespread.

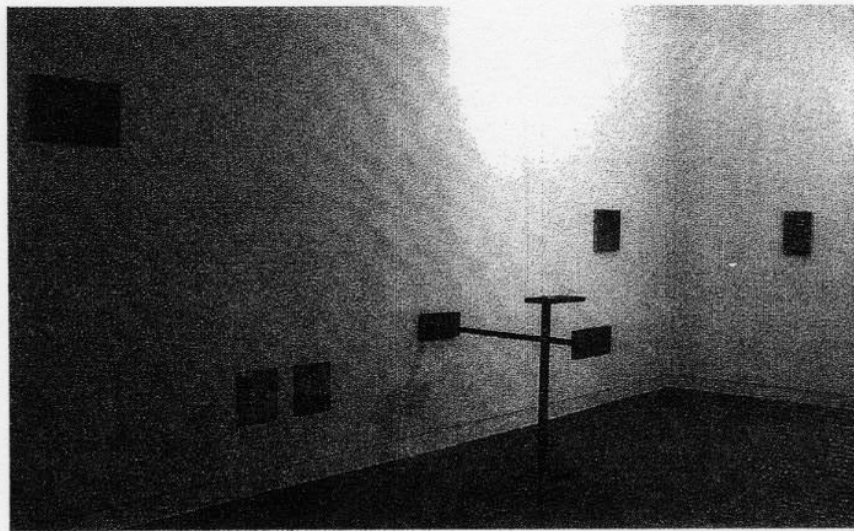
Most of Man's paintings are based on pictures from books, magazines, postcards, and websites; pictures that he has, for a variety of reasons, fished out of a sea of images, and which unexpectedly find themselves neighbors on his studio wall. More than an interest in subject, "a certain

ABOVE: Victor Man, *Untitled (Coats)*, 2007, yellow metal wardrobe, 3 coats (black, grey and brown; size 50) lined with the Romanian flag, 164 x 200 x 62 cm (installation view at Kunstverein in Hamburg, Germany; courtesy of the artist, Galerie Johnen und Schöttle, Köln, and Plan B, Cluj, Romania; photo: Fred Dott, Hamburg)



commitment to abstract forms”<sup>3</sup> guides the artist’s selection of his visual material. Formal elements prevail over narrative. They derive their significance from their assigned position in ensembles of paintings, photographs, wall paintings, assemblages, and reproductions on transparent foil. Placed within an associative context, the pictures become indicators of a possible narrative and are given a function within an unverifiable network of conjecture and suspicions. “When creating these assemblages,” says Man, “each work has to find its correct format in the context in which it finds itself.” In these ensembles, he aims to create “a terrain of turbulence where truth becomes a matter of clues.”<sup>4</sup>

*Untitled*, 2006, is such an assemblage of works. A small painting of a person looking through an attic window hangs high on the wall. A little further down are two black-and-white photographs of forest landscapes, framed in rusty iron. In front of the wall stands a wooden object that must have once been the base of a table. The artist came across this object amongst a load of furniture that, collected in the west, was destined for poverty-stricken Romania. Now, as part of Man’s installation, it has returned to its origins. The modernist form of this discarded piece of furni-



ABOVE, TOP: *Untitled*, 2006, 2007, oil on canvas, 190 x 303 cm [courtesy of the artist and Galerie Johnen und Schottle, Köln]; ABOVE, BOTTOM: installation view, left to right: *Untitled*, 2002, 2 found framed photographs, wooden object, painting, each photograph: 30 x 24 cm, object: 111 x 110.5 x 44 cm, painting: oil on canvas, 30 x 39 cm [collection James-Keith Brown and Er Diefenbach; courtesy of the artist and Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam]. *Leading by Example*, 2006, oil on canvas mounted on wood, 38 x 22.5 cm [collection of the Museum Bijlmans V, Beuningen, Rotterdam; courtesy of the artist and Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam]



ture is now a reminder of both the datedness of the International Style and the extent to which, for a number of decades, eastern and western Europe seemed to exist in different time periods. Until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, western visitors to communist countries often had the impression of stepping back fifty years in time. Man cultivates the idea of the work of art as a time capsule that escapes the flow of everyday events—something that is both outside of time and out of date, and thereby gains a sense of uselessness.

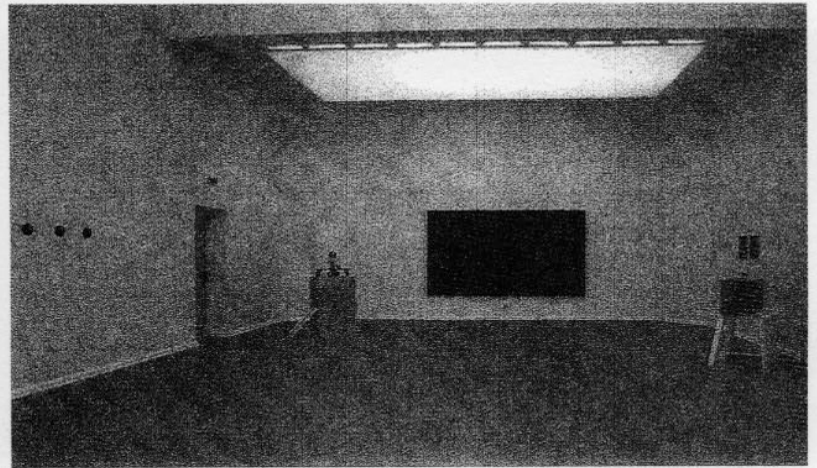
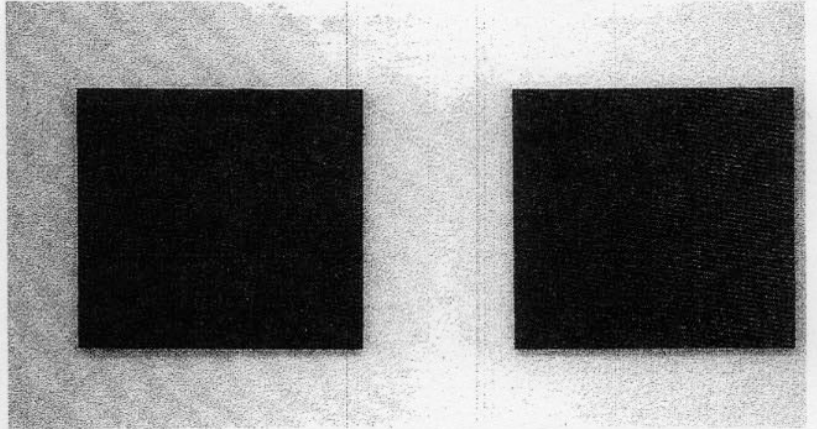
This ensemble was on view in Man's exhibition *With the first totters*<sup>5</sup>, titled after a small painting that enlists brown-gray shades and hazy backlighting to depict a lonely figure against a ravine in an inhospitable mountain landscape—a scene reminiscent of Joachim Patinier or Caspar David Friedrich. The title invokes a child's first steps and the uncertainty with which we enter new and unfamiliar territory. In this exhibition where various paintings play on the ambiguities of sexually charged gestures, this new realm is the dark domain of sexual desire. In *Leading by Example*, 2006, for instance, a woman's legs are spread in the air. The back of a man's hand strokes her inner thigh. The soft folds in his immaculate shirt are striking. The fabric's meticulous finish stands out against the coarse texture of the rest of the panel, which looks as though the paint has been partially rubbed away. One need not be an authority on Clérambault's psychopathological studies to be aware of the fetishistic value of silk, velvet, satin, and fur. The erotic connotation is also obvious in another work, *Untitled*, 2006, a panel depicting a masked, latex-clad figure of uncertain sex, mounted on a piece of fur. While the contrast between the synthetic fabric and the organic fur is evident, the aim of Man's voyeuristic images remains as elusive as their interpretation. He limits himself to suggestions, to "...incomplete gestures and uncertain endings."<sup>6</sup> In this respect, his images are comparable to the more or less latently perverse depictions in Balthus' paintings. Together in this exhibition, however, these enigmatic images evoke a spectacular and terrifying universe.

The contrast between primitive, almost bestial existence and the artifice of culture and civilization makes frequent appearances in Man's work. Take, for example, his intervention on the façade of the Romanian pavilion at the last Venice Biennale, where Man filled the spaces between the stone-carved letters composing the work ROMANIA with fur coats.<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, the furs were a reminder of traditions like bear-hunting in the Carpathians; on the other, they imparted a frivolous, dandyish allure to the pavilion's entrance. This ambiguity continued in other works in the pavilion, such as *Untitled*, 2006–2007, a large, dark, and mysterious painting that recalls an underexposed photograph. The picture has hardly any chromatic or tonal contrasts—as though it was not intended for our eyes. The outlines of an old-fashioned stage can vaguely be made out, with children in animal costumes performing a play. Two figures threaten a third, lending a sinister touch to the innocent performance. The painting withholds any clues about intentions and references. Yet, despite this restraint, it evokes an unpleasant memory that, suddenly intruding on the present, refuses to be driven away.

Man's paintings resist easy interpretation and veil themselves in silence. This sullen taciturnity is a feature they share with the early work of Vija Celmins, for example—a style of painting that is most explicit, and yet elicits sentiments that are hard to put into words. Another kindred spirit may be Morandi, who viewed the jars and bottles on his kitchen table as though looking through a telescope. In Morandi's still-life paintings, illuminated parts are hard to distinguish from shadows, just as one Morandi still life differs from another only in a few respects. "What is beautiful," argues Man, "is trying to find closeness instead of difference."<sup>8</sup> The panels of his diptych *Untitled (Octagon)*, 2007, depict the same geometric shape in slightly different color combinations: two octahedrons reflecting each other. Just like Man's figurative representations, his abstract works suggest that they are part of a complex system of secret relationships.

Perhaps we should interpret Man's exploration of closeness metaphorically, as an attempt

<sup>5</sup> BOTTOM: *Untitled*, 2006, oil on canvas mounted on wood attached to found animal fur, 34.2 x 19.5 cm (courtesy of the artist and Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam); *Romania*, installation on facade of Romanian Pavilion at Venice Biennale: fur, variable dimensions (courtesy the artist, Galerie Johnen und Schöttle, Köln, Galleria Zero, Milano, and Blum & Coles)



to depict the gulf between western Europe and the former eastern bloc as smaller than people on both sides of the former Iron Curtain seem to think. *Untitled (Coats)*, 2007, appears to lend itself to this reading. Three coats hang on a coat rack—one black, the second brown, and the last gray. Their insides are lined with the red, yellow, and blue of the Romanian flag. Man's reference to the introspection of the Romanian people, who were isolated for decades, may just as easily be interpreted as a response to the question posed by Barnett Newman in *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue?* It has long been impossible to make an unequivocal distinction between the local and the global.

#### NOTES

1. Timothy Taylor Gallery, London, May 5–31, 2006.
2. Victor Man, lecture at De Ateliers, Amsterdam, October 23, 2007.
3. Gianni Romano, "Interview: Victor Man & Gianni Romano," *Contemporary Magazine* 82, 2006, <http://www.contemporary-magazine.com/interview82.htm>, accessed December 1, 2007.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam, October 21–December 9, 2006.
6. Romano, *Ibid.*
7. *Low Budget Monuments*, Victor Man, Cristi Pogăcean, Florin Tudor, and Mona Vătămanu, Romanian Pavilion, 52nd Venice Biennale, June 10–November 21, 2007
8. Man, lecture at De Ateliers.

Dominic van den Boogerd is a critic and director of De Ateliers in Amsterdam. His interview with Aernout Mik was published in *ART PAPERS* 31:05, September–October 2007.

Translated from the Dutch by Laura Watkinson

ABOVE, LEFT: *Leading by Example*, 2006, oil on canvas mounted on wood, 38 x 22.5 cm [collection of the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; courtesy of the artist and Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam]; ABOVE, RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM: *Untitled (Octagon)*, 2007, oil on canvas mounted on wood, diptych: 39 x 37.6 cm each [courtesy of the artist and Galerie und Schöttle, Köln]; installation view, Venice Biennale, 2007 [courtesy the artist, Galerie Johnen und Schöttle, Köln, and Plan B, Cluj, Romania]